

VOLUME 25, NUMBER 1  
FALL 2004

# THE SPIRE

Vanderbilt University Divinity School, Graduate Department of Religion, and Oberlin Graduate School of Theology



Honoring and Changing  
**LEGACIES**

Words

Thought

Actions



Vanderbilt University Divinity School  
announces the  
**105th Cole Lectures**  
to be delivered by

**The Reverend Professor Peter John Gomes**

Plummer Professor of Christian Morals and  
Pusey Minister in The Memorial Church at  
Harvard University

**“THE BIBLE:  
The Development of  
an American Book”**

Thursday, November 4, 2004

7:00 p.m.

Benton Chapel

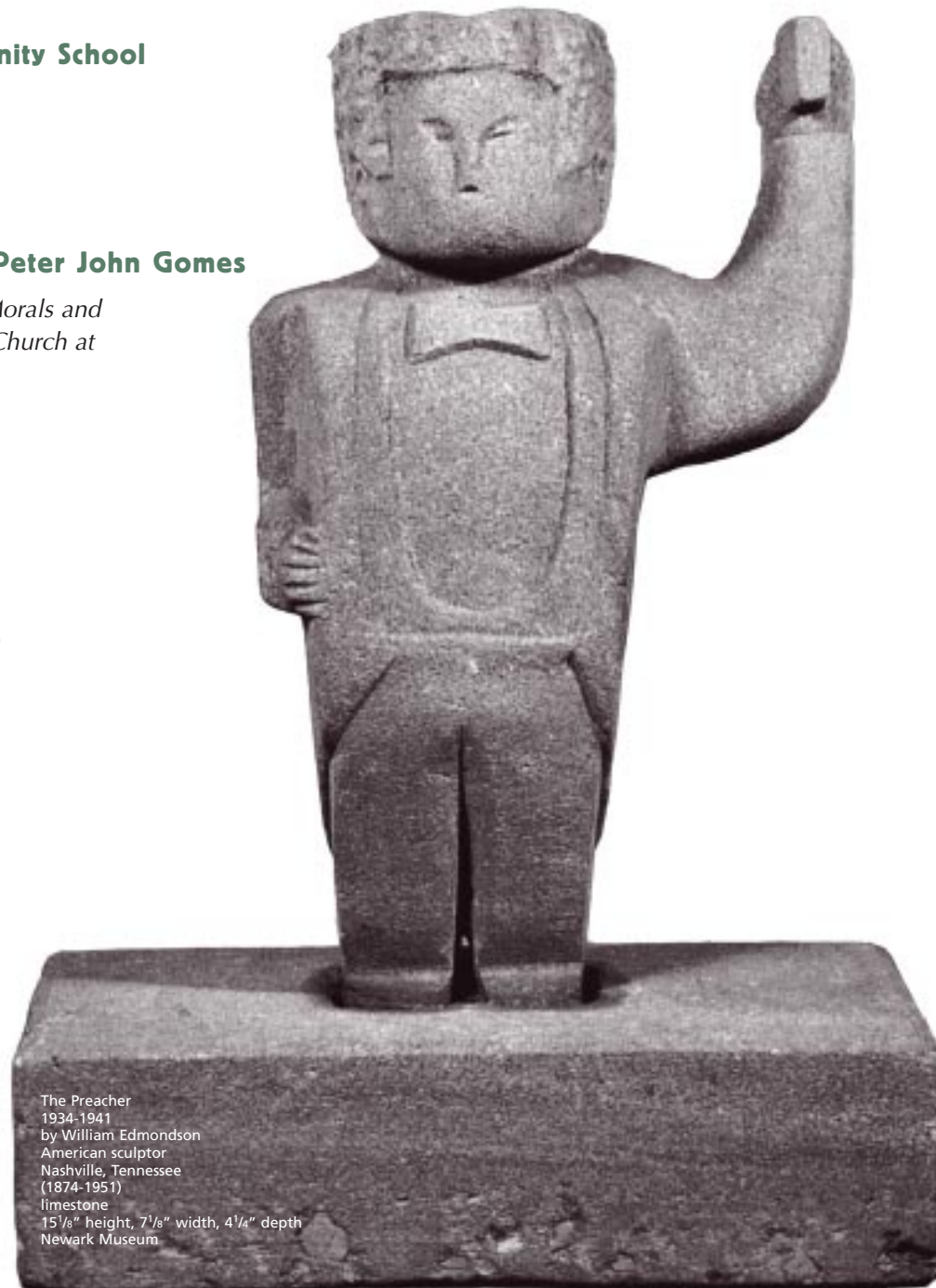
The lecture will be followed  
by a reception in the Divinity  
School Refectory.

**“THE BIBLE:  
Beyond the Culture  
to the Gospel”**

Friday, November 5, 2004

10:00 a.m.

Benton Chapel



The Preacher  
1934-1941  
by William Edmondson  
American sculptor  
Nashville, Tennessee  
(1874-1951)  
limestone  
15 1/8" height, 7 1/8" width, 4 1/4" depth  
Newark Museum

**B**orn in Boston, Massachusetts, in 1942, the **Reverend Professor Peter John Gomes** is an American Baptist minister ordained to the Christian ministry by the First Baptist Church of Plymouth, Massachusetts. A member of the Faculty of Arts and Sciences and of the Faculty of Divinity at Harvard University, Gomes earned a baccalaureate at Bates College before receiving the baccalaureate in sacred theology from the Harvard Divinity School; during the three decades of his vocation as an academician and preacher, he has been awarded twenty-four honorary degrees.

Regarded as one of America's most distinguished preachers, Gomes was invited to participate in the presidential inaugurations of Ronald Wilson Reagan and George Walker Bush. Named Clergy of the Year in 1998 by *Religion in American Life*, Gomes is the author of *The Preaching of the Passion*, *The Good Book: Reading the Bible with Mind and Heart*, *Sermons: Biblical Wisdom for Daily Living*, *The Good Life: Truths That Last in Times of Need*, *Strength for the Journey: Biblical Wisdom for Daily Living*, and nine volumes of sermons.

As the 2004 Cole Lecturer at Vanderbilt University Divinity School, Gomes will address two questions: "How did the Christian Bible become an icon of American society?" and "Are there inherent contradictions between the Bible and the Gospel and between the Gospel and American culture?"

Philanthropist Edmund W. Cole, president of Nashville & Chattanooga Railroad and treasurer of Vanderbilt University Board of Trust, endowed the annual Cole Lecture Series in 1892 "for the defense and advocacy of the Christian religion." Cole's gift provided for the first sustained lectureship in the history of Vanderbilt University.

# THE SPIRE

Volume 25 • Number I • Fall 2004

F E A T U R E S

*The Spire* is published biannually by Vanderbilt University Divinity School in cooperation with the Office of Alumni Communications & Publications. Letters and comments from readers are welcomed by the editor, and alumni/ae of the Divinity School, the Graduate School's Department of Religion, and the Oberlin Graduate School of Theology are encouraged to submit news of their personal and professional accomplishments. Readers may correspond by U.S. mail to:

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Fall 2004



**10**  
Forty Years Later  
Reflections on Going Home

At the height of the Cold War, Fernando F. Segovia left his home in Havana and traveled to the United States. Four decades later, the Oberlin Graduate Professor of New Testament at Vanderbilt University Divinity School returned to Cuba for the first time since his departure to seek the answer to the timeless question, "Can one go home, again?"

**16**  
The Bishop Who 'Turned Out' a Legacy

On the occasion of the fiftieth anniversary of the enrollment of Joseph Andrew Johnson Jr., essayist Bryan Bennington Bliss recounts scenes from the life a preacher and educator from Louisiana who would become the first African American alumnus of the University.

**27**  
Called to the Walls

For Divinity School student Lindsay Cathryn Meyers, a maximum security prison becomes the setting where a perception from her childhood is altered and the courses from the curriculum for the master of divinity degree intersect.



**29**  
The Deflowering of Hawaii

When Carpenter Scholar Joseph Daniels Blosser traveled to Hawaii to serve as chaplain in a hospital, he could not foresee that his clinical pastoral education would involve an apprenticeship in "talking story."





# From the Dean

## The Offering of a New Song

As we enter another academic year, I am moved to reflect on the ways the Divinity School that we all share both continues the traditions of the past and strives to implement new ideas while remaining faithful to those traditions. One year ago, we began with a convocation recognizing the fiftieth anniversary of the matriculation of Joseph Andrew Johnson Jr., Vanderbilt University's first African-American student. The University was already three-quarters of a century into its life when that admission took place. The School of Religion broke with tradition and thereby gained a fuller measure of its soul.

It was upon this theme of balancing tradition with the need to introduce perspectives that I charged our recent graduates at the end of the 2003-2004 school year. As alumni/ae of the school, you have discovered, as they will, that half of what your professors tried to teach you may be safely forgotten, but upon the other half you will stake your lives. The key to living a faithful life in ministry—whatever form that ministry may

take—is choosing well between ageless, life-changing wisdom and those ideas and practices that have only passing value. I told the graduates that this important work of choosing well amounts to balancing the Apostle Paul's words, "Hold fast to what is good" and the Psalmist's command, "Sing to the Lord a new song."

Vanderbilt University Divinity School has long styled itself as a School of the Prophets, a *Schola Prophetarum*. I think this is a marvelously apropos metaphor for a place that seeks to equip people for a still-unfolding world. Prophets are the jazz artists of religion. Priests are like well-rehearsed choirs singing the same music beautifully the same way each performance. The prophets, on the other hand sometimes sing the wailing lament of justice denied. Sometimes they toss off a lighter tune of joy in being alive. Sometimes they sing the blues of how hard it is to persevere in the faith. And sometimes they sing the ecstatic shout of hope achieved. No matter the mood of the religious jazz the prophets sing, they always offer a new song



Dean James Hudnut-Beumler

that extends the received tradition so that the word needed now is offered.

As we look around the world today, we see plenty of new occasions to embrace the best in what our forbearers tried to teach us and to sing new songs. When we see our sons and daughters turned into torturers instead of liberators, it is time to sing a new song. In our churches when we see the tradition being used as a tool of oppression and exclusion against others, it is time to sing a new song. When the old songs we are singing in worship no longer bring us closer to God, it is time to sing a new song. What new songs will the graduates of 2004 sing as life-long representatives of the School of the Prophets? What new songs are still in you and me? I do not know, but I am glad to be associated with a School that holds fast to what is good—not everything in the tradition mind you, but that which is good—and lives to sing a new song to the Lord.

We began our year celebrating a mutual admissions decision that turned out exceedingly well. A remarkable student went on to become a gifted and faithful leader as a bishop in the Christian Methodist Episcopal Church. We ended the year with a large graduating class of remarkable people venturing out in faith and hope. And as a faculty and staff at the Divinity School, we look forward to helping prepare more "jazz artists" who will offer their songs to a waiting, hurting, hoping world.

## In Appreciation of our Benefactors

Dean James Hudnut-Beumler and the Office of Development and Alumni/ae Relations of Vanderbilt University Divinity School welcome the following new members to the Schola Prophetarum donor society:

Alice W. Hunt  
Forrest B. Lammiman and Barbara C. Lammiman  
Thomas W. Moon and Katherine Moon

We also welcome the following members to the Mills-Buttrick Society and gratefully acknowledge their generous support of the Divinity School:

The Cathedral of the Incarnation  
Nashville, Tennessee  
Community Presbyterian Church, USA  
San Juan Capistrano, California  
Downtown Presbyterian Church  
Nashville, Tennessee  
First Missionary Baptist Church  
Huntsville, Alabama

First Presbyterian Church  
Nashville, Tennessee

Hillsboro Presbyterian Church  
Nashville, Tennessee

McKendree United Methodist Church  
Nashville, Tennessee

Parish of Trinity Church  
New York, New York

Pastoral Counseling Centers of Tennessee,  
Incorporated  
Nashville, Tennessee

Sixty-First Avenue United Methodist Church  
Nashville, Tennessee

Saint Paul's Episcopal Church  
Franklin, Tennessee

Ms. Nancy Allison Thellman  
Lawrence, Kansas

West End United Methodist Church  
Nashville, Tennessee

Westminster Presbyterian Church  
Charlottesville, Virginia

# Our Featured Artisan

## A Translation of Lessons

BY ZANA ZEIGLER, MDIV'3

"... our actions do not expire with their performances or words with their utterances or thoughts with the thinking of them."

—from *The Soul of the Black Preacher*

by Bishop Joseph Andrew Johnson Jr.

(1914-1979)



Zana Zeigler, MDiv'3

Prior to completing my application for admissions to Vanderbilt University Divinity School, I studied carefully the institution's commitments to theological education delineated in the *Bulletin*, and I remember my reaction when I read, "The School affirms its commitment to do all in its power to combat the idolatry of racism and ethnocentrism that remains widespread in our society." I felt an immediate impact of uncompromising intensity in that statement, and as I continued reading, I learned of the Divinity School's commitments to "opposing sexism," "confronting homophobia," encouraging "religious pluralism," and "promoting

a productive dialogue between Christians and Jews." I realized these words and thoughts require decisive actions for promoting a "more just, more humane, and wholesome world," and concluded that if I were accepted to a School whose mission embraced such values, I would enroll.

The history of the School's role in the integration of the University was revealed more fully to me while I conducted the research for my collage titled *Actions, Words, Thoughts*. Although Bishop Joseph Johnson's enrollment in 1953 was the initial step in the graduated integration of the University, the path toward racial integration was not without impediments when seven years later James Lawson would be expelled for his participation in the "illegal activities" of civil disobedience. The Divinity School proved instrumental in translating these difficult lessons of acceptance into a powerful moral and educational commitment that extends beyond the Oberlin Quadrangle.

Just as I am inspired by the Divinity School's commitment to combating the forms of racism, I am profoundly moved by a statement I encountered in Bishop Johnson's book, *The Soul of the Black Preacher*, published in 1971: "... our actions do not expire with their performances or words with their utterances



### On the Cover

*Actions, Words, Thoughts*

2004

by Zana Zeigler

American

(born 1950)

oil pastel, paper, found objects, and resin on wood

19" x 28"

The original collage will be presented as a gift from the Divinity School to the Bishop Joseph Johnson Black Cultural Center of Vanderbilt University.

or thoughts with the thinking of them." For the members of the University community, the actions, words, and thoughts of Bishop Johnson have not expired but continue to challenge us twenty-three years after his death. I remain grateful for having received the commission for this commemorative work and for being a benefactor of the translation.

Editor's Note:

In Zeigler's translation of the legacy of Bishop Joseph Johnson, the artist has juxtaposed a portrait of the first African American admitted to the Graduate School of Religion against the University's gold shield and symbolic oak leaf and acorns. The image of Johnson is based upon a formal photograph accompanying an article published in the Sunday morning, May 3, 1953, issue of *The Nashville Tennessean* in which Johnson's matriculation was announced. Among the other elements comprising the collage are the title page from the 1922 edition of the *History of the Afro-American Group of the Episcopal Church by the Reverend Doctor George F. Bragg*, a photograph of a police officer escorting Divinity School alumnus James M. Lawson following his arrest for participating in the non-violent demonstrations to desegregate downtown Nashville, and a photograph of the artist who, as a current student at VDS, considers herself a benefactor of Johnson's legacy and the School's mission in theological education. The fragments of pine straw mulch interspersed among the images suggest the period from Johnson's life when he worked as a yardman at Vanderbilt to earn money for his tuition at Fisk University.

A native of Fort Wayne, Indiana, Zeigler earned a baccalaureate in art education from Florida International University in Miami and the master of fine arts degree from the University of Georgia. She is the founder of the Nashville Neuromuscular Center, a clinic specializing in the holistic therapy of soft tissue pain and dysfunction. Prior to her enrollment at the Divinity School, Zeigler served as a staff minister for the congregation at Religious Science of Nashville.



# Readers' Forum

## From the Editor

Four years ago when I conducted an interview with poet Kate Daniels, associate professor of English and associate dean of the College of Arts and Science, I asked her to describe the intricate relationship that exists between a writer and figurative language. She responded in a cogent declarative sentence: "The subject announces itself by its will, and I become the conduit for the poem."

Daniels' statement serves as a reminder of the appropriate role of the writer in the imaginative experience, especially when one's efforts to impose a theme upon creativity prove futile. While serving as a field education intern for this issue of *The Spire*, Bryan Bliss discovered the relevance of Daniel's argument when he was contemplating ideas for the feature article he was required to compose. As a former newspaper reporter, Bryan was accustomed to receiving assignments from an editor who announced the subjects for coverage and who prescribed the number

of words for the articles.

Our preliminary discussions for planning this issue had not resulted in the announcement a lead article, and Bryan jokingly suggested that his muse had taken a sabbatical. But as he listened to Associate Provost Lucius Outlaw address the Divinity School community during our 2003 convocation, Bryan experienced that epiphanal moment when the subject, does indeed, announce itself. Hearing the history of Bishop Joseph Johnson's enrollment in the School of Religion, he intuitively knew this legacy should be commemorated fifty years after Johnson became the University's first African American to be admitted to a program of study.

As a conduit through whom a narrative of Bishop Johnson's life would be told, Bryan researched historical documents and conducted interviews with the bishop's daughter, Patricia Johnson-Powell, director of employee and guest relations for Thomas and King, Incorporated; and with his son,

Joseph Johnson III, professor of science and mechanical engineering at Florida A&M University, whose memories of their father provided details and anecdotes that have not been recorded in the School's history.

During his year as an intern—struggling with editorial revisions and with questions of vocational discernment—Bryan discovered that assuming the posture of conduit is comparable to responding to a call to a vocation. As a writer and as a student of theology, one encounters questions whose answers are not immediately announced; however, one must endeavor, as the nineteenth-century German lyric poet Rainer Maria Rilke argued, "to try to love the questions *themselves*, like locked rooms and like books that are written in a very foreign tongue." Bryan's commemorative essay "The Bishop Who 'Turned Out' a Legacy" is a testament to his discovery and his passion for language. —VJ



"I am a part of all  
that I have met."

—FROM "ULYSSES"  
STANZA I, LINE 18  
BY ALFRED, LORD TENNYSON  
(1809-1892)

As an alumnus/a of Vanderbilt University Divinity School, you are a significant part of a community that has been committed to theological education for 129 years. We remain interested in learning about your professional and personal accomplishments, so keep our administration, faculty, staff, readers, and "all that you met" during your days in the Oberlin Quadrangle informed by writing us at *The Spire*, 115 John Frederick Oberlin Divinity Quadrangle, 411 21st Avenue, South, Nashville, Tennessee 37240-1121 or [divinityspire@vanderbilt.edu](mailto:divinityspire@vanderbilt.edu).

## Recommended Reading

### New Titles by Faculty

Gregory Barz, *Music in East Africa: Experiencing Music, Expressing Culture* (Oxford University Press, 2004)

Paul Docecki, *The Clergy Sexual Abuse Crisis: Reform and Renewal in the Catholic Community* (Georgetown University Press, 2004)

Edward Farley, *Practicing Gospel: Unconventional Thoughts on the Church's Ministry* (Westminster John Knox, 2003)

Kathleen Flake, *The Politics of American Religious Identity: The Seating of Senator Reed Smoot, Mormon Apostle* (University of North Carolina Press, 2004)

Walter Harrelson, gen. ed., *New Interpreter's Study Bible* (Abingdon Press, 2003)

James Hudnut-Beumler, et al., ed., *The History of Riverside Church in New York* (New York University Press, 2004)

Douglas Knight, *Methods of Biblical Interpretation* (Abingdon Press, 2004)

Amy-Jill Levine, ed., *A Feminist Companion to Paul* (Pilgrim Press, 2004); *A Feminist Companion to Matthew* (Pilgrim Press, 2004)

John McClure and Burton Z. Cooper, *Claiming Theology in the Pulpit* (Westminster John Knox, 2003)

Daniel Patte, *The Gospel of Matthew: A Contextual Introduction for Group Study* (Abingdon Press, 2003)

Marjorie Suchocki, *Divinity and Diversity: A Christian Affirmation of Religious Pluralism* (Abingdon Press, 2003)

Richard McGregor, *Sanctity and Mysticism in Medieval Egypt: The Waf-a' Sufi Order and the Legacy of Ibn 'Arab-I* (State University of New York Press, 2004)

### Needlepoint and the Protestant Principle

I have just completed reading the 2003 fall issue of your magazine. Once again, I am impressed with the diversity of the articles and the art which speaks of the value of Vanderbilt University Divinity School and *The Spire* to the community.

The personal recollections of theologian Peter Hodgson ("A Theologian of Mediation") were especially meaningful to me. Dr. Hodgson's restatement of Tillich's Protestant principle is a statement that should be worked in needlepoint on all the kneelers in my own Episcopal church.

It is obvious that Dr. Hodgson's contribution to the Divinity School has been a major force in guiding the School to the forefront of progressive theological education. It is articles such as his that not only make me an avid reader of *The Spire* but encourage me to re-examine my own theology.

Harriet Foley  
Nashville, Tennessee

### Balancing Style and Content

I just received the fall issue of *The Spire* and want you to know that it is one of the best issues I have every received. Looking attractive is important, but it is the content that makes it substantial. Thank you for your effort; keep up the excellent work.

Bob Rose, DMin'77  
Grand Junction, Tennessee

### Appreciation for the Feast

I have finished reading the 2003 fall issue of *The Spire*, and it is spectacular! Often I find one or two articles of interest; occasionally none interests me. But this edition is amazing! Helping me to understand Peter Hodgson, learning of Howard Harold's death, the wonderful forum on "the good death," reflections from the US-

Mexico border, Milton on the devil and Edwards on hell, a fascinating introduction to Eastern Orthodoxy's ontology—and the deeply resonant art pieces accompanying each featured article. What a feast for mind, spirit, and heart.

Thank you for sharing these gifts.

Keith Clark, MDiv'80  
Waterloo, Iowa

### We Hope You'll Visit Us

I am a graduate of the Oberlin Graduate School of Theology and have never seen the Vanderbilt University campus, so I have not felt much *alumnus* loyalty. But I appreciate *The Spire* and the prophetic positions reflected in the magazine.

Roger Robison, Oberlin, BD'45  
Hamilton, Montana

### Pox or Pax?

*The Spire* is always welcomed with its information and inspiration. I would draw your attention to the article "Shock and Awe of Another Persuasion" in the 2003 fall issue, page 13, right-hand column, three lines from the bottom. Should not "pox-Americana" be *Pax Americana*?

Richard E. Appel, Oberlin, MST'57  
Lebanon, Ohio

### Editor's Response:

The phrase in question, "pox-Americana," was employed intentionally by Divinity School Dean James Hudnut-Beumler in his speech titled "Shock and Awe" which he delivered on Wednesday, April 9, 2003, during a peace rally at the University. Dean Hudnut-Beumler's deliberate variation on the proper noun *Pax Americana* was in reference to the presidential administration's failure to imagine, within a global context, the effects of a preemptive war against Iraq.



# Around the QUADRANGLE



Among the participants in the memorial walk was Divinity School alumnus, the Reverend William Young, MDiv'03.



Prior to his departure for the Federal Correctional Institution in Manchester, Kentucky, where he would serve a six-month sentence for trespassing at Fort Benning, Georgia, Professor, emeritus, Donald F. Beisswenger participated in a memorial walk for victims of human rights atrocities committed by graduates of the Western Hemisphere Institute for Security Cooperation, formerly known as the School of the Americas, located at Fort Benning. Walking from Saint Ann's Episcopal Church to the Federal Courthouse, the participants carried crosses and coffins bearing the names of victims of the WHISC/SOA's practices.



To honor the memories of victims of human rights abuses committed by graduates of the WHISC/SOA, protestors walk in solemn procession up Broadway to the Federal Courthouse.

## Trespassing for Justice

For taking six steps past a NO TRESPASSING sign at Fort Benning, Georgia, Donald F. Beisswenger, professor of church and community, emeritus, was fined \$1000 and sentenced to six months in the Federal Correctional Institution in Manchester, Kentucky. A self-professed, post-Holocaust Christian and ordained Presbyterian minister, Beisswenger was arrested, charged, tried, convicted, and sentenced in a federal court in Columbus, Georgia, for his act of civil disobedience in protesting the practices of the Western Hemisphere Institute for Security Cooperation, formerly known as the School of the Americas.

Beisswenger's act of trespassing was his attempt to bear witness against the teaching and training in counter-terrorism assault tactics at the WHISC/SOA whose graduates have committed human rights atrocities in Latin American countries for more than two decades. American military personnel at Fort Benning train foreign nationals in strategies for conducting insurgency warfare against dissidents in their home countries.

In a gesture of solidarity with Beisswenger, thirty-five members of the Divinity School administration, faculty, and staff signed a statement of support composed by Dean James Hudnut-Beumler who declares that Beisswenger's "chosen path as a witness is consistent with the best traditions and commitments of Vanderbilt University Divinity School." The Reverend Will D. Campbell, who acknowledges Beisswenger as a prophet—teaching and living by biblical authority—wrote an editorial titled "A Man of Peace, at Age 73, Pays Ridiculous Price," published in the February 9, 2004, issue of *The Tennessean* in which he argues that "a nation that becomes so insecure that it sends elderly and ill citizens to prison for taking a few steps on native ground is in danger of losing its soul."

Beisswenger, who began serving his sentence on April 6 and was released from federal prison on October 1, will be featured in the next issue of *The Spire*.

Photographs of the memorial walk were taken by Walter Brian Costilow, MDiv'04, who will be among the contributors to the article on Beisswenger in the next issue of *The Spire*.

## On Mystics and Prophets

Professors Jane and James Barr returned to campus during the spring semester to deliver two public lectures for the University community. A graduate of the University of Edinburgh and a scholar of the roles of women in early and medieval Christianity, Jane Barr lectured on the subject, "Medieval Women Mystics." The Regis Professor of Hebrew, emeritus, at Oxford University, James Barr presented "Prophetic Surprises."



Professor, emerita, Jane Barr discussed medieval women and mystics during a public lecture at the Divinity School.



During his visit to the Divinity School, James Barr, Distinguished Professor of Hebrew Bible, emeritus, was reunited with a former student, Alice Wells Hunt, PhD'03, the associate dean for academic affairs and a senior lecturer in Hebrew Bible.



Attending the reception for Randall Falk, rabbi, emeritus, of *The Temple* (fourth from left) were Father Joseph Breen, pastor of Saint Edward's Parish; Dr. Kent Kyger, MD'58, and Patricia Miller Kyger, BS'59, the chairpersons of Schola Prophetarum; and Father Philip Breen, pastor of Saint Ann's Parish.

## Honoring a Contributor to the Dialogue

Vanderbilt University Divinity School and the Jewish Studies Department hosted "In Celebration of Randall Falk: the Future of Jewish Liberalism" on Sunday, March 28. The event honored Rabbi Falk for his contributions to Jewish life, civil rights, community relations, and Jewish-Christian dialogue. While teaching at the Divinity School and serving as senior rabbi for Congregation Ohabai Sholom at the Temple in Nashville, Falk and Walter Harrelson, dean and professor of Hebrew Bible, emeritus, co-authored *Jews and Christians: A Troubled Family* and *Jews and Christians in Pursuit of Social Justice*—two volumes which marked an advancement in the dialogue between the two faith traditions.

The celebration for Falk featured a lecture on the future of Jewish Liberalism by Peter Haas, who holds the Abba Hillel Silver Chair of Religious Studies at Case Western Reserve University and who taught previously at Vanderbilt, and a viewing of the film titled *Arguing the World*, which documents the contributions of Irving Kristol, Irving Howe, Daniel Bell, and Nathan Bell to American public philosophy. Robert Barsky, professor of French and comparative literature at the University, led a discussion of the film.





The Association of Theological Schools in the United States and Canada (ATS) and the Henry Luce Foundation have named James Patout Burns Jr. as one of seven Henry Luce III

Fellows in Theology for 2004-2005. The Edward A. Malloy Professor of Catholic Studies at Vanderbilt University Divinity School, Burns will devote his fellowship to researching the topic "Saint Augustine's Preached Theology" by examining the fundamentally practical focus of Augustine's work, particularly his theory of preaching and the social context of his writings. Burns will seek to demonstrate that Augustine's controversial and theological treatises relate closely to the congregations and monasteries with which the church father was affiliated.



DANIEL DIEBIS

"We are living in a world of deadly theme parks of our own making, and I am trying to find a language to disrupt the comfort of mundaneness," proclaimed the Reverend Doctor emilie m. townes during the Antoinette Brown Lecture last spring at Vanderbilt Divinity School. The Carolyn Williams Baird Professor of Christian Ethics at Union Theological Seminary in New York, townes delivered "Mounting the High Side of Misery" for the thirtieth annual lecture commemorating the life of the first woman in the United States to be ordained to the Christian ministry.



NEIL BRANE

After deliberating the ethical challenges confronting leaders in business administration, law, medicine, nursing, and religion, participants in the third annual Cal Turner Program retreat navigated the waters of the Duck River near Henry Horton State Park. Divinity School matriculants Mark Peterson (third from left and Cynthia Curtis (fifth from left) were among graduate students from the University who attended the retreat.

## Navigating Ethical Questions

Five students from the Divinity School participated in the third annual retreat sponsored by the Cal Turner Program for Moral Leadership in the Professions at Vanderbilt University. The primary goals of the retreat are to encourage students' engagement with ethical and moral concerns relevant to different professions and to identify strategies for addressing the ethical challenges confronting leaders in the professions.

University professors who presided during the discussion sessions included Bart Victor from the Owen School of Management, on the aftermath of Enron; Mark Brandon from the Law School, on differing interpretations of constitutional law; Frank Boehm from the School of Medicine, on the questions of abortion; James Pace, MDiv'88, from the School of Nursing, on end-of-life care; and Joanne Sandberg, PhD'00, from the Divinity School and executive director of the Cal Turner Program, on religious diversity in the United States.

Cynthia Curtis, MDiv2; Mark Peterson, MTS2; Danielle Thompson, MDiv2; Ryan Owen, MDiv2; and Woodrow Lucas, MBA/MDiv1, served as the student representatives from the Divinity School.



Lewis V. Baldwin, professor of religious studies and acting chair of the department for the College of Arts and Science, has been inducted into the Martin Luther King Jr. Collegium of Scholars at Morehouse College for his scholarship on the Nobel Peace Prize-winning civil rights activist and American Baptist pastor. The International Association of Educators for World Peace, a nonprofit organization dedicated to the attainment of international understanding and world peace through education, also has recognized Baldwin for his research and teaching. Represented in over one hundred countries, IAERP has consultative status at many United Nations agencies and since 1987 has been a designated Peace Messenger of the United Nations.

## A Son of the Black Church

BY JAMES M. PATTERSON  
Public Affairs Officer for VU News Service

Older parishioners at First Baptist Church in Salem, Virginia, continue to tell stories about Brad Braxton as a boy—sitting in the front pew, his legs too short to reach the floor—watching every move while his father, the Reverend James Braxton Sr., preached.

"He was my first homiletics teacher," Braxton says. "I listened to his cadence. I watched his body movements, and I watched how people responded to him. It was my father who taught me how language imbued with God's spirit can make a decided difference in individual and communal living."

Braxton began his tenure this fall as an associate professor of homiletics and New Testament at Vanderbilt University Divinity School, the latest accomplishment in a dual pastoral-academic career that is progressing at a remarkable pace.

The former Rhodes Scholar earned his doctorate in New Testament studies at Emory University in Atlanta while simultaneously serving as the senior pastor at the prestigious Douglas Memorial Community Church in Baltimore. He has written three books, including *Preaching Paul*, which will be published this fall by Abingdon Press.

"I was really impressed by the fact that Vanderbilt is one of the few research universities in the country that offers a doctorate in homiletics," Braxton says. "Although I teach many styles of preaching, I am a son of the black church in every way. I had colleagues during my campus visit suggest that it was refreshing to hear someone name so clearly one's commitments. Vanderbilt is a wonderful place to be, with all the resources of a major research institution and colleagues who are eager to assist me."

Braxton will work with John McClure, the Charles Grandison Finney Professor of Homiletics and chair of the Graduate Department of Religion. Braxton's goals are characteristically ambitious, including research and writing commitments through 2007 and a full regional and national preaching schedule. As a long term goal, he wants to develop a cadre of doctoral students and help "shape the next generation of preachers and teachers."



STEVE GREEN

Brad Braxton, professor of homiletics and New Testament

Nicholas S. Zeppos, J.D.  
Provost and Vice Chancellor for Academic Affairs

AND

James Hudnut-Beumler, Ph.D.,  
Dean of the Divinity School

ANNOUNCE THE NAMING OF

Bonnie Miller-McLemore  
as the Carpenter Professor of Pastoral Theology

AND

Fernando F. Segovia  
as the Oberlin Graduate Professor of New Testament

AT VANDERBILT UNIVERSITY

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## Preparing Ministers for Congregational Care

Joseph Edward Pennel Jr., BD'64, DMin'77, who retired in July as bishop of the Virginia Conference of the United Methodist Church, has returned to the Oberlin Quadrangle where he is teaching courses in Wesleyan studies.



Bishop Joseph Edward Pennel Jr.

PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY OF THE UNITED METHODIST CHURCH NEWS SERVICE

During the 2004 fall semester, Pennel is offering "The Pastor and Ministry of the Congregation" in which students are examining models of spiritual leadership and strategies for developing a missional congregation. For the 2005 spring term, he will teach a course titled "The Practice of Ministry in the Congregation" which will focus upon the culture of congregational life and how the clergy and laity work together in the ordering of a congregation—planning, governing, and visioning congregational care.

In his courses at VDS, Pennel hopes students will develop an understanding that the pastor needs to be "preacher, teacher, prophet, and administrator who has the responsibility of communicating and passing the faith to the next generation."

Prior to his election as bishop in 1996, Pennel served as senior pastor for congregations at Brentwood United Methodist Church and at Belmont United Methodist Church. In the four decades of his ministry, he also has held the appointment of trustee for Wesley Theological Seminary, Ferrum College, Randolph-Macon College, Shenandoah University, and Virginia Wesleyan College.

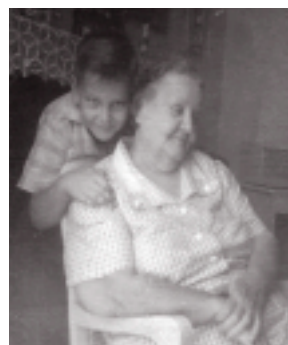


# Forty: Years Later

## REFLECTIONS ON GOING HOME



Top: This view of the Bay of Havana and the city's skyline was observed by the Segovias while visiting El Morro Castle. Right: Segovia, as a six-year-old, stands behind his maternal grandmother in this family photograph. Among the places he visited upon returning to Cuba was the Colón Cemetery where she and other members of the Segovia family are buried. Their tombs were blessed during a private, graveside service conducted by Father Philip Breen, pastor of Saint Ann's Roman Catholic Church in Nashville.



BY FERNANDO F. SEGOVIA

The Oberlin Graduate Professor of New Testament and Professor of New Testament and early Christianity

*Forty years later, I returned. On July 10, 1961, I boarded a KLM flight from La Habana, Cuba, to Miami, U.S.A. It was the height of the Cold War, indeed one of its hottest moments: three months earlier, in April, the Bay of Pigs invasion had taken place; a month later, in August, the*

*building of the Berlin Wall would begin. Mine was to have been a temporary absence—a period of brief exile in el Norte. On June 4, 2003, I boarded an Aeroméxico flight from Cancún, México, to La Habana.*

*The Cold War was by now a distant memory, frozen in time: more than a decade had elapsed since the demolition of the Berlin Wall (1989) and the dissolution of the USSR (1991); the socialist block of European nations, formerly members of the Warsaw Pact and the Council for Mutual Economic Assistance (COMECON), were to be found at various stages in the process of joining the European Community and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO); Russia itself was but a specter of its former imperial presence and power. My envisioned sojourn in the North had by then become a lifetime.*

Editor's Note: During the summer of 2003, Vanderbilt University Divinity School Professor Fernando F. Segovia directed a travel seminar titled "Religion and Society in Cuba" for Divinity School students and alumni/ae. Returning to his native country after forty-one years, Segovia recounted his experiences during a community breakfast sponsored by the Divinity School in April at the University Club of Nashville. Guests also were invited to attend a viewing of Cuban filmmaker Fernando Pérez' Suite Habana which documents—through a rapid sequence of images, sounds, and music—a day in the life of contemporary Cubans. A discussion of the 2003 film was led by Segovia and Elena Olazagasti-Segovia, senior lecturer in Spanish in the College of Arts and Science, who journeyed with her husband to Cuba.

We are grateful to Professor Segovia for granting us permission to publish his lecture in this issue of The Spire, and we wish to acknowledge the generosity of the Vanderbilt News Service in the division of Public Affairs for selected photographs which accompany the text.



Forty-one years after leaving Cuba, Professor Fernando F. Segovia returned in 2003 to his homeland for the first time since his departure on July 10, 1961. Accompanying him on his journey was his wife, Elena Olazagasti-Segovia, senior lecturer in Spanish in the College of Arts and Science.

Why did I return at this point? From a historico-political perspective, the time was ideal. With the myths and stereotypes of Cuban reality and experience in swift collapse, both on the island and in the diaspora, the sense of a forthcoming and inevitable transition was unmistakable. This would be a chance to observe and analyze the transition at work before the Transition itself. From a personal point of view, such a trip was both overdue and imperative. Way overdue, because I had long wanted to share my Cuba with my wife, just as she had shared her Puerto Rico with me, bringing me back to the magic and tragedy of the Caribbean after years of absence. Highly imperative, because not only was my own life beginning what I can only hope will be a broad turn toward fulfillment but also because the death of my father, in the spring of 2001, had awakened in me a profound desire, a deeply-felt need, to go back—to resume the beginning of my life, to see where we had lived and to walk where we had walked.

Indeed, this was a return haunted by spirits. Spirits of the past, to be sure, but also spirits of the present and of the future. The sightings weaved in and out at will and without fail. These were insistent spirits—forcing their way upon me, claiming my attention, pointing the way. I should like to share a few of these encounters with you.

From the moment I set foot on the tarmac in Cuba to the moment I boarded my flight out of Cuba, I was met with nothing but warmth and hospitality from the people of Cuba. Given my still-raw memories of our departure, our characterization and treatment as the dregs of society, I had come prepared for the worst. Not once, however, did I receive or hear a challenge or an insult, neither from the people on the streets nor from governmental authorities. Going through customs upon arrival, I was asked how long ago I had left the country and then greeted with a word of welcome. Going through customs for departure, I was asked whether the trip had been fulfilling for me and then invited to return. In between: openness, helpfulness, friendliness. Such was the Cuba I remembered. I was overjoyed to see and feel such sentiments again, despite all the conflicts and the travails, though I would readily confess to a

touch of sadness as well, for a people too kind for its own good—the mark and scourge of the Caribbean in general.

Throughout, not only did I feel Cuban again, in a way that I had not done in decades, not even in Miami, the capital of the diaspora, but also I was acknowledged as Cuban everywhere and by everybody. From the hotel porter who brought our bags to the room on the very night of our arrival, to all sorts of individuals with whom I had dealings, to people on the streets with whom I would exchange pleasantries or have a chat. All, without fail, would remark, "But, you are from here," and, similarly without fail, would proceed to ask me how long I had been away. Then, upon learning of the circumstances of my visit, my long absence and first return, they would express profound

*I was in my city and among my people, and my memory, physically triggered into action after a long hiatus, gushed abundantly and endlessly.*

sympathy for the emotions surmised at work within me—many pointing to their own hearts, with a palpating gesture, as they spoke—and welcomed me back. Such identification was not simply a matter of language. It was that, to be sure, but far more as well. Indeed, I walked through the city with full remembrance of things and places, people and events, dates and stories. I knew where to go and where to turn, what I would find and what had happened there. I was in my city and among my people, and my memory, physically triggered into action after a long hiatus, gushed abundantly and endlessly.

As I wandered around La Habana, an *habanero* re-found, I was struck by the unreal combination of magnificence and deterioration of the city. The city finds itself, at present, in an advanced and advancing state of decay. Aside from the outstanding project of renovation and reconstruction at work in the Old Quarter, *La Habana Vieja*, and away from the well-kept areas of tourist accommodations

and attractions, conditions in the city are desolate indeed. There was little new construction, none of note, since the 1950s; the existing construction, much of it dating from the first half of the twentieth century, was in a state of thorough abandonment and severe disrepair. Buildings and houses collapsed and close to collapse; overcrowded homes and precarious living arrangements; worn-out paint, condemned balconies and doors, boarded-up windows. Yet, behind such signs of moribund neglect, still very much of a glorious city, even in ruins. Its distinguished perch on the sea; its broad and elegant avenues; its magnificent street portals for blocks on end, providing shelter from the furious rain and the merciless sun of the Tropics; its striking architecture, from the colonial to the modernist, all thrown together in delirious mixture. From across the bay, taking in such splendor and degradation at once from the ramparts of the old fortress of La Cabaña, I could not but intone a solemn hymn of praise and lamentation.

Despite undeniable achievements in the social realm, such as education and medicine, I found the contradictions at the heart of the system overwhelming, beyond all expectations.

I well remember the early denunciations against the virtual system of separation at work in society and culture, with access to certain properties and spaces reserved for the upper classes and denied to the lower classes. All would belong to all. I witnessed ongoing separation in culture and society. Access to certain facilities and spaces reserved for foreigners and denied to locals.

I distinctly recall the early tirades against the exploitation of women, most concretely in terms of prostitution, and the social and cultural conditions responsible for such practices. All would be equal, women and men, with full access and full dignity. I heard





Havana's "unreal combination of magnificence and deterioration" made an indelible impression upon Segovia when he visited his native country. "The city finds itself, at present, in an advanced and advancing state of decay," he explains, as suggested by this scene of the first house in which Segovia and his family resided in Havana.

many stories of ongoing machismo and saw few women among the circles of the elite. I also witnessed the trade of sexual tourism at work, openly. Mostly, local women courting foreign men, strikingly attractive young women and strikingly repulsive older men, in search of a few dollars for themselves and their families.

I well remember the early denunciations against racial discrimination in society and culture at large. All would be equal, black and white and all shades in between. I experienced racial discrimination everywhere. I visited tourist facilities with not one person of color on the staff and where persons of color were denied access, creating difficult situations for foreigners of darker skin. I also observed a preponderance of people of color in the poorer neighborhoods of the city and their absence from the circles of the elite.

I well recall the tirades against the excesses of wealth and the presence and consequences of poverty. All would share all. I encountered signs of poverty everywhere: people begging for anything in the streets; stores with next to nothing on the shelves; clinics and pharmacies almost entirely devoid of medicines; a measure of homelessness; sharp unemployment and underemployment. I also encountered signs of wealth, none more lacerating than the abundance of goods in pharmacies and stores trading in foreign currencies, both the

dollar and the euro.

Such a house—a house that has created so many well-trained men and women in so many fields, some of whom we had the privilege of meeting—I reflected to myself, cannot stand, not given its principles and commitments.

As I made my way around the city, with the group in tow, I was fascinated by the number of people who would come up to us. Everywhere—in parks and plazas, churches and monuments—individuals, young and old and in-between, would approach. Some would do so in order to sell something, from drawings to peanuts; to ask for something, money or other items; or to offer something, services ranging from music ensembles to home restaurants. Most simply wanted to strike a conversation. They sought to find out where we were from and what we were doing; to inquire about life outside the island; to exchange views on any subject. This they did in the open, without any palpable sense of fear, even when there were authorities round about. With me in particular, once identified as Cuban and further established as born in the island but living abroad, the lines of inquiry were broad, rapid, endless.

Through such exchanges I learned much about the situation and concerns of the people in general: how many had relatives living

in exile, everywhere and for any number of years; the great thirst for information or news of any kind, beyond official government channels; the open desire to talk about those who had left and the phenomenon of exile as such; the conditions of everyday existence and the hopes for the future. In these exchanges I learned much about myself as well: I had left the country as an adolescent in bloom, younger than most, taught to show respect for and to learn from those older than myself; I came back as a man in full maturity, older than most, a fountain of information and an object of deference. I, unlike so many others now, had known the times prior to, of, and following the Revolution. I, unlike all, had known the world of Cuba and the world outside Cuba. I was a window on history, and invaluable so; I was an informant on the world, and an invaluable one as well. The years weighed upon me, but lightly so. Such curiosity, I thought, would stand us all in good stead for the future.

These conversations on the street further revealed, quite often and to my utter stupefaction, not only scant devotion to the ideals of the system but also open criticism of it. Nowhere did I come across—aside from the official media, its outlets and spokespersons—the kind of consuming commitment to the faith of the Revolution, passionate apologetic for its creeds and practices, and raptur-

ous exercise of its rituals that I remembered from the formative years. Not among the young; not among the old; not among anyone in-between. The Revolution—once a driving faith and organized religion, with its pantheon of deities, foreign and local, its dogmas and codes, its liturgical ceremonies—no longer appeared to be a subject of impact, a subject of relevance, a subject for conversation. It seemed displaced, and utterly so.

Other topics prevailed: the harsh demands of life in general; the way of life on the outside, at any level, from the political to the musical; the life of exile and the relationship between those outside and those inside. More than occasionally, I also ran into critique, from the mild to the severe: dissatisfaction with the legacy of the revolutionary experiment; rejection of paternalism on the part of the leadership and its maximum leader in particular, often painted in terms of senility or madness; discontent with the lack of options across the whole of society. Not uncommonly, such critique emerged from religious circles and in religious language, across the spectrum: from predictions of a forthcoming transcendent event of supernatural character; to appeals to the Bible as the ultimate source of all power and authority; to devotions to Mary as the Queen of Cuba. In other words, batteries of religious beliefs and practices, once dismissed as retrograde and superannuated, hammering away at the ideological ramparts of the Revolution. To me this was a supremely tired people, ideologically devastated, looking for exits, from the informational to the symbolic to the supernatural. A people, I observed, ready to move onward.

Throughout, I had the intense feeling of being observed, followed, even directed. Not by the populace as such, constant and curious witnesses of our presence and movements—always forthcoming and inquisitive; nor by the security apparatus, mostly in evidence around hotels and points of interest—courteous and helpful at all times. It seemed, rather, as if I had entered, through a deployment of magical realism, a world where various temporal and spatial dimensions intersected and interacted with one another, a world where vigorous presences long vanished and active spirits long departed were juxtaposed alongside and consorted with present-day actors and realities.

This I sensed all around the city, as events and faces manifested themselves as if still

unfinished, ongoing. Posing for pictures at the corner of Carlos III and Marqués González, I saw the leaders of the Revolution, arm in arm, leading a march after the sabotage explosion of a freighter, La Coubre, in the harbor; standing before my old school, the Colegio De La Salle in El Vedado, I felt my father's hand as he rushed me out of the building and home, having just learned of

I sensed it keenly in the streets of La Habana Vieja, the old center of town, where so many of my relatives had lived—grandparents and great-grandparents; great-aunts and great-uncles—and where a maternal great-grandfather had owned a hat store on Obispo Street in the 1920s. I saw their silhouettes as I looked at the buildings where they had lived and the balconies where they had



Pairs of *los pioneritos* (the little pioneers) of Fidel Castro's Cuba form a procession on a street of Havana. Beginning in the first grade, all Cuban children are members of the Young Pioneers, and the *pioneritos* begin each day by reciting, "Pioneers for communism will be like Che!"

the attack on the Presidential Palace and having just witnessed the assassination of José Antonio Echevarría, a foremost student leader; sitting by the waterfront, across from the Parque de las Misiones and looking towards the Morro Castle, I heard my parents' call, after a full Sunday afternoon of play, that it was time to go home.

once stood—places where I had visited as a child; balconies where they had waved greetings or goodbyes; individuals on whom I could always count for a drink or a snack.

I sensed it as well in my old neighborhoods, where old friends of the family had lived—people who had held me as a baby in their arms, who had looked after me while



*Past and present had come together, indeed pushed together, in a magical world of (un)real fusion.*

playing in the streets or at the park, who had shared life with us through so many personal and national events. There was Ester Ponsada, our next-door neighbor, now in her nineties and confined to her bed—as I embraced her, I heard her making music with her husband, both members of the Philharmonic, and leading a slide show in the open patio after one of their many travels abroad. And Daisy López, from around the corner, in her eighties and ever so thin—as I opened my arms, I felt her kiss upon my cheek as she met my mother and me on the way to the Aguirre Park, right across her house.

I sensed it deeply at the Colón Cemetery, that magnificent necropolis where more than two million *habaneros* lie buried. There, in front of the tomb where so many of my relatives continue their daily chats and repasts, I stood, as I had done many times as a child. Always on Sundays, as flowers were laid upon the tomb. As I read the inscriptions, I saw their smiles and felt their caresses as I bore greetings from afar, from exile—from the living, for the dead had already, no doubt, paid their visit.

I sensed it most acutely perhaps at the top of the esplanade where sits the majestic old campus of the University of La Habana, there where the conscience of the nation has always resided and where the statue of the Alma Mater extends its arms wide open to city and population alike. I cringed at the encounter: the idealist students coming down the steps, locked in arms and bearing political banners; the repressive guards coming up the steps, bearing wooden sticks and water cannons. I heard my grandmother open the street door, ready to take students,

now in retreat through the adjacent streets, seeking a place to hide; I smelled the *café con leche* she always prepared for them, as we all waited for the tumult to die down. Next to the Alma Mater, I heard my father, both a graduate and a faculty member of the University, speaking of his ideals for the country, as I felt the touch of his hand upon my right shoulder.

Not only did I feel watched and accompanied, I also felt driven. Places where I had lived opened their doors to me. Someone just happened to be there and bid me in. I took in rooms and walls, patios and porches, of long ago. Old friends were found and hugged. Someone just happened to be nearby and pointed the way. I continued conversations interrupted many a year ago. A place of burial disclosed itself forthwith. Someone just happened to know where to look for the old registry card. I nipped a wild flower from the ground and set it upon the tomb, for the first time in decades. I felt here-and-there. Past and present had come together, indeed pushed together, in a magical world of (un)real fusion. The living and the dead intermingled at will. I was young and old at the same time. In this enchanted and enchanting world, I could not but think of the future.

What will the future bring for Cuba? To be sure, such a future is already here, its



*Friends of Professor Segovia's mother, who resides in Miami, Florida, greet him from their balconies.*

traces all about. I saw it and I see it. Beyond all doubt, the transition has begun, both within the island and in the diaspora, among Cubans as well as in the eyes of the world. The tropical experiment in real socialism is in its final throes, kept afloat by a leadership elite whose devotion to *caudillismo*, that, oh!, so traditional mixture of authoritarianism and paternalism, remains unflinching, indeed growingly defiant, driven by sheer panic in the face of implosion and annihilation. This experiment has been severely compromised from within and has lost its luster from without. In body and face, its supreme leader reflects the exhaustion and the madness of the system. For this future, only the Transition remains, inevitable and ever closer. At the same time, the future is not yet, its ultimate configuration(s) beyond precision at this point. What follows the Transition is not at all clear. This future I did not see as such. On this score, I am afraid, the spirits were silent, much too terrified perhaps, and the living reticent, just trying to survive. Still, on the basis of what has transpired both in Cuba and elsewhere, it does not take a visionary to conjure up the various options possible, by no means mutually exclusive.

Cuba could easily go the way of Russia and other post-Soviet states. From within, individuals and factions among the elite will make every attempt to remain in power, officially or unofficially. Rapidly discarding their previous identities and loyalties, with loud renunciations of *fidelista* intransigence and appeals to a Nuremberg-like defense, they shall try to hang on to political leadership. If need be, they shall bury the knife deep into castrite entrails, and thus one another as well. It will not work; it never does. The alternative may very well be the development of a powerful mafia, in control

behind the scenes, relying on an extensive client network and wielding vast sums of money. This option is not only feasible, it will happen, to one degree or another: already corruption reaches into the highest levels of the leadership elite.

Just as easily Cuba could follow the path of many countries in the Caribbean Basin and Central America. From without, individuals and companies will seek to exploit the dire conditions of the population by bringing the country under the aegis of globalization, singing the glories of the world economy and the virtues of free-market capitalism. This shall be done through the establishment of a *maquiladora*-style economy, with low wages and no benefits for the workers, whose entire social apparatus would be brought down. This social net is already beyond the breaking point. This shall be done as well through the promotion of a tourism industry based on resorts and casinos and sexuality. Such industry is already very much at work and advertised as such. This option is not just theoretical; it too shall happen, to one degree or another: the social net has been largely replaced by remittances from abroad, and the sensuous image of the island has replaced, with official sanction, the virtuous image once cultivated by the Revolution. Workers by the tens of thousands, if not the hundreds of thousands, will seek to go north, in search of jobs and food; barred from doing so, absolute poverty and rampant criminality will go through the roof.

Among Cubans themselves, a bloodbath, actual or metaphorical, may ensue. The use of Manichean discourse and practices for so many years and in such unrelenting fashion cannot but create problems for the future. Everyone, whether with the Revolution or in the opposition, fell under its trance, to one degree or another. Such raw exercise in inclusion and exclusion cannot but engender, as it has, a poisonous atmosphere of mutual rejection, mutual abuse, and mutual hatred—a spirit of repudiation alongside a spirit of revanchism. Those whom the authorities have taken pleasure in calling “worms” have always retorted that, in the end, it is the “worms” that devour the “corpses.” Those who were forced to abandon everything, in a circus-like atmosphere, remember who it was who shouted slogans against them, who took inventory of each and every one of their belongings, who moved into their apartments and houses. Those who have experienced



*“What these eyes must have seen,” mused Segovia, upon encountering this woman on a street in Havana.*

years of banishment from education or work or public life on account of real or suspected dissident beliefs, who have undergone the unremitting surveillance of the security apparatus, down to the local Committees for the Defense of the Revolution in each and every block, who have endured years of imprisonment in conditions beyond human imagination—they too remember, and they have faces and names and addresses to go with such memories. This option, I regret to say, is also unavoidable: long-standing and recent scores will be settled on the perpetrators, perhaps their children, and perhaps even their children's children.

The future, therefore, will, in all likelihood, involve all of these options at once—absolute chaos. Desperate hanging on to power, alongside powerful and violent cartels; utter financial collapse leading to massive exploitation, massive poverty, and massive emigration; severe rupture in the body politic at all levels of society and culture. A chaos, in other words, of apocalyptic proportions.

Against all hope, my own hope is for a different option altogether. It is the hope of a

reconciliation based on truth and justice. A hope based on the best instincts already in evidence within a transition already at work, where mutual myths and stereotypes continue to give way to visions of understanding and solidarity. A hope grounded in a fundamental respect for human dignity and thus with eyes set undeviatingly on human and social rights. A hope that all religious groups and all Christian churches will raise in loud accord. A hope that perhaps all spirits on both sides of the Florida Straits—surely reconciled by now and shaking their heads in horror as they look back, around, and ahead—will finally push us all beyond that hurricane out of the Cold War that ensnared us, beat us mercilessly about, and left us in tatters. A hopeless hope, I readily admit, but a hope to which I have no option but to devote the rest of my life, for the spirits will have it no other way.



*Cuban citizens stand in line to apply for a visa.*



# The Bishop Who ‘Turned Out’ A Legacy

Commemorating the  
Fiftieth Anniversary of the  
Matriculation of the First  
African American Student  
at Vanderbilt University

BY BRYAN BENNINGTON BLISS, MTS'04

*The Creation*  
1935  
by Aaron Douglas  
American painter  
(1899-1979)  
48" x 36"  
oil on masonite  
The Howard University Gallery of Art  
Permanent Collection  
Washington, D.C.

A. Douglas

*“Every time we chose the difficult right  
rather than the easy wrong we gain our lives.”*

—from *The Soul of the Black Preacher*  
by Bishop Joseph Andrew Johnson Jr.  
(1914-1979)

Patricia Johnson-Powell, daughter of Bishop Joseph Andrew Johnson Jr., does not remember her father as the first black student at Vanderbilt University. She remembers him in the bathtub—splashing.

“Daddy used to practice his sermons in the bathtub,” Johnson-Powell recounts. “We could always tell when he reached the climax of the homily because we would hear water splashing on the floor.”

Nor does Johnson-Powell remember her father because of the academic degrees he obtained. And he acquired two baccalaureates, a master’s degree, and two doctorates. She remembers him with an Afro.

“In the early part of the Black Power Movement, my father had an Afro,” she explains. “I have a picture of him and me—both of us with these large Afros—and there he was, a bishop in the Colored Methodist Episcopal Church.”

Bishop Johnson was involved in different forbearing movements, and to find him bailing radical black power activists out of jail was not an unusual occurrence. “He was aware of the movement’s inherent power,” says Johnson-Powell, “and he interacted with the cause in a very progressive way and lived to see developments in racial consciousness.”

But before Johnson was a bishop, he was president of Phillips School of Theology, a black seminary of the Christian Methodist Episcopal Church originally located in Jackson, Tennessee. He was a pastor, serving churches throughout the South, including parishes in Nashville and Shreveport, Louisiana. He was a country preacher and a scholar. He was a fervent Christian and a dedicated parent. He was husband to one woman, Grace. And he was the first black student to attend Vanderbilt University when he enrolled in the School of Religion.

### Assuming the Mantle

On December 4, 1951, Bishop Johnson submitted an application to the Graduate School of Vanderbilt University. His résumé was impressive, listing graduate degrees from the Illif School of Theology. He was president

of a school of theology. He was an ordained minister who had served three churches before his application was submitted. He sought admission to the doctor of philosophy degree program and hoped to study the New Testament.

Johnson anticipated beginning his course work in the spring quarter of 1952; however, the first documentation of Johnson at the University does not appear until 1953 in the form of correspondence between him and Dean John Keith Benton. One letter explains the year-long lapse.

“I came to your office at the University to discuss the possibilities of my entering the Graduate School of Religion at Vanderbilt,” Johnson wrote on February 23, 1953. “You will recall that I submitted my application to you December 4, 1951. Later, I was advised by the Dean of the Graduate School of Vanderbilt University that I could not enter. The Dean of the Graduate School gave no reasons as to why I could not be admitted. However, I assumed that the University at that time was not accepting Negro students.”

Further correspondence between Benton and Johnson details a meeting that occurred on March 11, 1953; subsequent letters indicate that Johnson and Benton discussed Johnson’s application. In a letter to Johnson, Benton gives the applicant his home telephone number, a gesture—which given the racial climate of the time period—may indicate a growing relationship and a genuine interest on Benton’s part to see Johnson become a student at Vanderbilt.

Professor Joseph Andrew Johnson III, one of Bishop Johnson’s sons, explains his father’s drive to further his education as a step in becoming the leading theological scholar in the CME Church.

“He decided higher education was the route he wanted to take,” Johnson says. “My father wanted to assume the mantle of the church’s leading scholar, and I think that desire is what originally led him back to school. I do not think he was a specifically stellar student, but he was enthusiastic, and his bishop wanted him to pursue the degree.”



Bishop Joseph Andrew Johnson Jr., BD’54, PhD’58

### A Chronology of Significant Events in the Life of Bishop Joseph Andrew Johnson Jr. (1914-1979)

- June 19, 1914**  
Born in Shreveport, Louisiana, the son of Joseph Andrew Johnson Sr., a Methodist preacher, and Rose Johnson of West Monroe, Louisiana
- September 1922**  
becomes a member of the Colored Methodist Episcopal Church in Crowley, Louisiana (The black Methodist church in the United States, organized in 1870 as the Colored Methodist Episcopal Church, officially adopted the name Christian Methodist Episcopal Church (CME) in 1956. The CME developed from a movement that began in 1866 within the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, to organize the black members into an independent church. At the founding convention in 1870, two bishops from the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, consecrated two black elders as the first bishops of the new church which is Methodist in church government and doctrine; a general conference is held every four years.)
- 1932**  
matriculates at Monroe Colored High School, in Monroe, Louisiana
- 1933**  
decides to enter the ministry (When asked the reason for pursuing a vocation in ministry, Bishop Johnson would later reply, “I became a minister because of a consuming desire to help my race.”)
- 1934**  
receives his diploma from Monroe Colored High School and enrolls in Texas College in Tyler, Texas, a historically black institution of higher learning administered under the auspices of the CME
- November 19, 1937**  
ordained to the ministry by Bishop J.C. Martin
- 1938**  
earns the baccalaureate from Texas College and accepts a year appointment as pastor of the Phillips Chapel CME Church in Nashville, Tennessee
- September 21, 1938**  
marries Grace L. Johnson, an alumna of Southern University who will earn a graduate degree from Denver University and will receive an appointment to the faculty of Lane College in Jackson, Tennessee



**1939**  
enrolls as a graduate student at Fisk University and works as groundskeeper at Vanderbilt University where he rakes leaves and gathers them into gunnysacks

**1940**  
birth of first son, Joseph Andrew Johnson III, who will matriculate at Fisk University and later become a distinguished professor of science and mechanical engineering at the Center for Nonlinear and Nonequilibrium Aerospace at Florida A&M University in Tallahassee  
(An article published in the March 29, 1957, edition of the Nashville Banner will announce that the younger Johnson is one of "four students who achieved a straight A scholastic record during the fall semester.")

**1940**  
begins his tenure as pastor of Cleaves Memorial Church in Denver, Colorado, a position he will hold until 1944

**1943**  
birth of second son, Charles Dewitt Johnson; Johnson receives master of theology degree from the Iliff School of Theology in Denver

**1944**  
founding of the Phillips School of Theology in Jackson, Tennessee, the official seminary of the CME, now a constituent seminary of the Interdenominational Theological Center in Atlanta, Georgia

**1945**  
earns doctorate of theology from Iliff School of Theology and appointed dean and professor of New Testament at Phillips School of Theology

**1948**  
birth of daughter, Patricia Ann Johnson

**1951**  
appointed president of Phillips School of Theology and represents the CME church at the eighth Ecumenical World Conference at Oxford University, Oxford, England

**December 4, 1951**  
applies for admission to the Graduate School of Vanderbilt University

**1952**  
travels to Lund, Sweden, to serve as a delegate to the third World Conference on Faith and Order conducted at the University of Lund

**March 12, 1953**  
accepts an invitation from John Keith Benton, dean of the School of Religion at Vanderbilt University to discuss matriculating at the University

**May 1, 1953**  
Board of Trust of Vanderbilt University adopts a resolution to admit Johnson to the University

**May 3, 1953**  
article titled "First VU Negro Student Former Local Pastor," published in the *Nashville Tennessean* (Sunday edition), announces the matriculation of 39-year-old Joseph Andrew Johnson Jr. in the Graduate School's Department of Religion

**September 28, 1953**  
on the first day of the fall quarter, enters Vanderbilt University as a special student and begins a program of study in biblical literature

But this was an increasingly hostile time in the history of the United States, especially in the South— after the landmark *Brown v. Board of Education* decision resulting in the integration of public schools but before the Civil Rights Movement's major influences. Johnson contends, however, there was no sentiment that his father's appearance on Vanderbilt's campus was a good idea.

"He received almost absolute assurance from Vanderbilt's School of Religion, primarily from a specific faculty member, that if he were willing to go through the application process, they would make his enrollment happen," Johnson said. The faculty member, identified as Professor William Kendrick Grobel, had an influence on Johnson and his decision to seek admission to Vanderbilt.

The autumn 1973 issue of *Vanderbilt Alumnus* featured a class note on Johnson who had returned to campus to deliver a lecture titled "The Sermon on the Mount in the Black Tradition" for the Divinity School's Ministers' Convocation: "A 1938 graduate of Texas College in Tyler...Bishop Johnson applied to Vanderbilt in the early fifties, 'as a joke' and was accepted. It was only several months later when he finally sent in the photograph requested that he was told he could not attend."

There is no documentation to support the assertion that Johnson applied to Vanderbilt "as a joke." The class note, which was printed two years after Bishop Johnson was elected a trustee of the University, gives no qualification, no explanation, and no reason for the relatively obtuse phrase. Johnson himself is quoted as saying he was planning on attending Union Theological Seminary in New York; however, even this detail is suspect when compared to other documents in which Johnson claims his first choice for pursuing the doctorate of philosophy was Vanderbilt.

"I can guarantee he never applied as a joke," Johnson states. "I am absolutely sure when he applied, he was dead serious."

And the son's perspective is more consistent with the portrait of Bishop Johnson. Whereas the picture painted by the *Vanderbilt Alumnus* portrays Bishop Johnson's application to the University as whimsical, his correspondence and his earlier educational and professional accomplishments do not lead one to believe that Bishop Johnson would waste his time applying to a prestigious doctoral program just for the humor such a joke might garner at church luncheons.

But he was a funny man. "He was very polished, clear, articulate—and very funny," Johnson-Powell says. "He had that element of humor in his personality. We always wondered how a black man who grew up in Louisiana wound up with a British accent."

#### Acknowledging the Inclusive Possession

On April 28, 1953, Dean Benton wrote a letter to Vanderbilt University Chancellor Harvie Branscomb. He needed advice about Bishop Johnson's application. He wrote, "Both his college and seminary degrees are from accredited institutions, and his record is such to warrant his admission to the School of Religion." According to the letter, Bishop Johnson had been accepted at the University of Chicago, Yale University, and Union Theological Seminary. He desired to study at Vanderbilt because of the faculty's prestige and the close proximity to his family.

Benton describes Johnson as a "mature man of 39," and a "fine person." He wrote, "He is a Southern man with complete understanding of the social patterns that prevail in the South, and I believe would adjust himself with complete sincerity to our situation. In conversation with him he said, 'I have no interest in publicity, and I do not seek entrance at Vanderbilt for any reason except that I want to know more about the New Testament, so that I can teach it better.'"

The phrases "a Southern man with complete understanding of the social patterns that prevail in the South" and "would adjust himself with complete sincerity to our situation" are particularly telling. According to his son, Johnson was not to be granted access to dormitories, the dining facilities, or any of the other amenities available to white students on Vanderbilt's campus.

"There were restrictions to his being admitted, mostly social in nature," Johnson says, "but he found all the conditions agreeable—no dorm, no dining—but he had a family, so that did not really matter to him."

Benton's letter concludes, "I am convinced that his application is completely sincere and that, if accepted as a special student in the School of Religion, he would do acceptable, although not outstanding work, and would be entirely acceptable as a person in the student body....Our only reason for not accepting him at once is that he is a Negro."

It is worth noting that Benton did not believe Johnson would be an "outstanding"

student; his application to the Graduate School did not require a reporting of the standardized test scores which may help predict one's academic potential. Benton's statement leads one to question if Johnson were seen as an "acceptable" applicant solely because he was black.

Johnson's decision to apply to a southern, all-white university may seem radical, and even impetuous. But the younger Johnson says his father's decision was quite characteristic of his father.

"Before he preached his first sermon in Louisiana, there was a lynching," Johnson said. "Apparently, if you were a minister during that time, you didn't come close to any lynching. You didn't perform the services—nothing."

Johnson said his father arrived for his new assignment on a Monday, and the family

*"There were restrictions to his being admitted, mostly social in nature," Johnson says, "but he found all the conditions agreeable—no dorm, no dining—but he had a family, so that did not really matter to him."*

of the lynching victim came to the church on Tuesday to ask Johnson to bury their son.

Johnson asked the family, "Why don't you go to your minister?"

"He is scared," the family members replied.

Johnson performed the funeral on Saturday before he preached his first sermon at the new church.

"He had people curious about him in the black community," Johnson says. "The first worship service was filled with people wanting to see the minister that would bury a lynching victim. By not caring what people thought of his presiding at the victim's funeral, he established a pattern for making other important decisions in his life."

And Johnson would need to use his decision making ability later. On May 1, 1953, the Vanderbilt University Board of Trust granted him admission to the Graduate School of Religion. The Board's resolution stated: "He has been accepted by institutions outside this region, but for valid reasons, he desires to study in his own State and closer to the institution for which he is administratively responsible."

There must have been some reservation because subsequent statements in the resolution serve a healthy dose of suspicion as to

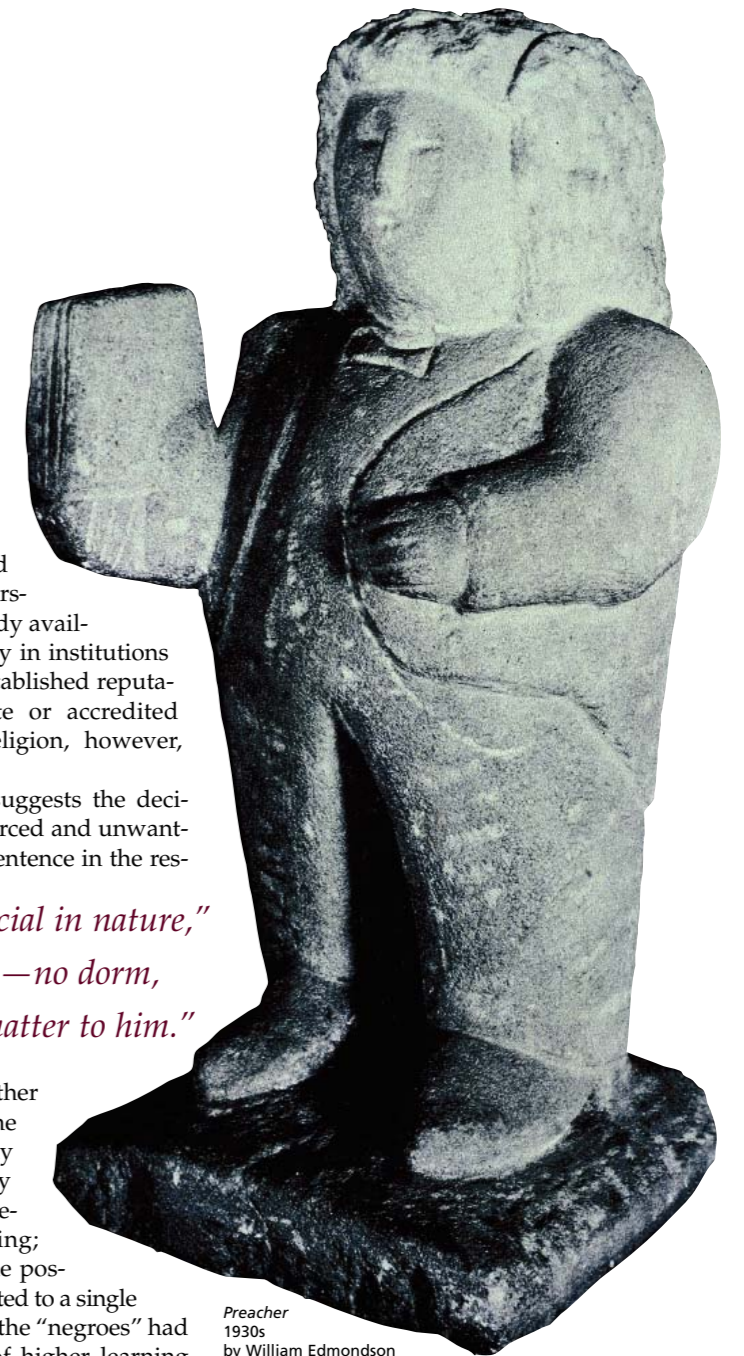
why the trustees voted to grant Johnson admission. He was academically qualified, and if he were a white student, there would have been little discussion, but the resolution also stated: "The Board of Trust does not believe that Vanderbilt University should admit negro students to courses of study which are already available to them in this vicinity in institutions of strong resources and established reputations...No negro graduate or accredited school in the field of religion, however, exists in this city or state."

The preceding clause suggests the decision to admit Johnson is forced and unwanted. Although the closing sentence in the res-

olution, "We recognize further that Christianity is not the exclusive possession of any one nation or race," may sound progressive, the statement is rather patronizing; Christianity may not be the possession of one race or restricted to a single geographical region, but if the "negroes" had an accredited institution of higher learning in the area during the 1950s, chances are, Bishop Joseph Andrew Johnson Jr. would not be an alumnus of Vanderbilt University.

On May 2, 1953, *The Tennessean* documented Bishop Johnson's acceptance to the University, but the news did not receive first billing. The article's headline read, "VU Board Adopts Budget, Announces Admission of Negro To School of Religion." The first clause in the headline and the lead sentence of the introductory paragraph give precedence to the adoption of the budget—a decision that boards of trust routinely make—while the details related to Johnson appear further in the body of the article. And this is the first black student in the history of Vanderbilt University to be accepted for admission.

Dean Benton then corresponded with Johnson, "I believe that you have already heard of the favorable action of our Board of



*Preacher*  
1930s  
by William Edmondson  
American sculptor  
Nashville, Tennessee  
(1874-1951)  
(the first African American artist to be honored with a one-man show at the Museum of Modern Art, 1937)  
limestone  
18 1/4" height, 8" width, 7 1/2" depth  
University of Tennessee  
Knoxville, Tennessee

Trust on your application for admission at Vanderbilt. I am happy to inform you officially that you have been admitted as a special student to the Vanderbilt School of Religion."

The term, "special student" was not a reference to some notion of diversity. In fact, the designation was quite the opposite. Even though Johnson was accepted as a student by the Board of Trust, the qualification "special" was conferred upon him. It seems the Board of Trust was not explicitly clear in its language. In a memorandum to Chancellor Branscomb, Dean Benton expresses his confusion: "Originally you and I had agreed to



*Building More Stately Mansions*  
1944  
by Aaron Douglas  
American painter  
(1899-1979)  
54" x 42"  
oil on canvas  
Fisk University Museum of Art  
Nashville, Tennessee



**April 1, 1954**

Dean Benton informs Johnson that he will be a candidate for the bachelor of divinity degree in August at the conclusion of the summer session and writes Bishop J. Arthur Hamlett of the First Episcopal District of the CME to commend Johnson as one who has "conducted himself in such a way as to exemplify the highest Christian character" and who has proven to be "competent in scholarly pursuits and worthy of his place of leadership in the Christian church"

**1954-55**

Bishop J. Claude Allen of the Tennessee Conference of the CME churches announces that Johnson, who will begin studies at Vanderbilt University for the doctorate in philosophy, will be "returned" for a second year as pastor of Capers Memorial Church where he will oversee the installation of the church's commemorative stained glass windows and the restoration of the silver communion service displayed on the Lord's Table for anniversaries

**March 25, 1957**

J. Philip Hyatt, acting dean of the School of Religion at Vanderbilt, asks Johnson if he would represent the University at the inauguration of the president of Paine College in Augusta, Georgia

**July 26, 1957**

Leonard B. Beach, dean of the Graduate School at Vanderbilt, requests that Professors W. Kendrick Grobel, J. Philip Hyatt, C. Everett Tilson, and Roger L. Shinn serve on the committee to administer the qualifying examinations for the doctorate to Johnson from July 29 to August 12, 1957; Johnson's dissertation will be titled "Christology and Atonement in the Fourth Gospel"

**February 9, 1958**

Johnson delivers a sermon titled "Jesus Saw the Multitude" in commemoration of the 126th anniversary of the founding of Capers Memorial CME Church

**May 31, 1958**

a sidebar titled "Ex-Yardman Earns Degree" published in the "Nashville Church News" section of the May 31, 1958, issue of *The Nashville Tennessean* states there will be a guest preacher in the pulpit at Capers Memorial CME Church because Johnson will be attending the commencement exercises at Vanderbilt University where he will receive the first doctorate of philosophy "ever awarded a Negro at Vanderbilt—and reportedly the first Negro ever to receive a doctorate from a white institution in the South" (The noun "Ex-Yardman" is a reference to Johnson's employment at the University two decades earlier when he raked the lawns to pay for his graduate tuition at Fisk University. On the eve of his being graduated, Johnson states, "The South is really progressing in solving its human relations problems. This is truly a wonderful place to live.")

**October 6, 1959**

the *Nashville Banner* announces that Johnson will serve as dean of the chapel for the 1959-60 academic year at Fisk University and will accept also a professorship in New Testament and chairmanship of graduate studies at the Interdenominational Theological Center in Atlanta—a school of religion sponsored jointly by the Methodist, Baptist, and Presbyterian denominations

**August 14-25, 1961**

at the tenth World Methodist Conference in Oslo, Norway, Johnson delivers a paper titled "Methodism in the Field of Social Service"

**1966**

elected the thirty-fourth bishop of the Fourth Episcopal District (Louisiana and Mississippi) in the Christian Methodist Episcopal Church

consider Mr. Johnson for admission to the School of Religion as a special student for one term."

The Board of Trust "voted to admit this applicant." There was no qualification, no restriction upon Johnson's student classification.

"The statement seems to imply he can be a regular student, and this means that he can be a candidate for any degree given in the School of Religion," Benton wrote. "I have not made the assumption that the action of the Board opened the way for him now to become a candidate for the Ph.D. degree."

Johnson, upon whom two graduate degrees had been conferred, was not granted immediate admission into the doctoral program; instead, he began his studies in the bachelor of divinity degree program. Chancellor Branscomb's subsequent response to Benton clarified any questions regarding Johnson's status as a student:

"The action of the Board...admitting Mr. Johnson to the School of Religion includes whatever category the Dean and faculty of the School of Religion may desire. In other words, you are free to enroll him as a special

student, a candidate for the B.D. degree, or in any other category of student which has been approved by your school. It is evident that his admission was not restricted to one term. He may register for as long a time as regulations of your faculty permit or as he may desire."

Dean Benton and the faculty of the School of Religion could have enrolled him as a special student. But they could have enrolled him as a doctoral student as well.

Johnson fulfilled the requirements for the bachelor of divinity degree in approximately one year. On April 1, 1954, he received a letter from Benton congratulating him on the accomplishment. He wrote, "I have gone over your transcript carefully and your record at Vanderbilt. It appears desirable for you to major in the field of biblical literature."

Benton also corresponded with Bishop J. Arthur Hamlett of the CME Church and praised Johnson's for his academic standing. "He has made an outstanding record at Vanderbilt and has conducted himself in such a way as to exemplify the highest Christian character. We deem him a man competent in scholarly pursuits and worthy of his place of

leadership in the Christian Church."

While the specific reason for the letter of commendation is unknown, it is interesting to note the adjective employed to describe Johnson's work. His record was "outstanding" instead of the "acceptable" level anticipated when he made application to the University.

"The impression I have is that once he earned the bachelor of divinity degree, the whole School made an investment in him and encouraged him to continue in his success. There was not a sense that attending Vanderbilt was ever problematic for him. There did not seem to be any race-based pressure. He received stronger and stronger support as he progressed," says Johnson.

Three decades later, Chancellor Branscomb would recount the occasion when Johnson was graduated with the baccalaureate in divinity. Sitting next to Dean Rusk, then President of the Rockefeller Foundation and later Secretary of State, the chancellor remarked, "I leaned over to Mr. Rusk and said that this was an historic occasion for us but also an unpredictable one—that for the first time the University was to confer a degree upon a black graduate, but none of us knew what the reaction of the audience would be. When the name of Joseph Andrew Johnson Jr. was called and he came forward to be handed his diploma, the audience broke out into prolonged applause. It was an ovation richly deserved."

**"Pomposity," Circumstance, and Turning Out the Woods**

When Johnson decided to continue with his studies in the Graduate School, he was governed by a passion to make a significant contribution to teaching and to theological scholarship.

"My father knew if he were going to become a scholar of the New Testament and of the black church that he would have to attack an issue—a big issue—in his dissertation; he wanted to research and write on a substantial topic—a topic full of meat—and he did not want there to be any questions about Vanderbilt 'giving' him the degree," says Johnson.

Four years of graduate study culminated in Johnson's defense of "Christology and Atonement in the Fourth Gospel." In the preface to his dissertation, Johnson wrote,

"...it became apparent that if I were ever permitted to write a doctoral dissertation I would write on the subject of Christology in the Fourth Gospel." The author also thanked Chancellor Branscomb, Dean Benton, and the Vanderbilt University Board of Trust, who, "in 1953 opened the doors of a great University to qualified Negro students."

During commencement exercises which the son remembers as being full of "pomposity," Johnson again made history when he became the first African American to earn a doctorate at the University.

"My father wanted me to get a picture of him as he was being hooded and shaking people's hands," Johnson said. "Remember, this is the era of pre-civil rights. I walked down to the front, near the stage and snapped a picture as he was walking across the stage."

*When the name of Joseph Andrew Johnson Jr. was called and he came forward to be handed his diploma, the audience broke out into prolonged applause. It was an ovation richly deserved.*

When the younger Johnson returned to his seat, a lady seated nearby rose from her chair and told him she was from Mississippi. "That still could put shivers down a man's spine during that time," Johnson says. "She told me her husband was receiving a doctorate in history, and then she asked if I would go back to the stage and take a picture of her husband as he received his diploma."

Johnson honored her request, and the two families—the black and white families—exchanged addresses for sharing the photographs.

It is easy for one to think of Bishop Johnson only as a scholar and minister, but it would be wrong to think these were his only gifts. He had a profound impact on his children.

"We had a very dear, close relationship," Johnson-Powell says. "He touched so many areas of my life. It is hard for me to talk about him as a scholar without thinking of him first as a father."

She remembers her father calling her a "brown, beautiful woman."

"And this was before black became beautiful," Johnson-Powell emphasizes. "There was definitely a light skinned color preference when I was young, and my father gave me joy in my aesthetic. His comment may sound

trivial, but it did wonders for my self-esteem. He gave me a sense of beauty and a sense of my own intelligence. He doted on me—I admit that."

The son's fondest memory involves his own predilection for mimicking his father. "I became notorious for imitating his preaching,"

Johnson also remembers when he was twelve years old and made an announcement to his father.

"We were sitting on the porch, and I told him that the Bible says twelve-year-olds make important decisions during that time in their lives," Johnson says. "I told him I wanted to be a preacher. He asked, 'You sure?'"

And I said, 'I think so.' He told me that I would know and not to worry about it. At that moment he released me from any obligation I had felt about following him into the ministry."

And his father had not always envisioned himself in the pulpit. He once had aspirations of becoming a football player, a running back. But he was severely injured during a tackle, and he turned his attention from any athletic ambitions to pursuing a religious vocation.

"He promised the Lord, if he recovered, he would go into the ministry," Johnson said. "That kind of clarity in his spirit was a trait we always observed in our father. He soon acquired a reputation as a very powerful preacher, and he would love to go some place, deep into the woods, and 'turn the place out.' Preaching was his gift, a gift he believed he was supposed to share."

"He was the perfect balance between learned theologian and country preacher," Johnson-Powell says. "He could break down religious and social complexities. I remember him strutting across the stage, taking off his glasses—just at the right time when he wanted to make a point."

**From Knee Pants to Rabat**

Johnson's gift for preaching was not limited to turning out congregations in the deep woods. An invitation to cross the threshold of a sanctuary whose doors had once been closed to him always remained one of the memorable events in his vocation.

The Reverend Kenneth Paul, Rector of Holy Cross Episcopal Church in Shreveport, Louisiana, remembers Johnson calling to congratulate him on his clerical assignment.

"Joseph called me when I first became the



- 1969**  
becomes the acting dean and a professor of religion at Fisk University
- 1971**  
elected to membership on the Vanderbilt University Board of Trust and becomes one of three Americans appointed to the Faith and Order Commission of the World Council of Churches; appointed chair of the Commission of Theology of the National Committee of Black Churchmen; appointed chair of the Commission on Worship of Consultation on Church Union; his book, *The Soul of the Black Preacher*, is published by Pilgrim Press in Philadelphia
- April 1973**  
returns to the Vanderbilt campus to deliver a lecture titled "The Sermon on the Mount in the Black Tradition" during the Divinity School's Ministers' Convocation
- August 1973**  
travels to Russia for a meeting of the Faith and Order Commission of the World Council of Churches
- 1977**  
Johnson's *Proclamation Theology* is published by the Fourth Episcopal District Press in Shreveport, Louisiana
- 1978**  
Johnson's *Basic Christian Methodist Beliefs* is published by the Fourth Episcopal District Press in Shreveport, Louisiana
- September 26, 1979**  
Johnson dies following surgery in Shreveport
- September 29, 1979**  
funeral rites for the bishop are conducted in Shreveport and he is interred in Lincoln Memorial Park (During the funeral service, Vanderbilt University Chancellor Alexander Heard eulogizes the bishop by saying, "Ever since his graduation, Bishop Johnson kept an active attachment to Vanderbilt, and as a trustee, he consistently brought wise and useful counsel to the deliberations of the board. As bishop in the Christian Methodist Episcopal Church, and as author, preacher, and nationally recognized church leader, he brought lasting credit to his alma mater and enduring honor to himself and his family. We shall miss him sorely.")
- November 2, 1979**  
the Vanderbilt University Board of Trust adopts a memorial resolution to honor Bishop Johnson for his "gifted eloquence, his tenacious energy, his uncompromised ethical values, his undented religious convictions, and his abiding loyalty to Vanderbilt"
- October 27, 1983**  
Vanderbilt University Chancellor Joe B. Wyatt announces to alumni during the University's Black Alumni Weekend that the Vanderbilt Black Cultural Center will be renamed to honor Bishop Joseph Johnson
- April 12, 1984**  
the dedication of the Bishop Johnson Cultural Center at Vanderbilt University

rector at Holy Cross," Paul says. "He extended good wishes and informed me that he had a boyhood familiarity with the church."

In 1971, Holy Cross organized a Lenten preaching series for which Paul helped recruit, "the big guns" of the city to preach, and Johnson was one of the ministers invited to participate.

"That was quite an occasion," Paul states. "It was the first time in Shreveport that a black man would preach in a predominately white church, and the announcement made big news."

When Johnson arrived at Holy Cross, Paul met him on the front steps of the

*'When I was a boy in knee pants, I walked by this church, knowing I could never go inside. Today I'm not only inside, I'm preaching. I will never forget this day.'*"

church. The two clerics exchanged pleasantries, and Paul escorted Johnson to the vestry. "I told him he could prepare for his homily while I took care of some last-minute details in the sanctuary."

But when the rector returned for Johnson, he saw the bishop sitting in a chair and weeping.

"I remember he was wearing striking scarlet vestments as he sat alone in the vestry," Paul says, "and great tears were running down his cheeks and falling on his chasuble."

Johnson then explained the reason for his emotions. "Father Paul, you do not know what this opportunity means to me. And I replied, 'No, I don't.' He then told me, 'When I was a boy in knee pants, I walked by this church, knowing I could never go inside. Today I'm not only inside, I'm preaching. I will never forget this day.'"

After narrating this poignant scene from the bishop's life, Paul always enjoys telling another anecdote about Johnson. "Joseph had the pleasure of meeting the Archbishop of Canterbury, Michael Ramsey, and the archbishop told him to stop by and see him if he were ever in England because he had a gift for him. And when Joseph traveled to England, he went to Canterbury to call on the archbishop who presented him with a

purple rabat. Joseph, with his wonderful sense of humor, was fond of saying thereafter that he received his first colors from the Archbishop of Canterbury."

Another significant event in the biography of Bishop Johnson occurred in 1971 when he was elected as the first black person to serve on the Vanderbilt University Board of Trust.

"My father had a great love for Vandy—that's a fact. He was proud of his association with the University, and he regarded his election to the Board of Trust an honor."

Bishop Johnson's daughter also remembers her father's ministry as a trustee.

"That was a pivotal event," Johnson-Powell said. "He was an eloquent educator who was proud to be affiliated with the Board of Trust. I can see him matching wits with the other trustees on contemporary issues."

At the dedication of the Bishop Joseph Johnson Black Cultural Center in 1984, William S. Vaughn, President of the Vanderbilt University Board of Trust during Johnson's tenure as a trustee, remarked: "Bishop Johnson was a skillful advocate on behalf of the blacks, yes. But more than that, he was an interpreter, bringing to our understanding the complex elements of racial psychology and estrangement. And in his tactful and persuasive way, he would hold up the mirror to our own consciences, which, when deftly administered, can be the most effective therapy of all."

Bishop Joseph Andrew Johnson Jr. was a man of *firsts*. He was the first black student admitted to the University. He was the first to be graduated with a doctorate of philosophy. He was the first black member of the Board of Trust. The man who once worked on Vanderbilt's campus as a member of a grounds crew is an undeniable figure in the history of the University. He was a race man, and his accomplishments helped to open doors for black men and women at the University. His gentle intellectualism was paired with a fiery spirit and with an intense desire to see God's will fulfilled on earth. Bishop Johnson was a father and a husband; he was a preacher; he was a man dedicated to serving God. And he was the first black student to attend Vanderbilt University.

## Honoring and Changing Legacies

BY FORREST ELLIOTT HARRIS SR., MDIV'83, DMIN'91

*When I arrived at Vanderbilt University Divinity School in the fall of 1987 to enroll in the master of divinity degree program, I had no suspicion that my matriculation would develop into a vocation in theological education. A combination of five years as a graduate student and sixteen years as director of the Kelly Miller Smith Institute on Black Church Studies and faculty member of Vanderbilt Divinity School marks me with a great sense of honor to have been privileged with the opportunity to serve the academy and the church. I came to the Divinity School with a deep passion for the faith tradition of the black church and with a thirst of theological scholarship. I was thrilled to enter an environment where religious imagination was encouraged and where a new theological vocabulary opened up vistas for reflection on the purpose and meaning of the Christian faith.*

Coming to Vanderbilt Divinity School made creative demands upon my sense of Christian vocation. I was determined to honor the legacies of great luminaries whose significant contributions to the Divinity School were widely recognized. Even to this day, the prophetic voice of the Reverend Kelly Miller Smith Sr., pastor of First Baptist Church, Capitol Hill, and assistant dean of the Divinity School; the rare brilliance and courage of Bishop Joseph A. Johnson Jr., the first African American student admitted to Vanderbilt University in 1953; the intense desire for academic excellence of Professor Peter Paris, the first African American to gain tenure at the University and rise through the ranks from instructor to professor during his service at the Divinity School from 1972 to 1985; and the passionate pursuit for justice of the Reverend Nehemiah

Elias Douglas MDiv'71, DMin'74, a Divinity School graduate originally from Jamaica who introduced me to black theology at American Baptist College—all give me reasons to be thankful for their sacrifices and for their legacies which continue to inspire and challenge students at VDS.

I remember quite clearly the comment Reverend Douglas wrote in the margin of a paper which I titled "The Black Rage and Black Theology" and submitted for his class: "Interpreting and understanding black rage is the creative and unfinished agenda of black theology and the black churches." This was my first intellectual encounter with the justice struggles of the black church, and my understanding of the role of organized religion was altered dramatically. From that moment, I saw the academy and the Christian church as inseparable partners in fulfilling the mandate for social justice change.

Surprisingly, my own years of silent rage surfaced in creative response to what I continue to believe to be a call from God to serve the ends of the gospel. I came to terms with the realization that my government job as a

*From that moment, I saw the academy and the Christian church as inseparable partners in fulfilling the mandate for social justice change.*

Federal Compliance Officer with the Atomic Energy Commission in Oak Ridge, Tennessee, could not satisfy my vocational hunger to pursue the dream of the black church. I left that government position and journeyed the road between Oak Ridge and Nashville—first to American Baptist College and then to Vanderbilt Divinity School—a novice with naive notions about the Christian faith and its demands.

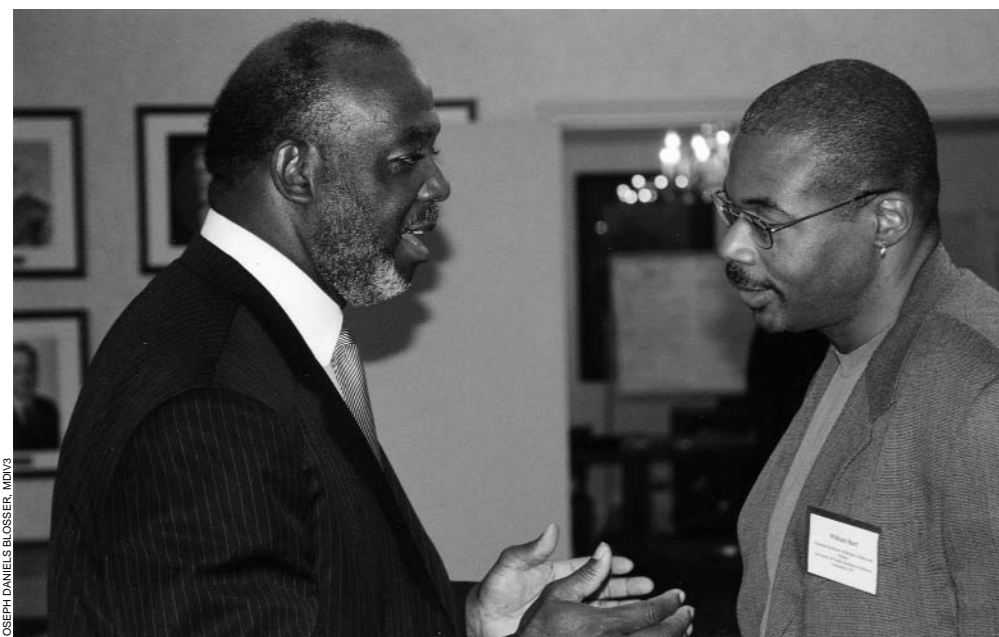
I entered Vanderbilt Divinity School in awe; the faculty's credentials were excep-

## Linking the Academy with the Black Church

The Kelly Miller Smith Institute on Black Church Studies at Vanderbilt University sponsored a conference during September to examine the cutting edge research issues in African American religious studies and to explore the contributions this academic discipline is making to the black church. Fifteen participants, including University alumni/ae, who represent institutions of higher education, theological foundations, and churches convened at the Divinity School to consult with one another on strategies for preparing African American scholars and teachers of religion to serve the academy and the black church.

Attending the conference were James Hudnut-Beumler, dean of the Divinity School; Alice Wells Hunt, PhD'03, associate dean for academic affairs at VDS; Forrest Harris Sr., MDiv'83, DMin'91, director of the Kelly Miller Smith Institute at VDS and president of American Baptist College; Victor Anderson, associate professor of ethics at VDS; Brad Braxton, associate professor of homiletics and New Testament at VDS; Lewis Baldwin, professor of religious studies at Vanderbilt; Dennis Dickerson, professor of history at Vanderbilt; Anthony Pinn, professor of religious studies at Rice University; Dianne Stewart, assistant professor of religious studies at Emory University; Riggins Earl, MDiv'69, PhD'78, professor of ethics and theology at the Interdenominational Theology Center in Atlanta; Dwight Hopkins, professor of theology at the University of Chicago; Eddie Glaude, professor of religious studies at Princeton University; William Hart, associate professor of religion, ethics, and politics at the University of North Carolina in Greensboro; Dennis Wiley of Covenant Baptist Church in Washington, D.C.; and Sharon Watson Fluker of the Fund for Theological Education in Atlanta.





JOSEPH DANIELS BLOSSER, MDIV

Forrest Harris Sr., MDiv'83, DMin'91, director of the Kelly Miller Smith Institute on Black Church Studies at VDS and president of American Baptist College, consults with William Hart, associate professor of religion, ethics, and politics at the University of North Carolina in Greensboro during the conference on the relationship of African American religious studies to the black church.

tional. The dominance of white academic elitism and exclusivism, however, was overwhelming. The apparent resources to facilitate learning at Vanderbilt were more abundant than I had known previously, but the theological world view and justice concerns of the black church were on the margins of Vanderbilt's theological curriculum. The logo for Marian Wright Eldeman's Children Defense Fund aptly describes my feelings at that time: "Lord, the ocean is big and my boat is so small." The ocean had many legacies, myths and images of "the Old and New South"—some that I was inspired to honor and others that I was compelled to challenge.

Kelly Miller Smith and Peter Paris were my first teachers at Vanderbilt and were the only African Americans on the faculty. Reverend Smith was the premier civil rights leader in Nashville during the 1960s and one whose social crisis preaching was a combination of theological acumen, prophetic imagination and pastoral concern. These qualities made him an unusually gifted black religious leader in Nashville and throughout the country. The Supreme Court's decision of 1954 in *Brown v. the Board of Education*, the student sit-in movements of the 1960s, and the injustice of expelling James Lawson from Vanderbilt University because of his participation in the student protests, the Civil

Rights Act of 1964, and the assassination of the Reverend Doctor Martin Luther King Jr. in 1968 made serious waves in the ocean of academic racism and injustice at the University. I soon realized that my aspirations for theological education were linked to a larger movement that preceded me and would last long after my departure, so I, as I suspect many African American students had done prior to my arrival at the Divinity School, hooked my small boat to the big boat of Vanderbilt and tugged my way through the contours and uncertain waters of theological preparation to serve the cause of justice through the witness of the black church. The burden of racial representation and inequality placed black students in the position of being tug boats, pulling the Divinity School forward to a more complete understanding of the black church and its significant contributions to American Protestantism.

The ocean in which I found myself at Vanderbilt was always restless around issues related to theological education for a graduate research faculty, a diverse student pool, and a commitment to the Christian church. From the sometimes turbulent waters of dialogue, debate, and compromise, commitments on behalf of the Divinity's School administration, faculty, staff, and students to combat all forms and expressions of racism, sexism, and

homophobia emerged. The institutional commitment to the ideals of diversity, equality, and justice always won, but the institutional resources to honor those commitments required constant monitoring and self-study. Positive but challenging dialogues and constructive but stormy debates characterized the situation of black students as they sought to negotiate their tenuous position as students and advocates for change. Good faith efforts always seemed to involve the Divinity School in an endless cycle of recruitment and retention of a limited pool of available African American scholars with commensurate resources to support the needs and vision of theological education for African American students. When Smith died in 1984 and Peter Paris joined the faculty of Princeton University in 1985, the Divinity School was left without a single African American on its faculty. The School soon realized that it had drifted too long in the ocean of entrenched institutional racism, and bold moves were now required to correct the problem.

In 1987, after being graduated from the Divinity School, I thought my boat had come to shore as a black minister. As pastor of Oak Valley Baptist Church in Oak Ridge, Tennessee, I was content to use the pastoral experiences of this small church as a platform to grow into the larger leadership challenges and opportunities in the black church. One day while working in my church office, I received a telephone call from Professor Sallie McFague who was serving as chair of a search committee for the director of the Kelly Miller Smith Institute on the Black Church. My conversation with Professor McFague changed the direction of my pastoral career. Following the death of Reverend Smith, the faculty of the Divinity School established an institute on the black church named in his honor. "You would be an excellent choice for this job," Professor McFague said to me. I then availed myself for an interview with Divinity School Dean Jack Forstman, and to my family's surprise and excitement, we were moving to Nashville.

After a few weeks in my role as director, I soon found myself in a dilemma. I was inspired by Kelly Miller Smith's legacy of prophetic witness, yet the legacy of racial disparity at Vanderbilt challenged me daily. When I sat down to compose a mission statement for the newly established institute, the "creative rage" to which Nehemiah Douglas alerted me found intellectual articulation in ways that made me confident that the justice

tradition of the black church is not marginal to theological education at the Divinity School but an essential aspect of the School's adopted mission—"the minister as theologian." Much work, however, needed to be accomplished to honor one legacy and change the other.

So there I was, on the job for only three weeks, standing up in Benton Chapel at the invitation of the Dean Forstman to deliver the convocation address and open the academic year. I thought my boat would sink. But not long into the address, a creative wave of the black preaching tradition crested at the very moment that my rage demanded theological articulation. I said, "During my days as a student at Vanderbilt, I did not notice as much as I do now the glaring racial disparity here. I have come to join this faculty to challenge and change this legacy, else history will mark Vanderbilt as a glorified plantation."

At the faculty meeting later that day, Professor Liston Mills led the faculty in a celebrated applause for my address, and I felt a buoyancy of support beneath my boat. Since those days, many aspects of the legacy have changed, indeed, yet certain conditions continue to require our attention. Recruitment and retention of black theologians and religious scholars remain significant challenges.

The Kelly Miller Smith Institute on Black Church Studies has acquired a permanent endowment to support the educational programs to strengthen the ministry and leadership of the black churches. Commitment to the black church theological tradition is a prominent feature of the Divinity School's core curriculum. Scholarships for African American students continue to increase. Through the institute's initiatives, the theological academy at Vanderbilt enjoys collaboration with the black church community in Nashville through specialty seminars and programs that address various disparities and justice issues related to leadership economics, health and human sexuality.

Honoring and changing legacies is the challenge, as I see it, for the dedicated faculty and talented student population at Vanderbilt University Divinity School. I am proud to be a part of such a rich legacy in theological education.

*Harris serves as director of the Kelly Miller Smith Institute on Black Church Studies at Vanderbilt University Divinity School and as president of American Baptist College in Nashville, Tennessee.*

## Words from the Soul of the Bishop

... [Man] has won his physical perfection through endurance. It is only by the exercise of this physical power that he gains additional physical powers. This is the law of life.

This truth is operative in the realm of the mind of man. The mind is given to us by God as a capacity which may be developed into perfection, but it is far from being perfect when it is given. It is only as man uses his mind, exercises it, disciplines it, as he seeks to master the fields of knowledge which are thrust before him, that he grows strong in his mental capacity and develops the potential which is given to the mind by God. Education depends not so much on putting knowledge into the child's mind as drawing forth power by the exercise of the mind. Thus, it must be said in a true sense that a man may win his mind.

A man wins his body, a man wins his mind, and a man wins his soul or his life. Every time we choose the difficult right rather than the easy wrong we gain our lives. Every time we sacrifice ease and comfort to do service for our fellowman we gain our lives. Every time we say a kind word and do a loving deed we gain our lives. Our lives will grow and expand on loving-kindness and sacrifice.

\* \* \* \* \*

The black experience teaches us that not only must we identify ourselves with the Blacks of the world, but also with the wretched nonwhites of the world. We must remember that our blackness links us with the Indians of Peru, the miners of Bolivia, the Africans, and the freedom fighters in Vietnam. What they fight for is what the black man in America fights for—the right to govern his own life. This is the new universalism which is based on suffering, struggle, survival, and hope.

To fulfill this destiny, God, working through the black experience, has well-equipped us. God has given us the gift of faith. As we examine the shape of the black experience in America, we realize that the black man would not be in existence today were it not for this gift of faith.

The gift of faith is proclaimed in our hymns and spirituals, and it is articulated in our language; it rings out in our laughter and is rhythmized in our dances. We have discovered this faith in the depth of our suffering, and it has given meaning and glory to our existence.

—Bishop Joseph Andrew Johnson Jr.  
(1914-1979)  
from *The Soul of the Black Preacher*, 1971





Adam and Eve  
1912  
by Marc Chagall  
Russian painter  
(1887-1985)  
oil on canvas  
160.5 x 109 cm  
Saint Louis Art Museum

# Genesis

*"God is subtle, but he is not malicious."*

—Albert Einstein

In the beginning they were all beginners; no one was advanced. Little by little they learned that Nature favors the firstborn, but God prefers the second; so they had to learn deception. Though the serpent was more subtle than any of the creatures God had made, God had made him; he was Yahweh's protégé, The world's first teacher, and Eve's first lesson after trees was God's predilection for flocks over fruits and Abel over Cain, Though not the reason why—or was it whim? Sibling rivalry was couching at the door And sprang.

At first the covenant was fragile, so the fathers built a fence for Its survival; then as now, the last line of defense was dissimulation. Abram had to say that Sarai was his sister, and they lived well in Egypt so long as she was Pharaoh's wife. As Abraham of the promise, he fancied the younger boy to Ishmael; Sarah easily won the boon for Isaac, who in turn played his dad's Old trick in Gerar: 'Lest I die because of her.' His own Rebekah bested him, scheming to secure the blessing for Her favorite son; who can fault her, for didn't the Lord ordain: 'The elder shall serve the younger'?

But who can forget Esau's exceedingly great and bitter cry: 'Bless me, even me also, O my father!' Didn't Isaac tremble Then and see again, that blind old man, the shadow of the knife Upraised so long ago and sorrow for Jacob who would follow him Along the twisted way of Chosenness to the mad land of Moriah? Lost to his mother, who called the curse upon herself, wily Jacob Fled the springing beast to Paddan-aram; from Bethel of the dream He woke and went to Haran, where he found his kinsmen at the Well and loved at sight Rachel, the younger girl; the seven Years he worked for her went swifter than a week.

But Uncle Laban was a schemer like his sister and had a ruse for Putting Leah in her rightful place as first wife in his nephew's bed. Even so, Jacob in his dotage forgot where favoritism led, and loved Best of all his sons the dreamer, Joseph, who strutted in his pretty coat. The envy of his brothers was the beast that drenched his robe in blood. Yet the promise proved efficacious through doting fathers, meddling Mothers, family strife and reconciliation; deception begat deception Unto the fourth generation; the burden of the blessing was the root of Jacob's limp, until Israel laid his right hand on the wrong grandson, then Blessed them all and gathered up his feet into his bed.

At the end of the beginning the patriarchs and matriarchs must have Known the truth of what the mystics say: 'Nothing' is one of the Names of God, and nothing ceases to exist at the moment of creation, Meaning that creatures must then, for good or ill, make something Of the world. Reading Genesis, one wonders whether it matters To God that the Covenant came to fruition by so much mendacity, So many wiles, and whether without guile the saving story could unfold, Much less have been retold. Is subtlety but the veil that hides the face of Him Who was and is and is to come?

Charlotte Barr, BA'69  
29 April 2004

T H E S P I R E



# CALLED TO THE WALLS

BY LINDSAY CATHRYN MEYERS, MDIV 3

*After spending eighteen years of my life in Texas, one would think I would know about prisons. But to me, prisons were merely plots of land marked by water towers and tall fences rising from the Texas gulf coast plains.*

The Houston nightly local news often reported executions that had occurred that week in Huntsville by displaying a mug shot, name, and crime. As children, we were not permitted to play outside when an inmate had escaped from one of the six prisons located in Brazoria County. Despite the significant presence of prisons in our county, discussions relating to penal institutions, inmates, or the criminal justice system were absent from conversations in the community, in the classroom, at the dinner table, or at church.

I was able to escape any conversations relating to prisons throughout my undergraduate and post-graduate career. While working in the affordable housing industry in Washington, D.C., I heard many discussions about the need for affordable housing for the developmentally handicapped, physically handicapped, or homeless individuals. The community development professionals were silent when it came to matters relating to potential communal responsibility for housing or programs for individuals exiting prisons.

Fortunately, Vanderbilt University Divinity School refuses to perpetuate the silence present in most communities. In my second semester

of my program of studies for the master of divinity degree, I had the opportunity to register for a class taught at Riverbend Maximum Security Institution, the local state prison. The course invited residents of Riverbend and VDS students to begin an exploration of theology inside the walls of the prison.

Similar to the other students from VDS, I had never been inside a prison. In fact, I did not even know where to go to find a prison in Tennessee without a visible water tower and tall fence emerging from the horizon. I initially questioned the rationale for traveling the distance to the prison to engage in theological discussions with individuals who were not students in a divinity school, but the professors' enthusiasm quieted my hesitations and drew me to the fence surrounding Riverbend.

I encountered many fences designed to separate me from my classmates at Riverbend. I was not wearing the "blues." I did not share the standardized shoes or assigned job descriptions. After leaving the prison, I could choose my own dinner and leave my lights on as late as I wanted. I could receive phone calls from loved ones anytime of the day.

In our first class, my mind wandered into imagining the life inside the walls of the prison. To bring me back to the present, the professors asked each of us to introduce ourselves with our name. The task seemed simple, but to the men at Riverbend the task was liberating. The inmates were not asked to identify themselves by the crimes they had committed or the lengths of their sentences. Instead, a name would suffice for entrance into the discussions of theology that have

continued for six semesters.

It is common to acknowledge and affirm difference and diversity at VDS, but, in comparison to the diversity found in the Riverbend classroom, VDS students are quite homogeneous. Instead of focusing on the inherent differences present inside the walls of the Riverbend classroom, our professors invited each of us into a dialogue centered on our common passions. Not surprisingly, the VDS students who traveled to the prison were interested in discussing justice, sexism, racism, and violence within our society. These issues provoke emotional responses and challenge all participants to reconsider the structure of oppressive institutions and to consider how one's participation in these systems may contribute to violence towards one another.

In order to elicit discussions, our assignments included reading challenging theological texts. Just as the professors promised, the words of the theological texts acquire different meanings inside the prison. The words of Paulo Friere, Dorothy Day, Will Campbell, and Walter Wink take on new life while reading them with the Riverbend residents who are hearing the authors' pleas for the first time. Through the reflections of the classmates who are reconsidering their identities, their experiences of the world, and their understandings of the divine, I am forced to reshape my own perspective.

In contrast to other programs at the prison, we do not travel to the prison to offer Bible studies, to counsel inmates, or to preside at worship services. Our journey, however, does include a hope for transformation



of one another. Unexpectedly, some VDS students and Riverbend residents who have rejected belonging to a faith tradition in the past, now call the Riverbend class “church.”

After encountering the prison, it has become impossible for me to ignore the theoretical and practical connections between my theological convictions and the structure of the criminal justice system. In all courses, the VDS professors encourage students to integrate the words of texts we are studying with our experiences in our practice of ministry. Not only is this task necessary, but it is unavoidable. As one Riverbend resident proclaimed quite cogently, “If you take these texts seriously, this is a hard place to be.” Regardless of social location, if one approaches theology and its practical implications seriously, living in the world and practicing the art of ministry will challenge one everyday.

My four-semester experience at Riverbend constantly shapes my other course work at the Divinity School. While attending classes at the prison, I was also exploring political theology in the course “Communities, Traditions, and Differences” with Mary McClintock Fulkerson, PhD’86, the visiting E. Rhodes and Leona B. Carpenter Professor of Theology. Here we examined the religious and political traditions that govern communities by exploring the scholarship of John Rawls, Donald Moon, Alsadair MacIntyre, William Connolly, Edward Farley, and John Howard Yoder.

In all communities, we adopt certain traditions and practices to reinforce community values. Specifically, my experience in the prison raised questions concerning the boundaries of communities, as well as a community’s responsibilities to individuals. While the human voices from Riverbend suggest that those inside the walls of the prison are no longer members of the community, the theologians we encountered insist that the razor fences do not absolve “free worlders” from responsibility to “the other.” Our discussions centering on community boundaries and responsibilities encouraged me to envision new paradigms for mission in faith communities.

Similar to my political theology class, the material in the course “Ethics for Human Development Professionals” taught by Paul Dokecki, PhD’68, professor of psychology at Peabody and a member of the John F. Kennedy Center for Research on Human Development, required me to question the ethics of our criminal justice system. From the class discussions I learned that an ethical

professional is measured by one’s ability to strengthen community and foster the human development of individuals. These two ideals seem to be acceptable models for guiding decisions in a professional setting, but how often are these ideals used in governing decisions regarding prisons? The theological texts I have encountered at VDS propose that individuals in prison, despite one’s transgressions, are still members of the community and children of God.

*I encountered many fences designed to separate me from my classmates at Riverbend.*

From the experience of the residents of Riverbend, decisions are based upon safety and cost-effectiveness. In practice, intentional decisions are made to disrupt the formation of community or friendships among the men. I am at a loss to find the theological texts to support decisions that do not support the development of humans and community.

Similar to my course in political theology and professional ethics, my experience at Riverbend inspires my studies of feminist process theology with Visiting Professor Marjorie Hewitt Suchocki this fall semester. Her book, *The Fall to Violence*, suggests that sin is the use of unnecessary violence, a practice which demonstrates a “rebellion against creation’s well-being.”<sup>i</sup> From her understanding of original sin, in light of relational theology, it follows that each person is responsible for enhancing the well-being of any victim and violator in order to stop the cycle of violence defined as sin. From her perspective, transformation of this cycle does not occur from “feelings of love” or “acceptance of the other,” but transformation entails a “matter of intellect.”<sup>ii</sup> Transformation and forgiveness arise from the practice of “willing the well-being of victim(s) and violator(s) in the context of the fullest possible knowledge of the nature of the violation.”<sup>iii</sup> Since I have become acquainted with residents of Riverbend, Suchocki’s words resonate with the pain of victims and violators I encounter inside and outside the walls of the prison. Suchocki’s argument of solidarity and interdependence challenges all to become more involved in practices of communal transformation and self-transcendence.

Fortunately, these classes, authors, and men at Riverbend offer me a new voice in

public discussions and private conversations. My experience inside the fence of the prison enables me to engage individuals, evaluate ethical arguments, and question political practices in the social world. Marked by my identity as a free-worlder Tennessean, native Texan, and student of theology, I can no longer participate in the silence that pervades our communities and churches. Mistakenly, debates relating to prisons become centered on the funding, construction, and location of prisons. But, as individuals whose theological education at Vanderbilt Divinity School has endorsed an ethic of care,

we should expand these debates to discussions of communal responsibility to victim and violator. The prison, an institution once only identified by fences and water towers, has now become a community of individuals with needs and resources to share with me.

*The course currently taught at Riverbend Maximum Security Institution is titled “Where We Stand: The Impact of Social Location on Biblical Interpretation in the Southern United States” and is coordinated by alumni/ae Janet Lynn Wolf, MDiv’88, director of public policy and community outreach for Religious Leaders for a More Just and Compassionate Drug Policy; Harmon Wray, MA’85, executive director for the National Association of Sentencing Advocates; and Richard Goode, PhD’95, associate professor of history and senior faculty fellow in the Center for International Peace and Justice at Davidson College.*

*A native of Lake Jackson, Texas, Meyers was graduated in 2000 from Davidson College where she earned a baccalaureate in mathematics.*

i Suchocki, Marjorie Hewitt, *The Fall to Violence: Original Sin in Relational Theology* (New York: Continuum Publishing Company, 1995), 16.

ii Ibid, 145.

iii Ibid, 144.

*In the dense haze of January, I sit frozen as the brisk lake winds send shivers up the spines of icicles scaling the rugged gutters of my family’s cabin in the Ozark Mountains. With the warmth of a fire on my face, I again feel the blazing Hawaiian sun tanning my skin and lighting my way into an unknown world. For three months I participated in clinical pastoral education with Pacific Health Ministries located in Honolulu on the island of Oahu. I visited patients during the day and spent the rest of my time exploring this tropical paradise and her unique offering of human and natural life. I witnessed the flowering beauty of a land rich with the sun’s graces, and I mourned a land scorched with pain of imperialism.*

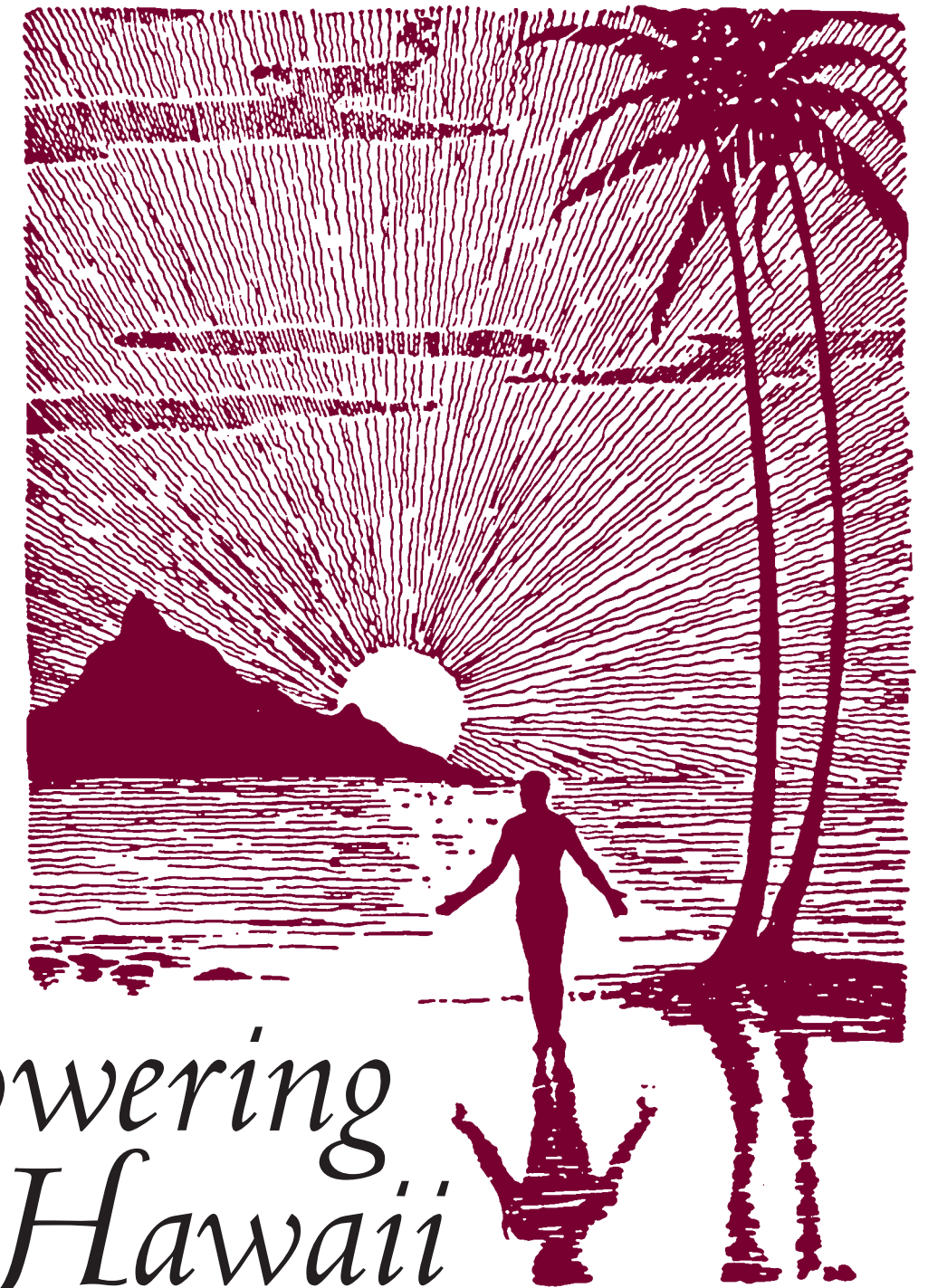
# THE Deflowering OF Hawaii

An Apprenticeship in Talking Story

BY JOSEPH DANIELS BLOSSER, MDIV3

Titling this essay “The Deflowering of Hawaii” seems a rather supercilious assertion coming from a mid-Western boy safely nestled in the logs of his heritage, but besides the literal environmental overtones, I hope this image conveys the intensity I sensed in the Hawaiian experience. Though decades have lapsed, many Hawaiians perpetuate the story of how Western cultures robbed Hawaii’s innocence by commercializing her land, suffocating her way of life, and enslaving her people to poverty and powerlessness. They tell a tale of deceit, arrogance, mechanization, militarization, dehumanization, tourism, and turmoil, but somewhere within the story of their lives emerges the grace, compassion, hope, and “Spirit of Aloha,” which continue to define these islands.

I received the gift of these stories through chance encounters on the beach, conversations in patients’ rooms, nurses’ stations, and especially through the hours spent in the office of my CPE preceptor. Gail, a local Hawaiian woman (residents of Hawaii reserve the term “local” to signify those born and reared on the islands), has served as the chaplain at Kapi’olani Med-





ical Center for Women and Children for over fourteen years, and for me she embodies the essence of the Hawaiian tradition of “talking story.” Heard on occasional southern sun porches over lemonade and sweet tea, the telling of ancient myths, ancestral trials, and moral quips flowed from the lips of nearly every Hawaiian resident I visited.

Academicians have reveled in the importance of story. Ethicist Alasdair MacIntyre writes that “there is no way to give us an understanding of any society, including our own, except through the stock of stories that constitute its essential dramatic resources.” Similarly, religious historian Martin Marty mirrors political columnist Max Lerner’s statement about symbols: “People possess stories, but stories possess people.” Academic giddiness over the power of story, however, often misses a particular story’s richness. The Hawaiian tale is far richer than I could ever express, yet I can tell of my experience, the stories I witnessed, and the lives that shaped my own. Though my apprenticeship in “talking story” lasted only a short time, I hope I can convey both the pain of innocence lost through the collision of cultures and the sense of the spiritual maturity gained through these internal conflicts.

#### Plucking the Ripened Pear

I began my relationship with Hawaii a month before leaving the mainland by searching Amazon.com for books to help me understand better the local culture. I soon learned this endeavor prepared me for the Hawaiian experience as well as my reading on the spiritual effects of a hysterectomy prepared me for my first patient, who showed off the Polaroids she demanded the doctor take of her uterus so her children could see their first home.

What I found in that initial Internet quest was a Web site for Hawaiian independence.<sup>ii</sup> It had never occurred to me that someone other than the residents of Texas desired independence from the United States. I was shocked to see a link to Paul Harvey’s “The Rest of the Story” in which he describes the U.S. takeover of a “friendly monarchy” as being crafted “down in the shadowy realms where U.S. foreign policy shakes hands with the devil.”<sup>iii</sup>

On a late summer island-hopping adventure to the Big Island, I kayaked the mile across a crystal blue Kealekekua Bay to the monument marking the landing site of the

first Western vessel on Hawaii. The monument proclaims the place where in January of 1778 Captain Cook discovered the island. Two words have been etched away—“Cook” and “discovered.” At the Bishop Museum for Hawaiian Culture, docents refer to time on the islands as B.C. and A.C. (Before Cook and After Cook).<sup>v</sup> Cook’s arrival set in motion the forces that in 1893 lead U.S. Marines to overtake Iolani Palace at the insistence of a few American businessmen jolted by Queen Lili‘uokalani’s attempts to stifle their growing power.

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and powerlessness.*

Before the invasion, U.S. Foreign Minister to Hawaii Stevens wrote to the Secretary of State saying, “The Hawaiian pear is now fully ripe and this is the golden hour for the United States to pluck it.” Speaking of the Hawaiian delegation sent to negotiate annexation with the U.S. government, locals were known to say that they were “[e]lighteen men representing nobody.”<sup>vi</sup> The dominance of U.S. business spread from whaling to sugar and to pineapple, and finally to tourism, but this is not my story to tell.<sup>vii</sup>

As my plane landed in Honolulu, I learned that Hickam Air Force Base shares runways with the International Airport. Soon my ride picked me up, and we merged onto Interstate H-1. Though my first reaction was to laugh at the conception of an Interstate in Hawaii (“I think they’re building a tunnel”), I soon learned that Hawaii’s three interstates connect military bases, including the infamous H-3, which due to rugged landscape and lawsuits over its passage through sacred land makes it the most expensive per-mile interstate ever constructed. I encountered signs of the military everywhere I went. As I hiked to the top of Diamond Head, an old crater and popular

tourist attraction, I found it strewn with military bunkers. On a hike into Oahu’s windward (East coast) rainforest, my friends and I discovered three bunkers over five miles into the dense forest. Besides the Buddhist Obon Dances, the greatest parties of the summer all took place on military bases, of which there are more in Hawaii than any other state. And of course, I spent a day at Pearl Harbor indulging in the deep rumblings of my patriotism, which both turned my cheeks red with embarrassment and brought water to my eyes with pride. The residents of this strategic island bear both the painful memory of “a date that will live in infamy” and the weight of guarding against that date ever coming again.<sup>viii</sup>

While most military personal receive treatment at Tripplar Army Hospital, which announces its healing purposes to the world through a bright pink exterior, a few patients drifted my way when pregnancies became complicated. My first military couple caught me by surprise. As I entered the room, the young husband arose from his chair. When I introduced myself as the chaplain, he apologetically snapped to attention. I was shocked and slightly embarrassed. Though I could see he was a few years my junior, I could not explain the formalities of this private. The child of a former submariner, I at least pulled myself together enough to say “at ease,” but despite my insistence that I need not be saluted for I was not in the military, I received a formal greeting with each visit. A fellow CPE student and retired army chaplain explained that chaplains are always military officers and the private simply followed his learned procedure.

#### Quilting Sensibilities

My understanding of the military’s role in Hawaiian life and the roots to the title of this essay grow out of the interpretation provided by two scholars at the University of Hawaii at Manoa. Phyllis Turnbull and Kathy Ferguson contend that “Hawai‘i is coded as a soft, feminine, welcoming place, waiting and receptive...In military discourse, the erotic appeal is more convoluted...Hawai‘i appears as a weak female needing manly protection from a dangerous world.”<sup>ix</sup> Indeed the history of Hawaii suggests the aggression of the Western male and the continued defeat of the islands and her people. Before the heavy presence of the military, the scene of Western dominance played through the saga of mis-

sionary zeal. Though painful in part, the religious landscape of these islands also exudes one of its most resilient resources.

Many of the patients I visited on the OB-GYN floor and in the neonatal nurseries were young women arrested amidst the conflicting values of their ancestors, parents, and peers. A young girl desired my presence after terminating her twenty-week pregnancy. As I sat with her, I asked if she would like to bless the baby. Unsure, she nodded and replied, “Whatever you do for everyone else.”

As I began the patchwork blessing quilted of Catholic, Hawaiian, and my own Disciple of Christ traditions, the girl began to weep. Though “unreligious” herself, she claimed the words reminded her of the times her mother made her attend church, but the traditional Hawaiian blessing with Te leaves and saltwater stirred deeper memories of her grandmother’s life. She was a woman caught not between two religious worlds, but among three.

I visited the Kawaiaho Church (one of over a hundred United Church of Christ congregations on the islands) midway through the summer. Prominently situated near the state capitol and the former royal palace, this old stone church is Hawaii’s mother church—the first permanent church building on Oahu. Though James Michener’s depiction of the early missionaries in his book *Hawaii* appears somewhat harsh, a contemporary scholar argues that “[t]he missionaries were horrified at a Hawaiian lifestyle that was at once casual and oriented to human gregariousness.”<sup>x</sup> Indeed, the Calvinism of the first missionary families and their connection to the business interests of the islands would serve as an appropriate example for Max Weber’s *The Protestant Ethic and The Spirit of Capitalism*.

What I witnessed at the mother church would have appalled the missionaries. While they mostly sought to obliterate the Hawaiian language, today this church holds services in both English and Hawaiian. While the churches I serve debate the appropriateness of a single American flag in the sanctuary, no such qualms appear at Kawaiaho as alternating American and Hawaiian flags line the balcony. This building, once the heart of a smothering Western theology, now embraces the language of the islands, displays the seating boxes of past Hawaiian royalty, and affirms Hawaii’s independence and interdependence.

The rainbow on the Hawaiian license plate seeks to embody the diversity of these islands and the residents’ ability to turn their differences into marks of beauty. An older female patient mistook me for the custodian when I arrived in her room and then through profuse apologies offered me something to drink. Unable to stand, she simply pointed to the many cans of Ensure at the foot of her bed. I politely declined and soon found myself immersed in the depths of a woman’s struggle for spiritual meaning at the precipice of her physical life. She learned and practiced the ways of Buddhism during her early years in Japan, but upon coming to Hawaii, she had been unable to find a fitting teacher. She found instead several Christian friends and joined a Full Gospel church. While neither the Buddhist teachers she sometimes saw nor her Christian minister could support her *dual religious dabbling*, she found richness in the mix.

“Oh, I know you don’t want to hear all of

*As God’s representative in the room, I was as silent as the God to whom she had prayed. . . . Her voice was God’s voice teaching me to guard against my arrogant desire to solve her problem—God’s voice whispering the wisdom of soulful silence—God’s voice illuminating the pain of the world and calming me enough to sit in its midst.*

this,” she said. “You are just supposed to tell me about Jesus and heaven and hell, right?”

If that were my task, I had missed the mark. I told her about my CPE program, the religious diversity of the chaplains, and the different countries from which we came.

She smiled slyly and asked, “So, you think Jesus and the Buddha are friends?”

They’d have to be to share as rich a soul as hers.

#### A Challenge to “Normalcy”

The missionary invasion deflowered the religious sensibilities of local Hawaiians, but many have found new life through their matured embrace of these once conflicting religious sentiments. The gifts of diversity, however, seem only to come through its challenges. I have witnessed the difficulties my female friends face in their journeys toward ministry, but my maleness, whiteness, thinness, and height have made my validation come too soon. But in Hawaii, this story

changed; in Hawaii I am *haole*. Resident white Hawaiian scholar Judy Rohrer writes:

Hawai‘i is perhaps the only place in the United States where the “invisible center” (the white, male, heterosexual, Christian, able-bodied “norm” that maintains its power by hiding it) is forced into partial visibility. Perhaps that is because knowledge of the violence that it took and continues to take, to create that “center” is so close to the surface here... In Hawai‘i you get called on your haoleness; you are confronted with your race—an especially unpleasant experience for those who have denied it all their lives.”

When I entered some patient’s rooms, I was respected and honored, but I could sense the uneasiness of others, especially women from the Micronesian islands. Even some local Hawaiian women distrusted my intentions

and revealed little of themselves. Being a man in a women’s hospital and a haole in Hawaii challenged the “normalcy” of my life.

Haole originally appears to have meant “foreigner,” but it can assume a derogatory nature, depending on the words preceding and following the appellation. Some of the patients explained that the word means “breathless” in Hawaiian. It seemed an appropriate name for the breathless sailors hoisting themselves onto Hawaii for the first time; coincidentally they add this word for breathless also means “without Spirit.” Though perhaps inaccurate historically, this interpretation more precisely reveals the feeling associated with the term’s contemporary usage. If only in glimpses, I began to confront the power structures on the mainland that hoist my life into its delusions of normalcy. The Hawaiian story began affecting my own; Hawaii’s struggles became my teacher.

One afternoon I received word that a



middle-school-aged girl had lost her baby sixteen weeks into the pregnancy. She spoke very little, and I, wiser after several disasters earlier in the summer, spoke less. She did not like the middle-aged father, and everyone told her the loss was for the best—now she could finish school. She, however, had prayed that God would save the baby because she wanted a child to love.

"I tried praying," she said, "but now I'm done talking to God."

I could only sit with her in the silence. I had no answers to offer. As God's representative in the room, I was as silent as the God to whom she had prayed. I cannot say how God worked in that young girl's life, but she worked in mine. Her voice was God's voice teaching me to guard against my arrogant desire to solve her problem—God's voice whispering the wisdom of soulful silence—God's voice illuminating the pain of the world and calming me enough to sit in its midst. She helped me see that I can know no answers to her story or the Hawaiian story, but I can stop, and I can sit, and I can listen. The maturity of her struggle ultimately revealed the pain of my innocence escaping.

As I read Dag Hammarskjöld's book *Markings*, one musing leapt at me after a particularly long day of snorkeling on the infamous North Shore: "Sun and stillness. Looking down through the jade-green water, you see the monsters of the deep playing on the reef. Is this a reason to be afraid? Do you feel safer when scudding waves hide what lies beneath the water?"<sup>1</sup> Growing up a white male on the bluffs of the Missouri river, the deep brown streams of my life have hidden the monstrous truths far better than Hawaii's clear blue bays. At home I could snorkel all day and never glimpse the structures of power, money, and religious privilege just beyond the end of my nose. In Hawaii these structures remain hidden by the sun's brilliant reflection off the water, but a dip below the surface reveals the immensity of struggle shielded from view. In Hawaii I began learning to see and swim among these monsters of the deep.

One cannot deny the pain brought through the loss of a child or the necessity of a hysterectomy, but many patients I visited also gave voice to the emotional and spiritual pain inflicted by Hawaii's cultural milieu. Hawaii and her people taught me a new way



Captain James Cook, a British sailor changed the course of history for Hawaii when he and his ships, the *Resolution* and the *Discovery*, entered the sheltered waters of Kealahou Bay, "the pathway of God," on the morning of January 17, 1778. Reportedly the first Westerner to enter the bay, Cook was perceived initially by the Hawaiians to be a returning god when he arrived during a religious festival.

to see my life and my place in the world. Many there have endured hardships, but they retain a spirit of generosity and kindness. While builders long ago etched Jesus' command to "Go and make disciples of all nations" into the cornerstone of my home church, Pidgin, the plantation language of the Hawaiian people, gives this imperative a new meaning:

Den Jesus go near dem and say, "God wen give me all da power, so now I in charge a everything all ova da world an inside da sky. So you guys, go all ova da world and teach all da difern peoplos, so dey can learn bout me and come my guys. Boy, and God's Good an Spesho Spirit. Teach um how fo do everything dat I wen tell you guys fo do. An you know wat? I goin stick wit you guys all da way, till da world goin pau."<sup>2</sup>

I now go, not to impose my story and my language, but to listen, to engage, and to grow in the language of others so that together we might construct anew the narratives of our lives. Perhaps Hawaii's innocence was not the only one lost; perhaps the loss of innocence engenders drops of maturity.

*The essayist was graduated in 2001 from Texas Christian University in Fort Worth where he earned a baccalaureate in economics and in religion. A Carpenter Scholar at Vanderbilt University Divinity School, Blosser will receive the*

*master of divinity degree in May 2005.*

<sup>1</sup> Alasdair MacIntyre, "The Virtues, the Unity of a Human Life, and the Concept of a Tradition," in *Why Narrative? Readings in Narrative Theology*, ed. Stanley Hauerwas and L. Gregory Jones (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1989), 89-112.

<sup>2</sup> Martin Marty, *The One and the Many: America's Struggle for the Common Good* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1997), 143.

<sup>3</sup> "Hawaii – Independent and Sovereign," <<http://www.hawaii-nation.org/>> 9 January 2004.

<sup>4</sup> "Paul Harvey – The Rest of the Story – Overthrow of Hawaiian Monarchy," <<http://www.hawaii-nation.org/paulharvey.html>> 9 January 2004.

<sup>5</sup> "Bishop Museum," <<http://www.bishopmuseum.org/>> 9 January 2004.

<sup>6</sup> Noel J. Kent, *Hawaii: Islands under the Influence* (Honolulu: U of Hawaii P, 1993), 63.

<sup>7</sup> See Kent or Queen Liliuokalani, *Hawaii's Story by Hawaii's Queen* (Boston: Tuttle, 1991).

<sup>8</sup> Franklin D. Roosevelt, "Day of Infamy," December 8, 1941.

<sup>9</sup> Phyllis Turnbull and Kathy E. Ferguson, "Military Presence/Missionary Past: The Historical Construction of Masculine Order and Feminine Hawai'i," in *Women in Hawai'i: Sites, Identities, and Voices*, Vol. 38 of *Social Process in Hawai'i*, ed. Joyce N. Chinen, Kathleen O. Kane, and Ida M. Yoshinaga (Honolulu, U of Hawaii P, 1997), 94-107.

<sup>10</sup> Kent, 28.

<sup>11</sup> Judy Rohrer, "Haole Girl: Identity and White Privilege in Hawai'i," in *Women in Hawai'i: Sites, Identities, and Voices*, Vol. 38 of *Social Process in Hawai'i*, ed. Joyce N. Chinen, Kathleen O. Kane, and Ida M. Yoshinaga (Honolulu, U of Hawaii P, 1997), 138-161.

<sup>12</sup> Dag Hammarskjöld, *Markings*, trans. Lief Sjoeborg and W.H. Auden (New York: Knopf, 1965), 121.

<sup>13</sup> Matthew 28:16-20, *Da Jesus Book: Hawaii Pidgin New Testament* (Orlando, Florida: Wycliffe, 2000).

# gleanings



Camilla Clay Andrews, MTS'04, is congratulated by Bettye Goah and John G. W. Goah following the act of worship in Benton Chapel. As laity in the black church, the Goahs were recognized during Commencement 2004 for fulfilling the requirements for the Kelly Miller Smith Institute Certificate Program in Black Church Studies.



Traveling from Ann Arbor, Michigan, to attend his son's graduation was Robert Picken, father of Conor Adam Picken, who received the master of theological studies degree and has accepted a position with Dell Computer, Incorporated.



Among the new members of the Vanderbilt University Divinity School alumni/ae community are Maurice Edward Harris, MTS'04, and Kyung Lee, MDiv'04.

Commencement Photographs by Mark Andrew Caldwell, MTS'04



Returning to campus to participate in the spring graduation exercises, Andrew Paul Barnett, MDiv'03, was reunited with a former professor, J. Patout Burns Jr., the Edward A Malloy Professor of Catholic Studies.



During the 2004 spring semester, Bryan Bennington Bliss anticipated two commencements—graduation from the Divinity School and fatherhood. He and his wife, Michelle, became the proud parents of Eleanor Grace (Nora), who had the distinction of being the youngest guest at the Divinity School's exercises. Bliss received the master of theological studies degree and also served as field education intern for this issue of *The Spire*.



## Commencement 2004

Ninety-six graduates from the Divinity School and the Graduate School's Department of Religion were welcomed into the Vanderbilt University alumni/ae community on Friday, May 14, 2004. Chancellor Gordon Gee conferred the master of divinity degree upon thirty-four students, the master of theological studies degree upon thirty-three graduates, and the joint master of theological studies and doctor of jurisprudence degree upon one student during the commencement exercises on Alumni Lawn. Thirteen students received the master of arts degree in religion while fifteen members of the class of 2004 were awarded the doctorate of philosophy in religion.

### Kudos for the 2003–2004 Academic Year

Founder's Medal for first honors in the Divinity School

Robert Odell Wyatt II, MTS'04  
Nashville, Tennessee

Academic Achievement Award

Maria Mayo Robbins, MDiv'04  
Nashville, Tennessee

Banner Bearer for the Procession of Degree Candidates

Jonathan Daniel Rhodes, MDiv'04  
Nashville, Tennessee

William Newcomb Prize for receiving honors on one's senior essay

Mary Leigh Pittenger, MDiv'04  
Nashville, Tennessee

for her essay titled "But If We Confess Our Sins: The Role of Confessional Narrative in Spiritual Care"

Umphey Lee Dean's Award for best exemplifying the School's vision

Vincent Kevin Campbell, MDiv'04  
Nashville, Tennessee

Florence Conwell Prize for outstanding preaching

Katherine Jeannine Lauer Rigler, MDiv'04  
Mount Juliet, Tennessee

Saint James Academy for outstanding sermon

Kaye Harvey, MDiv'04  
Franklin, Tennessee

W. Kendrick Grobel Award for outstanding achievement in biblical studies

James William Barker, MTS'04  
Johnson City, Tennessee

J. D. Owen Prize for most successful work in Hebrew Bible

Robert Justin Harkins, MTS'04  
Lexington, Kentucky

The Nella May Overby Memorial Award for honors in field education in a congregation or community agency

Emily Kate Nourse, MDiv'04  
Corpus Christi, Texas

Elliott F. Shepard Prize in church history

Mark Edward DeCogliano, MTS'04  
Nashville, Tennessee

Wilbur F. Tillett Prize in theology

Joshua Bradley Davis, MTS'04  
Florence, Alabama

Chalice Press Book Awards for academic accomplishment by Disciples of Christ students

Sunny Beth Buchanan, MDiv'04  
Blue Springs, Missouri

Nancy Jean Humes, MDiv'04  
Stow, Ohio

Luke-Acts Prize for the outstanding paper on an aspect of Luke-Acts

James William Barker, MTS'04  
Johnson City, Tennessee

Bishop Holland Nimmons McTyeire Award presented by the United Methodist Student Association at Vanderbilt University Divinity School for outstanding service to the School and to parishes

Kaye Harvey, MDiv'04  
Franklin, Tennessee

Student Government Association Community Service Awards

Jonathan Daniel Rhodes, MDiv'04  
Nashville, Tennessee

Viki B. Matson, director of field education and assistant professor of the practice of ministry

Betty Ford Award for service to the faculty and students of the Graduate School's Department of Religion

Heather Randall McMurray,  
doctoral student in Hebrew Bible  
Nashville, Tennessee



Emily Kate Nourse, MDiv'04 received the Nella May Overby Memorial Award for honors in field education in a congregation or community agency. A native of Corpus Christi, Texas, Nourse earned her baccalaureate from Texas Christian University in Fort Worth before entering the Divinity School. Among her guests who attended Commencement 2004 was alumnus Will Connelly, MTS'03.

## Incense and the Mere Christian

After Robert Odell Wyatt II earned a baccalaureate in English from the University of the South, he decided to leave the idyllic setting of Sewanee mountain and move to Evanston, Illinois, where he would enroll in Seabury-Western Theological Seminary. But before he completed the first year of his theological education, he found himself preparing to move again—across the street to the English department of Northwestern University—after he ran afoul of the seminary dean on the subject of incense.

“The very reverend dean was a Virginia gentleman who wore French cuffs and hailed from the Old School, and he was extremely rigid about the liturgies he would permit in our chapel,” recalls Wyatt. “He decreed that incense was forbidden in any service because he did not want to offend those who preferred lower church practices. But in a fit of generosity, he told the degree candidates for the class of 1969 that they could assume the responsibilities for planning their commencement services. When the seminarians elected to use incense in the act of worship, the dean immediately withdrew his permission and informed the students that he would prescribe the liturgy for their graduation exercises.”

Upon learning of the strident comments Wyatt had exchanged during a campus protest about the dean's domineering character, the gentleman of the Old School summoned the young seminarian from Tennessee to his office and suggested Wyatt might be happier matriculating at the University of Chicago Divinity School or walking across the street and introducing himself to the English faculty at Northwestern.

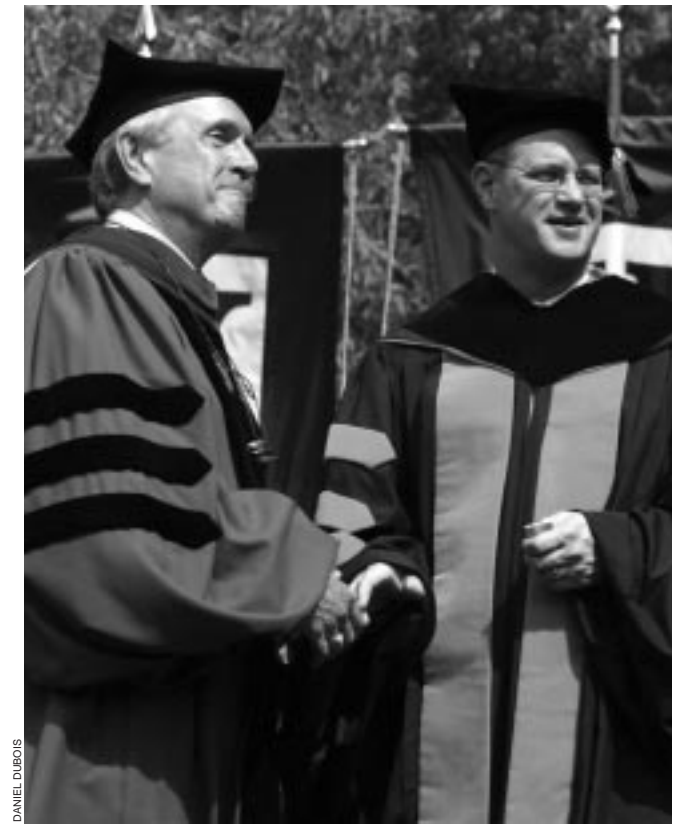
“He gave me ten days to reach my decision,” remembers Wyatt.

Four years after he ventured onto Northwestern's campus, Wyatt was graduated with the doctorate of philosophy in English and religion and began his vocation in the academy as a professor of journalism. Dur-

ing his tenure of twenty-five years at Middle Tennessee State University, where he directs the Office of Communication Research in the College of Mass Communications, Wyatt returned to Seabury-Western Theological Seminary in 2002 to complete his certificate of Anglican studies, and he also enrolled in Vanderbilt University Divinity School to pursue the master of theological studies degree.

For maintaining the highest grade point average in the Divinity School's class of 2004, Wyatt was named the eighty-fifth founder's medalist in the history of the School. When conferring the honor upon Wyatt, Chancellor Gordon Gee cited Wyatt's contributions to research on public opinion, attitudes toward free expression, international communication, and the relationship between religion and the media. He has served as the director of the Middle Tennessee Poll, a survey conducted twice each year for soliciting area opinion toward major institutions and current political events; book review editor for the *Tennessean*, a research advisor for the Freedom Forum First Amendment Center at Vanderbilt University, and four-time chairperson of the nonfiction jury for the Pulitzer Prize. For his study in the problems of international communication among Israeli Arabs, Jews, and Americans, Wyatt received the Worcester Prize from the World Association for Public Opinion Research.

“When I enrolled at the Divinity School, I had doubts if I would be successful in the pastoral theology courses; I always thought my ministry in the church would involve teaching and preaching, but in my courses with Bonnie Miller-McLemore and my field education practica with Viki Matson and Trudy Stringer, I developed a passion for applied theology,” explains Wyatt. “From my cross-cultural study in Mexico and my travels in India, I began to understand that if



Robert Odell Wyatt II, MTS'04, received the Founder's Medal for first honors in the Divinity School during the 2004 Commencement Exercises conducted on Alumni Lawn. Vanderbilt University Chancellor Gordon Gee conferred the honor upon Wyatt as Divinity School Dean James Hudnut-Beumler presented the medal. Cornelius Vanderbilt's gifts to the University included the endowment of this award given since 1877 for first honors in each graduating class.

I were going to be a Christian who relates to people across cultural lines, I had to become, in the words of C. S. Lewis, a 'mere Christian' who endeavors to understand the cultures of others on their terms and to understand my culture differently. To my great surprise, when I took the general ordination examination, my highest score was not in church history but in pastoral theology.”

Ordained as a transitional deacon on June 20, Wyatt has accepted a call as curate, or associate priest, for Making Excellent Disciples, an initiative funded by the Lilly Endowment for the Church of the Transfiguration in the Diocese of Chicago. “I have always felt called to return to Chicago, and theologically and liturgically Chicago is a better setting for me than Tennessee,” says Wyatt, who describes himself as “High Church, socially liberal, and rather theologically conservative.” Prior to his ordination to the priesthood in December, he will return to India, at the request of his bishop, to participate in a study to support free expression and democratic values within the country and to establish ties with the Church of South India.



## Confessions of a Half-Mad Divinity School Student

BY BRYAN BENNINGTON BLISS, MTS'04

*It is rumored—at least in the whispers that collect in divinity school hallways—that theology students are at a higher risk for mental breakdowns.*

*Call it an urban legend, or existential dread—but anyone who has ever endured a theological education would respond with an emphatic: “Amen!”*

Vanderbilt University Divinity School was supposed to be my definitive answer to the slippery questions about God. Surely the wise professors, with their hefty student loan payments, and Ivy League educations would have the answers—right? But, there are no answers here—only more questions.

Before I enrolled in graduate school, I was living and working with a false sense of comfort of having received an undergraduate liberal arts education. There is no better inoculation for intellectual arrogance than graduate education, especially theological training. If you had asked, before graduate school, my opinion on the Bible, I would have waxed theologially on the subject. Now, I don't have much to say. If you want to know anything about Jesus, I suggest you find someone who is not affiliated with any school of religion. The last person who asked me to explain the nature of God was met with a vacant, slightly neurotic stare, and a barrage of incoherent mumbling.

It's best just to ignore me, and let me shuffle by the wayside.

Divinity school breeds this sort of odd behavior. For some, the deconstruction of long-held religious beliefs is a severe shaking of their foundations. Others choose to ignore the academy, and treat their education as a formality—another hoop in the ordination process. I haven't been so lucky. I was seduced by the academy. And now, like all illicit affairs, I am left with an aching sense of confusion and a growing debt of student loans. Unlike financial aid, confusion cannot be consolidated. There is no knowledge lending institution that is willing to loan you the answers at a good interest rate.

There should be a disclaimer in every

divinity school bulletin. Something like: “While (Insert name of institution here) is committed to providing a comprehensive theological education to all of its students, it cannot provide said students with any answers.” But, this would not work—most incoming students think they have the answers. And I pity them.

The first semester of divinity school is relentless. It's not only the work. It's the realization that you know nothing. What you thought you knew—no, you don't know that. Every statement becomes crucial, a constant weighing of the arguments inside your head. Every belief is held against the critical methods of some long-dead thinker.

During my first semester, I was furiously typing on my laptop when my wife asked me what I was researching. Wild-eyed, I looked up at her, and grunted the words: *soteriology...pneumosomethingorother.*

*There is no better inoculation for intellectual arrogance than graduate education, especially theological training.... You come to realize that the answers are not as important as the questions. And even though it goes against every fiber of your existence, you accept that you are not God and that you will never have a concrete answer.*

She looked at me, and was quiet for a moment. Then, she said, “Well, good for you.”

She might as well have patted me on my head and given me some milk and cookies. Divinity school makes you unable to relate to normal people. My wife does not care about soteriology, or pneumatology. She'd rather talk about salvation and the Holy Spirit.

I suspect law and medical students don't have this trouble. Sure, they discuss *prima facie* evidence, and polycythemia, but it's not the same. They have tangible evidence; we have God.

Only one person can be blamed for this decision—my undergraduate advisor, of course. Theology? One more year and I could be a lawyer; four more years, and I could be Bryan B. Bliss, M.D. But, I suspect law and medicine have their downfalls, too—like lots of money and virtually guaranteed employment upon graduation. Sounds terrible.

And there are other downfalls of divinity

school. You cannot go to a family meal, or any other gathering without being asked to say the invocation. People suddenly think you need t-shirts, neck ties, hats—and anything else they may find with a picture of Jesus on it. Your friends will inquire, “Why are you going *there*? Do you want to be a minister?” They will suddenly treat you differently. You are God's spy, trying to gather the dirt He needs to indict each of your friends and send them to Hell. But all you wanted to do was to contemplate God.

So, for two or three years, that is what you do. You think about God. You come to realize that the answers are not as important as the questions. And even though it goes against every fiber of your existence, you accept that you are not God and that you will never have a concrete answer. But you will have a master's degree—granted one in theology—to rebuke the demons who visit in dreams and

mock you with stethoscopes and legal dictionaries.

Along the way you meet people who have come to divinity school in search of truth; they are just like you, in search of the unknowable and frustrated at most turns. This struggle creates a bond where you don't have to speak; you only have to look and sympathetically nod in agreement. All problems in divinity school are the same—they just go by different names. These fellow students are young and old, black, white, yellow, brown, gay, straight, or any conceivable combination. You argue with them, and jokingly banish them to Hell for their theological beliefs.

Then someone in your class dies, or gives birth to a child, and the community comes together to form an insulated nucleus of support. Suddenly the reason you attended divinity school becomes clear; the truth so desperately sought is annoyingly simple. The truth is the community.

A constructive Christian theology paper quickly muddies the water, and truth once again becomes nothing more than a tall tale third-year divinity school students speak about in hushed voices, first-year students at their feet.

This, however, isn't an acceptable answer for most people. The worst question a divinity school student confronts is: “What are you going to do when you graduate?” There are variations of this question such as: “What are you going to do with *that* degree?” For some, the choice is easy. They will be ordained ministers, and go straight into a church. For others, the choice isn't so clear. When confronted with the question of vocation, I generally smile, shrug my shoulders,

and give a very profound, theological answer:

“I have no idea.”

People, of course, do not want to hear this. They want to know why you left your job to go to school; and your wife, husband, or partner is equally mystified. Luckily, you are in divinity school—surrounded by people who not only understand but also are living in the same ambiguity. And this is the beauty of divinity school; it is a community of wanderlusts, the weary travelers who have no other place to go—or who majored in philosophy as undergraduates.

Somewhere, in the shadowy corners of my head, a voice is screaming for me to stay in divinity school as long as I can. A recent

graduate proffered this advice: “It's tough out here, stay. Stay!” And, he probably is right. The world is not like divinity school. Not everyone is going to care when your wife is sick, and I do not envision conversations about theodicy by the office water cooler. But, ultimately, you have to be graduated and face the real world. I find myself frighteningly close to this reality. And, even though I do not know what I am going to do when I finish, or even why I came to divinity school—I abide. At least I wasn't committed.

*The essayist serves as youth minister at the First United Methodist Church in Salisbury, North Carolina.*

## Lección de Geografía

During the 2004 summer term, thirteen Vanderbilt University Divinity School students and Trudy Stringer, associate director of field education, traveled to Mexico for a field education immersion experience in the social, political, and economic circumstances affecting the country's population. The cross-cultural course was designed through the Center for Global Education at Augsburg College in Minneapolis, Minnesota.

Upon returning to Nashville, Lisa Dordal, MDiv3, a research coordinator for the Center for Mental Health Policy at the Vanderbilt Institute for Public Policy Studies, composed a series of poems in which she reflects upon the questions inspired by the trip. “Twenty-three million Mexicans, approximately twenty percent of the population, live in the United States, and the reason so many Mexicans make the perilous journey across the border is because there are so few economic opportunities in Mexico,” explains Dordal. “I learned that poverty is worse than at any other time in the past fifty years; seventy-five percent of the population lives in economic poverty that may be attributed to inadequate policies set forth by the Mexican government, greedy transnational corporations, and grossly unjust trade agreements with the United States. Amid the poverty, however, there is hope to be found in the work and activism of Base Christian Communities, of nongovernmental organizations, and of dedicated individuals.”

The *Spire* is pleased to publish a selection from Dordal's field education portfolio titled *Text Shots of Cuernavaca*.



“Vasco de Quiroga teaching the Indians”  
1929-1930  
by Diego Rivera  
Mexican painter  
(1886-1957)  
the tenth grisaille from the mural titled  
*History of Morelos, Conquest and Revolution*  
The Palacio de Cortes, 16th century  
Cuernavaca City  
photographed by Joseph Daniels Blosser, MDiv3

## Geography Lesson

*Where is Mexico?  
She is here —  
washing our dishes,  
picking our strawberries,  
building our houses.*

*Living, working, and dreaming.*

*Mexico on the move.*

*Where is the church?  
She is here —  
in the sweaty palm of my hand,  
the hand holding the bread I wish  
to share with you, my neighbor,  
across a whole new border.*

—LISA DORDAL  
(1964 - )



## A House Built on Partnership Celebrating Seventy-Five Years of Disciples at VDS

BY BRANDON L. GILVIN, MDiv'02

Alumni/ae, faculty, administrators, and friends of Vanderbilt Divinity School gathered for dinner at Nashville's Woodmont Christian Church, Disciples of Christ, on November 17, 2003, to celebrate the seventy-fifth anniversary of a place dear to them—the Disciples Divinity House. An important institution in the history of VDS, the Disciples House has supported over five hundred Disciple students and has been home to students from other faith traditions as well.

Forged in 1927 under the leadership of George Mayhew, professor of history and religions at the Vanderbilt School of Religion, the Disciples House began as the Disciples Foundation. Since the beginning of the Disciples movement, education for ministry had been a priority, and Mayhew envisioned a fairly new ideal in the South—that Disciples could best obtain higher education for ministry from faculty in an ecumenical, university-based setting while maintaining a lively Disciple community. Vine Street, a local Disciples congregation, embraced the vision and provided early support and leadership in the Foundation's establishment.

The first Disciples House was purchased in 1941 and became home for students and their spouses. In 1952, the Board of Higher Education of the Disciples of Christ recognized Vanderbilt Divinity School as one of its approved theological institutions, and an increasing number of Disciples students moved to Nashville, making a new and larger Disciples Divinity House necessary. The present building was completed in 1958 and has housed numerous Disciples in its forty-five years of existence.

Former residents of the Disciples House will tell you that living there proved to be an integral part of their education at Vanderbilt by providing a unique sense of community and helping them to develop lifelong, collegial relationships. "I have been enriched in so many ways by this community," says alumna Kara Kleinschmidt, MDiv'04. "The seventy-fifth anniversary was a great way to celebrate the ways Disciple Divinity House has affected the lives of its residents. I am honored to be a part of such a long tradition

of Disciples of Christ presence, and I am anxious to learn of the community's developments as we move toward our one-hundredth anniversary."

A significant element of the celebration actually began several days before the celebration dinner. As part of an initiative on "Transition into Ministry" funded by the Lilly Endowment, current Disciple students and recent alumni/ae gathered at the House for a workshop on Practical Theology and the Practice of Ministry conducted by Don Browning, the Alexander Campbell Professor of Ethics and the Social Sciences, *emeritus*, at the University of Chicago Divinity School. After examining the practical uses of theological discourse and reflection in the life of communities of faith, participants explored Browning's case study model as a way for contextualizing instances in congregational life into a theological schema.

"This workshop was extremely relevant considering the mission of the Disciples Divinity House," said Heather Godsey, MDiv'03. "The educational component complemented the dinner quite well and reminded me of why I am honored to have been part of the DDH community and how important the DDH community was during my years at Vanderbilt."

The celebration included a video presentation filmed and edited by John Dyer on the House. Nashville singer and songwriter and lifelong Disciple Andra Moran provided music for the evening. Celebrated Disciples preacher Fred Craddock, PhD'64, was scheduled to speak; however, a family illness prevented his attending. Among the individuals intimately connected with life at the House and who commemorated the House's anniversary included H. Jackson Forstman, dean of Vanderbilt University Divinity School and the Charles Grandison Finney Professor of Theology, *emeritus*; Mary Katherine (Kaki) Friskics-Warren, MDiv'92, executive director for Renewal House Resi-



A three-story apartment building located at 2005 Grand Avenue and dedicated on February 26, 1942, served as the original Disciples House although the Disciples Foundation has been affiliated with Vanderbilt University Divinity School for seventy-five years. The building was sold to the Methodists in 1957 and the current Disciples House was erected.

dential Services, a recovery community in Nashville for mothers with addictions and for their children; and C. Roy Stauffer, MDiv'71, DMin'72, senior minister at Lindenwood Christian Church, Memphis, Tennessee. Sunny Beth Buchanan, MDiv'04, and current resident Nathan Brown, MDiv'3, spoke on their experiences in the Disciples House community.

Alumni/ae from past decades of the House's existence, ministers and church members from Tennessee, friends and trustees of the House from all over the country, and faculty members whose careers span the history of the House attended the anniversary celebration. For longtime friends of the House, however, there was one conspicuous absence, at least in the physical sense—Herman Norton, BD'49, MA'51, PhD'56, dean of the House through its formative years of 1951-1986. Norton died in 1992, but his influence on the trajectory of the Disciples House, as well as on the lives of the students who lived there, was commemorated in stories shared over dinner, not only by the featured speakers, but in casual conversations.

Our gathering at Woodmont Christian Church, whose congregation also has supported the mission of the House, was not merely a time to revel in the glories of the past. As Brown remarked, the anniversary was also a time to keep in mind DDH's contributions to the future work of the church. "We find importance in the Disciples Divinity House at Vanderbilt because of the quality of leadership it produces for the church and for God's ministry on earth," explained Brown. "I find God's promise in the Disciples Divinity House at Vanderbilt because I find hope in the ministries that are repre-

sented in this room, the ministries that are continuing to flourish in our denomination, and for the ministries that are created by institutions such as the Disciples Divinity House at Vanderbilt that will allow God's church to exist in the future."

Disciple students have a long history of leadership in the Divinity School, including key roles in student government and other campus organizations, strong participation in programs such as the recent grant in theological education in a global context, and providing leadership for the annual Antoinette Brown Lecture. Currently, there are twenty-five students in the Disciple community at Vanderbilt Divinity School, eighteen of whom live in the House. They are all involved in a variety of activities at the Divinity School and in the greater Nashville community, making the House an exciting place filled with activity, often operating at a frenetic pace, but it is a pace that supports an



GERALD HOLLY, APRIL 1988

The leadership of Herman Norton at the Disciples Divinity House of Vanderbilt University was acknowledged during the seventy-fifth anniversary of the Disciples Vanderbilt Foundation. Norton began his studies at Vanderbilt's School of Religion in 1947 and for thirty-five years, (1951-1986) served as dean of the House.

energetic ministry for providing leadership for the future church.

Perhaps Mark Miller-McLemore, dean of the Disciples Divinity House, describes most accurately the occasion of our seventy-fifth anniversary: "Disciples House has been through some challenging times in the last decade, so it was great to celebrate all the good—for the Christian Church and for the

Divinity School—that has emerged from this unique partnership. The event gave testimony to the School's influence on the more than five hundred Disciple graduates of Vanderbilt and the quality of ministers in congregations and the larger church—as teachers and as forces for shalom in our communities. And the significant presence of Disciple students and faculty has shaped for generations the School's role and vision

of its place in American Protestantism and in Nashville. It is a relationship that has been fruitful."

The essayist recently served as minister-in-residence at Central Christian Church in Lexington, Kentucky, and has accepted an appointment in Nairobi, Kenya, with the Overseas Ministries of the Disciples of Christ.

## A Practical Writer

The life of the Reverend Doctor Perry H. Biddle, DMin'73, exemplifies Vanderbilt University Divinity School's commitment to educate ministers as theologians.



The Reverend Doctor Perry H. Biddle, DMin'73, author of eighteen books for clergy and laity, has donated a collection of his publications to the archives of the Jean and Alexander Heard Library.

In the three decades since earning his doctorate in ministry from the Divinity School, Biddle has written eighteen books for clergy and laity including practical guides for preaching the lectionary, conducting weddings and funerals, hospital visitation, and coping with suicide. He has also written a devotional book for newlyweds and another volume relating humor with healing.

As a gesture of appreciation for the Divinity School's contributions to his theological education, Biddle has donated a signed collection of his books published by William B. Eerdmans, Westminster/John Knox Press, Abingdon Press, Upper Room, Children's Sermon Service (now CSS), Desert Ministries, and Smyth & Helwys to

the University's special collections and archives department of the Jean and Alexander Heard Library.

An alumnus of Davidson College, where he recently celebrated his fiftieth undergraduate class reunion, Biddle earned the master of divinity degree from Union Theological Seminary in Richmond, Virginia, before receiving the certificate in theology from New College of the University of Edinburgh. He returned to Union to pursue a second master's degree in theology and then accepted his first pastorate at St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church in Memphis. Before his retirement from the ministry in 1997, Biddle served congregations in Mobile, Alabama, and in Starkville, Mississippi, where he was met by opposition from the congregation for his support from the pulpit for the civil rights of African Americans and

the integration of congregations and public schools.

After he was graduated from the Divinity School, where he received the Florence Conwell Prize for his accomplishments in preaching, Biddle accepted an appointment as pastor of Old Hickory Presbyterian Church, a position he held for fifteen years. An avid traveler since his first trip in 1953 by cattle boat to Israel, he has visited thirty-eight countries and preached on five continents.

Biddle's most recent excursion was to Buckingham Palace in London to witness the presentation of the 2003 Templeton Prize to Professor Holmes Rolston III with whom he matriculated at Davidson and at Union Theological Seminary. Biddle nominated Rolston for the Templeton Prize, the world's largest annual award given to an individual whose scholarship and spirit of inquiry in science and religion have contributed to a greater appreciation of the transcendent and the metaphysical.

During his retirement years, Biddle continues to audit courses at the Divinity School and remains active in the Academy of Parish Clergy, The North American Academy of Liturgy and the Presbyterian Writers Guild.



## A Rite of Passages *Reflections on the Consecration of a Bishop*

BY THE REVEREND TERRY RANDOLPH  
PANNELL, MTS'01

*The state of New Hampshire traditionally makes the national news only during presidential election years. Accustomed to an invasion of politicians and journalists during the primary season, these hearty, independent-minded New Englanders found themselves in the spotlight again in 2003 when another election was conducted—not a presidential primary—but the election of a bishop for a diocese in the Episcopal Church.*

Growing up in the South, I must admit I did not spend much time thinking about New Hampshire. All I knew was that it was one of those tiny states wedged somewhere into that mythical land known as New England. The only person I had met from New Hampshire was a seminary classmate at The University of the South's School of Theology in Sewanee. Susan and I were candidates for holy orders, and after we were graduated, neither of us really expected to see each other again. But when Gene Robinson was elected to be her new bishop, I decided to board a plane for Manchester.

I was not sure what to expect upon my arrival. The November weather was as cold and damp as the mood of Episcopalians who opposed Gene Robinson's election. *Passionate* is not an adjective that immediately comes to mind when one describes Episcopalians who are known as the "frozen chosen." The New Hampshire election, however, stirred up a hornet's nest, to employ a cliché, and suddenly Bible thumping Episcopalians—a real oddity if ever there were one—were scurrying about the land and threatening schism if the consecration occurred.

Susan was assigned to serve as a deacon



at the consecration. She told me to expect heavy security because of the threats made against Gene's life. The people charged with planning and overseeing the consecration also were worried that protesters would try to disrupt the worship service. Given the presence of the national media, it was the perfect venue for anti-gay activists. Never one to miss an opportunity for publicity, the infamous preacher Fred Phelps, attended by his entourage from Westboro Baptist Church in Topeka, was scheduled to fly in from Kansas.

On the way to Manchester, I thought about the protesters who would be there and tried to rationalize why people have such visceral reactions to people they do not even know. I replayed in my mind the time, when by accident, my sister and I were stranded in downtown Tupelo, Mississippi, during a Ku Klux Klan parade. Sharpshooters with rifles, riot police, and a police helicopter were on the scene to keep circumstances from getting out of control. I remembered seeing men dressed in white hoods and hearing them shout a litany of racist slogans. It was frightening to witness hatred so closely, and as the plane landed in Manchester, I could not help but wonder if the fear I experienced in Tupelo would be resurrected during the protests of Gene's consecration.

The rite was to be held at the University of New Hampshire in Durham, and the diocese had rented the university's sports arena to accommodate the crowd. When we arrived for the services, there was a long line of people waiting to enter the building. SWAT teams with binoculars and walkie-talkies were located on top of the buildings and were screening carefully the crowd

below for signs of trouble. Déjà vu. What a bizarre image—armed police watching over people who had come to pray together, to celebrate the Eucharist, and to witness the consecration of a bishop.

I learned later that plain-clothed police officers also were stationed at several locations inside the building. Both Gene Robinson and Frank Griswold, the Presiding Bishop of the Episcopal Church, wore bullet proof vests under their vestments. Unbeknownst but to a select few was a man who was vested in a white alb and was sitting behind Gene Robinson during the entire worship service. As it turned out, the man was the Chief of Police for the University of New Hampshire, and his role was to shield the new bishop-elect should there be an attempt on his life. The chief was nicknamed affectionately "Bishop of Durham."

The sidewalk leading to the arena had been cordoned off on each side to contain the protesters. There were approximately two hundred people on one side who braved the weather to lend their support to New Hampshire's newest bishop-elect. On the other side, there were twelve representatives from the Phelps group carrying large placards with proclamations denouncing gays, the Episcopal Church, and Gene Robinson. As we walked by they shouted that all sodomites would burn in hell. I joked with the people next to me that, being a southerner, I was already acclimated to the heat and that I had never really cared much for cold weather anyway.

There were more hurdles to go through when we arrived at the building's entrance. Each person had to present a ticket before entering, and then we had to walk through

metal detectors, like the ones you see in airports. Everyone, though, adapted to the security measures, and the mood inside was jovial, in contrast to the atmosphere outdoors. People waved to one another and to the bishops who were directly above us in a glassed-enclosed area overlooking the lobby. After we entered the arena, I could see why the diocese had to hold the service in a hockey arena. An estimated four thousand people had traveled from all parts of the world to participate in Gene's consecration.

*A long history of ecclesial suppression of minority voices, the condemnation of homosexuality, and the unwillingness to acknowledge and respect the reality of diversity in God's creation reflects our institutional dishonesty.*

It was a long journey to New Hampshire for someone who started out with the odds stacked against him. Gene Robinson had been injured severely at birth by physicians attending his mother during his delivery. Because he was paralyzed for weeks as an infant, the family made plans for his funeral. He recovered from the paralysis and grew up in a poor family of sharecroppers in rural Kentucky. His early formation as a Christian came through the auspices of the Disciples of Christ. When he was a senior at the University of the South in Sewanee, Gene was confirmed as a member of the Episcopal Church and later attended seminary. And now he was about to be consecrated a bishop.

We knew that objections would be expressed. In the Episcopal Church's ordination liturgy, the presiding bishop must ask those present if there are any reasons why the candidate should not be ordained. Three people who had been chosen by various groups within the Episcopal Church and who were opposed to Gene's election were escorted to the microphone where they could deliver their statements. This was the moment we all dreaded. Everyone had already heard or read every reason under the heavens why a non-celibate gay priest should not be consecrated as a bishop.

The first objection came from an elderly priest from Pennsylvania who began by describing graphically his interpretation of homosexual behavior. Mercifully, the presiding bishop intervened and asked him to spare everyone the details and articulate his opposition more cogently. Two other people came forward to read their objections. The Suffragan Bishop of Albany, New York, objected on behalf of a group of bishops who saw the consecration as a threat to the Anglican Communion. The final objection was

presented by a member of a congregation in the Diocese of New Hampshire.

People's hearts went out to Gene as the objections were read. Mark Andrew, Gene's partner of fifteen years, Gene's daughters, and his former wife—all who know Gene better than anyone—listened patiently as representatives claiming to carry the mantle of orthodoxy attacked him and those who had elected him. It was a painful and embarrassing moment for many of us to witness. At the same time, as an Episcopalian, I was proud that my church respects its members enough to make room for voices of dissent to be heard.

After being thanked for their statements, the small group perfunctorily left the building, and following a pastoral response from the presiding bishop, the service continued when he asked the question, "Is it your will that we ordain Gene Robinson a bishop?"

With a thunderous voice, thousands of people in unison said, "It is our will."

That massive sound wave of affirmation washed away the objections made earlier and lifted everyone's spirits.

All stood in silence as Gene knelt before the presiding bishop. Moving forward and encircling Gene, over forty bishops of the church—including the theologian and former

Lutheran Bishop of Stockholm, Krister Stendahl—laid hands upon Gene as the presiding bishop spoke the words, "Father, make Gene a bishop in your Church. Pour out upon him the power of your princely Spirit."

New Hampshire had a new bishop, and the Episcopal Church had made history.

By all measures, Bishop Robinson has conducted himself with exceptional dignity and grace as he continues to perform the duties of his office. Though his election and consecration have triggered negative reactions from some within the Episcopal Church and the Anglican Communion, the actions also have revealed the church's discomfort when addressing human sexuality and religion. A long history of ecclesial suppression of minority voices, the condemnation of homosexuality, and the unwillingness to acknowledge and respect the reality of diversity in God's creation reflects our institutional dishonesty.

In his book titled *This Far by Grace*, Neil Alexander, the Bishop of Atlanta recounts a meeting at the Episcopal Church's General Convention in Minneapolis during the summer of 2003. Bishops were debating whether or not to give their consent, which is required by the church's canons, to Gene's election. One conservative bishop, who thought Gene was a gifted and experienced priest suitable for the office of bishop, suggested that if Gene had just kept his sexuality and his relationship with Mark Andrew a secret, there would be no problem in making him a bishop. Bishop Alexander writes that at that moment he felt he had to vote in favor of Gene's election because it was time for us to tell the truth.

Two months later, there was a University of New Hampshire student standing outside the arena on the day of Gene's consecration. The young man held up a sign with the inscription "God is Love."

The student obviously knows the truth.

*Pannell, an Episcopal priest, resides in Shreveport, Louisiana.*



## Alumni/ae Class Notes

**Please Note: Class Notes appear only in the printed version of this publication.**











## Divinity School Administrators, Faculty, and Benefactors

Former Vanderbilt University Divinity School Dean **John Robert Nelson**, of Houston, Texas, died from the effects of cancer on July 6, 2004, at the age of 83. During his deanship at the Divinity School from 1957 to 1960, the institution experienced significant developments in the size and diversity of the student population, in the scope of academic programs, and in the breadth and quality of the faculty. The construction of the Oberlin Quadrangle, the present location of the Divinity School, occurred under the guidance of Nelson.

An ordained Methodist minister, Nelson was graduated from Yale University where he earned a master of divinity degree and from the University of Zurich where he received a doctorate in theology. He served on the staff of the World Council of Churches in Geneva, Switzerland, and was acknowledged during his life as an ecumenist whose interest in theological education was characterized by encouraging different denominations to talk constructively about the path to unity.

Nelson's tenure at the University, however, was not without controversy. When James Lawson, D'71, was expelled from the University in 1960 for his participation in the Southern Christian Leadership Conference's efforts in desegregation, Nelson protested the expulsion and eventually resigned from the University. Upon learning of Nelson's passing, Lawson told the Associated Press, "Robert Nelson was at the center of the crisis at Vanderbilt. He handled the crisis with poise, Christian strength, and character."

Following his resignation from the University, Nelson served the academy as a professor and later as dean of Boston University's School of Theology. He developed

an interest in the discipline of bioethics and was instrumental in advancing the study of the relationship among medical ethics, genetics, and theology and in promoting ethical and religious guidelines on cloning in conjunction with the National Institutes of Health. In 1985, Nelson accepted an appointment as director of the Institute of Religion at the Texas Medical Center.

(Source: *The Vanderbilt Register*, July 19-August 1, 2004 issue, page 7)

Former Vanderbilt University Divinity School Professor **James Daniel Glasse** died on July 11, 2004, at his home in Orinda, California, at the age of 80, from the effects of cancer. Ordained in the Presbyterian Church (USA), he served at the Divinity School from 1956-1969 in the roles of associate dean and professor of practical theology and field work. Following his tenure at VDS, he was appointed president of Lancaster Theological Seminary in Lancaster, Pennsylvania. He is remembered as an outstanding preacher whose sermons were known for their clear theology and humor; he expressed his passion for justice during the Civil Rights Movement during the 1960s and throughout his life in active support of the oppressed and suffering. The author of *Education for Ministry*; *Profession: Minister*; *Putting It Together in the Parish*; and *The Art of Spiritual Snake Handling and Other Sermons*, Glasse was developing two manuscripts, *Beyond Professional Ministry* and *Ministry in the Interim*, prior to his illness. He was honored for his contributions to theological education by honorary doctorates from Occidental, Ursinus, Elizabethtown, and Dickinson Colleges.

Retired businessman, civic leader, and Vanderbilt University Divinity School benefactor **Albert Werthan**, of Nashville, Tennessee, died on July 3, 2004, at the age of 97 from complications related to a fall. He was preceded in death by his wife, Mary Jane Lowenheim Werthan, BA'29, MA'35, the first woman elected to serve on the Vanderbilt University Board of Trust. The Werthans endowed the Divinity School's chair in Jewish Studies and Hebrew Bible.

"He was incredibly generous with his time, his energy, and his resources," explains Jack M. Sasson, who was appointed in 1999 as the first Mary Jane Werthan Professor of Jewish Studies and Hebrew Bible. "I got to know Albert only during his last years, but to the end, his mind was supple, engaged, and vastly searching. He always enjoyed entertaining company, and when we went out for supper and the bill was read to him (because he could no longer see), he would instantly calculate the gratuity, putting my Pentium to shame," remarks Sasson. "But I will remember him most for his optimism and for his enduring hope about the future of his people, his nation, and humanity. I feel very privileged to hold his family name as my academic title."

Werthan and his daughters, Elizabeth and the late May Werthan Shayne, also endowed the May and Morris Werthan Scholarship in honor of his parents. He referred to the establishment of the scholarship as an opportunity for the family "to live the fourth commandment."

# Come and Feast

## AT THE TABLE OF IDEAS

### AT VANDERBILT UNIVERSITY DIVINITY SCHOOL



#### THURSDAY, NOVEMBER 4, 2004

##### COMMUNITY BREAKFAST

*"The World Reads the Bible: A Global Bible Commentary"*

featuring Daniel Patte, *Professor of Religious Studies, New Testament, and early Christianity*

7:30-8:30 a.m.

Divinity School Refectory

To make reservations, please call 615/343-3994.

##### MINISTRY FORUM I

*"Preaching Paul: An Ancient Apostle and the Contemporary Pulpit"*

featuring Brad Braxton, *Associate Professor of Homiletics and New Testament*

10:00 a.m. until noon

All Faith Chapel

To register, please call Kitty Norton Jones at 615/322-4205.

##### MINISTRY FORUM II

*"Practical Theology for Pastoral Ministry"*

featuring guest lecturer Dale P. Andrews, *The Frank H. Caldwell Associate Professor of Homiletics at Louisville Presbyterian Theological Seminary*

1:00-3:00 p.m.

All Faith Chapel

To register, please call Kitty Norton Jones at 615/322-4205.

##### COLE LECTURE I

*"The Bible: The Development of An American Book"*

featuring the Reverend Professor Peter John Gomes, *The Plummer Professor of Christian Morals and Pusey Minister in The Memorial Church Harvard University*

7:00 p.m.

Benton Chapel

#### FRIDAY, NOVEMBER 5, 2004

##### COLE LECTURE II

*"The Bible: Beyond the Culture to the Gospel"*

featuring the Reverend Professor Peter John Gomes, *The Plummer Professor of Christian Morals and Pusey Minister in The Memorial Church Harvard University*

10:00 a.m.

Benton Chapel

#### THURSDAY, JANUARY 20, 2005

##### COMMUNITY BREAKFAST

*"Dealing with Religious Difference: Christian Responses"*

featuring John Thatamanil, *Assistant Professor of Theology*

7:30-8:30 a.m.

University Club of Nashville

To make reservations, please call 615/343-3994.

#### THURSDAY, MARCH 3, 2005

##### COMMUNITY BREAKFAST

*"The Holiness of Beauty: Knowing and Praising God through the Arts"*

featuring Robin Jensen, *The Luce Chancellor's Professor of the History of Christian Art and Worship*

7:30-8:30 a.m.

University Club of Nashville

To make reservations, please call 615/343-3994.

#### SATURDAY, APRIL 9, 2005

##### MINISTRY TODAY

*"The Image of the Invisible God: A Visual Theology for Orthodox Protestants"*

featuring Robin Jensen, *The Luce Chancellor's Professor of the History of Christian Art and Worship*

9:00 a.m. until 3:00 p.m.

Vanderbilt Divinity School

To register, please call 615/343-3994, or you may register online at [www.vanderbilt.edu/divinity](http://www.vanderbilt.edu/divinity). Continuing education units may be earned.

*"Wisdom is bright, and does not grow dim. By those who love her, she is readily seen, and found by those who look for her."*

—THE BOOK OF WISDOM 6:12-13  
THE JERUSALEM BIBLE



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# Mills-Buttrick Society

The Mills-Buttrick Society commemorates the legacies of Liston Mills (1928-2002), the Oberlin Professor of Pastoral Theology and Counseling, *emeritus*, and David Buttrick, the Drucilla Moore Buffington Professor of Homiletics and Liturgics, *emeritus*. By transforming the standards of the practice of pastoral care and of preaching within the academic community, Professors Mills and Buttrick contributed significantly to the Divinity School's mission of educating ministers as theologians. While Liston Mills defined ministry within the framework of pastoral theology and psychology, David Buttrick encouraged students to discover their prophetic voices.

We celebrate the service of these two distinguished and beloved professors by naming, in honor of their commitment to the ethos of Vanderbilt University Divinity School, a donor society for congregations. For information regarding membership in the Mills-Buttrick Society, please contact Kitty Norton Jones in the Office of Development and Alumni/ae Relations by calling 615/322-4205 or writing her at [kitty.a.norton@vanderbilt.edu](mailto:kitty.a.norton@vanderbilt.edu).