For congregations who wish to support the theological education of our next generation of religious, community, and academic leaders, Vanderbilt University Divinity School announces the establishment of the 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.norton@vanderbilt.edu.
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

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.

Born 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.

Regarding 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 the American Baptist Foundation, Gomes is the author of three decades of his vocation as an academician and preacher, he has been awarded twenty-four honorary degrees. The Preacher and Educator: An American Life. 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.

Gomes is the author of nine volumes of sermons. Readers may correspond by e-mail: director@vanderbilt.edu or facsimile: 615/343-9957.

James Hudnut-Beumler, Dunn & The Annie Peters Wilson Distinguished Professor of American Religious History
Alice Hunt, PAB’03,
Associate Dean for Academic Affairs and Senior Lecturer in Hebrew Bible
Lloyd R. Lewis, Assistant Dean for Student Life
Victor Judge, BS’77, MS’79, Editor & Registrar
Bryan Bennington Bliss, MTS’04, Field Education Intern
Jennifer Borgerd, Designeer
Christopher K. Sanders, MDiv’95,
Director of Development and Alumni/ae Relations
Dr. Karl Kipper, MD’98, and
Patricia Müller Kipper, BS’96,
Chaplains of Schola Prophetarum
Kenneth J. Schexnayder, Executive Director of Development Communications & Editor of Vanderbilt Magazine

Vanderbilt University is committed to the principles of equal opportunity and affirmative action.

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40 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?”

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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 are welcomed by the editor, and alumni/ae of the 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:

THE SPIRE
Volume 25 • Number 1 • Fall 2004

The 20th is published annually 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:

The Spire
Office 115, John Frederick Oberlin Divinity Quadrangle
411 21st Avenue, South
Nashville, Tennessee 37240-1121

by telephone: 615/343-5964
by e-mail: divinityspire@vanderbilt.edu
by facsimile: 615/343-9957

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The Bishop Who ‘Turned Out’ a Legacy
On the occasion of the fiftieth anniversary of the enrollment of Joseph Andrews Johnson Jr., co-creator Bennington Bliss recounts scenes from the life a preacher and educator from Louisiana who would become the first African American alumnus of the University.

29
The Deflowering of Hawaii
When Carpenter Scholar Joseph Daniels Bliss traveled to Hawai’i to serve as chaplain in a hospital, he could not foresee that his clinical pastoral education would involve an apprenticeship in “talking story.”
The Offering of a New Song

A s 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 conversation recognizing the fiftieth anniversary of the matriculation of Joseph Andrew Johnson Jr., Vanderbilt University’s first African-American student. The University was also 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 alumnus 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 keep 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. We strive to implement new ideas while changing wisdom and those ideas and practices that have only passing value. I told the graduates that the prophets, on the one hand sometimes sing the wailing song 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 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? 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 commitment to good—what is good—not everything in the tradition of the School that holds fast to what is good. A remarkable student went on to earn money for his tuition at Fisk University. When he worked as a yardman at Vanderbilt to earn his money for his tuition at Fisk University.

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? 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 wait- ing, hoping, world.

Dean James Hudnut-Beumler

In Appreciation of our Benefactors

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

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

We also welcome the following members to the Mills-BRickard Society and gratefully acknowledge their generous support of the University’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 gardener 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 completing my application for admission 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.” Realizing 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 college titled Articula, Words, Thoughts. Although Bishop Joseph Johnson’s enrollment in 1953 was the initial step in the gradual 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 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 benedictor of the translation.

Editor’s Note:
In Zeigler’s translation of the legacy of Bishop Joseph Johnson, the artist has just published 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 1952 edition of the History of the Afro-American Group of the Episcopal Church as preserved by the Reverend Derek G. Bragg, a photographer of a police office escorting Divinity School alumnus James M. Lawson following his arrest for participating in the nonviolent demonstrations to desegregate downtown Nashville, and a photograph of the artist who, as a current student at VDS, considers herself a beneficiary 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 gardener 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 to the congregation at Religious Science of Nashville.

A Translation of Lessons

BY ZANA ZEGLER, MDiv

... 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.

Zana Zeigler, MDiv

Our Featured artisan

On the cover:
Articula, Words, Thoughts
by Zana Zeigler
American
Born: 1956
MFA: Mills-BRickard Society
Specializes in found objects and relics on wood
The original collage will be presented as a gift from the Divinity School to the Bishop Joseph Johnson Black Cultural Center of Vanderbilt University.
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 enterprise, 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 Daniels’ 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 announce- ment a lead article, and Bryan jokingly sug- gested that his muse had taken a sabbatical. But as he listened to Associate Provost Lucius Outlane address the Divinity School community during our 2003 convocation, Bryan experienced that epiphany moment when the subject, does indeed, announce itself. Hearing the history of Bishop Joseph John- son’s enrollment in the School of Religion, he intuitively knew this legacy should be com- memorated 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 con- ducted interviews with the bishop’s daugh- ter, Patricia Johnson-Fowell, 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 Uni- versity, whose memories of their father pro- vided 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 com- parable 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 commemo- rative essay “The Bishop Who Turned Out A Legacy” is a testament to his discovery and his passion for language. –VJ

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 arti- cles and the art which speaks of the value of Vanderbilt University Divinity School and The Spire to the community.

The personal recollections of theo- logian Peter Hodgson (“A Theologian of Mediation”) were especially meaningful to me. Dr. Hodgson’s restatement of Tillich’s Protestant principle is a state- ment that should be worked in needle- point on all the kneelers in my own Epis- copal church.

It is obvious that Dr. Hodgson’s contri- bution to the Divinity School has been a major force in guiding the School to the forefront of progressive theological educa- tion. 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 the- ology.

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 ever seen. It is attractive is important, but it is the con- tent 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; occa- sionally none interests me. But this edition is amazing! Helping me to understand Peter Hodgson, learning of Howard Har- rod’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 introduc- tion to Eastern Orthodoxy’s ontology— and the deeply resonant art pieces accom- companying each featured article. What a feast for mind, spirit, and heart.

Thank you for sharing these gifts.

Keith Clark, MD’58
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 alumni loyalty. But I appreciate The Spire and the prophetic positions reflected in the magazine.

Roger Rusbison, 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 col- umn, three lines from the bottom. Should not “pox-American” be “Pax American”?

Richard E. Appel, Oberlin, MDiv’77
Lebanon, Ohio

Editor’s Response:

The phrase in question, “pox-American,” 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, dur- ing a peace rally at the University. Dean Hudnut-Beumler’s deliberate variation on the proper noun Pax American was in refer- ence to the presidential administration’s fail- ure to imagine, within a global context, the effects of a preemptive war against Iraq.

Douglas Knight, Methods of Biblical Interpre- tation (Abingdon Press, 2004)


John McClane and Burton Z. Cooper, Clashing Theology in the Pulpit (Westminster John Knox, 2003)


Recommended Reading

New Titles by Faculty


Paul Dokaess, The Lobby Strut: Success in the Catholic Community (Georgetown University Press, 2004)


Walter Harrelson, ed., New Interpreter’s Study Bible (Abingdon Press, 2003)


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


John McClane and Burton Z. Cooper, Clashing Theology in the Pulpit (Westminster John Knox, 2003)


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 Institute 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 obedience in protesting the practices of the WHISC/SOA—wrote an editorial titled “A Man of Peace, at Age 73, Pays Ridiculous Price,” published in the February 9, 2004, issue of The Tennessean.

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Among the participants in the memorial walk are Divinity School alumni, the Reverend William Young, MDiv’03.

To honor the memories of victims of human rights abuses committed by graduates of the WHISC/SOA, protestors carried crosses and coffins bearing the names of victims of the WHISC/SOA’s practices.

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.”

Protestors at Fort Benning, 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.

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 Reunited. The event also featured a viewing of the filmArguing 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.
which will be published this fall by Abingdon Press.

DANIEL DUBOIS

THE SPIRE

whispers to disrupt the comfort of mundaneness," said the Reverend Doctor emilie m. townes, a professor of homiletics and New Testament at Vanderbilt Divinity School. The Carolyn B. D. 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 Praeclarum Theologia" by examining the fundamentally practical focus of Augustine’s work, particularly his theory of preaching and the social context of his settings. Burns will seek to demonstrate how Augustine’s controversial and theological treatises relate closely to the congregations and communities with which the church father was affiliated.

Navigating Ethical Questions

E 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 Rehert 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’70, from the Divinity School and executive director of the Cal Turner Program, on religious diversity in the United States.

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

“A Son of the Black Church

BY JAMES M. PATTERSON

Preparation Ministers for Congregational Care

O ther 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.”

“The goal is to build upon and expand Vanderbilt Divinity School’s reputation as one of the leading programs in homiletics and liturgics on the North American continent,” he says. “It is a very daunting and humbling task, particularly when I am clear that given the quality of the masters and doctoral students here, I will be taught as much as I teach.”

This column is reprinted from the September 13–26, 2004, issue of The Vanderbilt Register with permission of the author.
Forty years later

Reflections on Going Home

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 invasion and reconstruction at work in the Old City and among my people, and my memory, my history, my point of view, such a trip was both overdue and imperative. Way overdue, because I had not done in decades, not even in the capital of the island or in the diaspora, the trip that had been fulfilling for me and then invited me to return. In between: openness, helpfulness, and friendliness. Such was the Cuba I remembered.

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 grand- mother in this family photograph. Among the places he visited upon returning to Cuba was the Catedral de la Habana, where he and other members of the Segovia family are buried. Their tombs were blessed by a private, graveyard service conducted by Father Philip Breen, pastor of Saint Ann’s Roman Catholic Church in Nashville.

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.” Accompanying him on his journey was his wife, Elena Olazagasti-Segovia, senior lecturer in Spanish in the College of Arts and Science.

Forty years after the Bay of Pigs invasion had taken place; a month later, in August, 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 past, its memory, 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—ones that 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 tamac 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 out of Cuba, I was 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 the people I encountered. I was acknowledged for its own good—well, for a people too long divided by 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 and also because the death of my father, 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—ones that way upon me, claiming my attention, pointing the way I should like to share a few of these encounters with you.

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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 or 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 abound alike. I encountered signs of poverty everywhere: people begging for anything in the streets; stores with not much to sell, 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 signs of poverty everywhere: people begging for anything in the streets; stores with not much to sell, 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

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Past and present had come together, indeed pushed together, in a magical world of (un)real fusion. The living and the dead bore greetings from afar, from exile—from the future. What follows the Transition is inevitable and ever closer. This experiment has been severely compromised from within and has lost its luster for 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 emigrate; severe rupture in the body politic at all levels of society and culture. A hope that all religious groups 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—sullenly recriminated by now and shaking their beads 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 mercifully about, and left us in tatters. A hope, I readily admit, but a hope to which I have no option but to reconcile 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 contin-ue to give way to visions of understanding and solidarity.
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 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 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 resume was impressive, listing graduate degrees from the Iliff 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 come 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 at 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—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.”

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“No one knows for certain what happened. But before Johnson was a bishop, he was a country preacher and a scholar. 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.

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There must have been some reservation

begins a program of study in biblical literature (Sunday edition), announces the matriculation of 39-year-old Joseph Andrew Johnson Jr. in the Graduate School’s Department of Religion.


He received almost absolute assurance from Vanderbilt’s School of Religion, primarily from a specific faculty member, that he would be 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 1953 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 entered 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, omits this information. Johnson did not explain no reason, and no reparation for the relatively obscure and understudied institution that had inquired about his qualifications to say 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 that he would accept the offer of the school if he were asked,” Johnson said, “but he found all the conditions agreeable—no dorm, no dining—but he had a family, so that did not really matter to him.”

The phrases “a Southern man with complete understanding of the social pattern that prevail in the South” and “would adjust himself with complete sincerity to our social pattern” 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.

Bishop Johnson’s acceptance to the University, but the news did not receive first billing. The article’s headline reflected the sentiment of the article. And this is the first black student in the history of Vanderbilt University to be accepted for admission.

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The image contains a page from a document with text discussing the life and career of Joseph Andrew Johnson Jr. and his contributions to the Christian Methodist Episcopal Church. The text is provided as a plain text representation of the content on the page.
When I arrived at Vanderbilt University School of Divinity in the fall of 1987 to enroll in the master of divinity degree program, I had no suspicion that my matriculation at the Divinity School would lay the groundwork for a career 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 Divinity School 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 for 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.

Honoring and Changing Legacies

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

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Words from the Soul of the Bishop

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.

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