

AROUND THE SOUTH; Wake Forest to open moderate seminary

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Body

If Bill Leonard, dean of Wake Forest University's new divinity school, ever wants a lesson in moderation, he can drop by Shorty's. The campus coffeehouse sells beer at night, but bartenders limit drinking to keep students from getting drunk.

Leonard's job isn't going to be so easy. The 51-year-old Baptist minister and scholar is walking a fine line, theologically and practically, as he plots a moderate course for Wake Forest's divinity school.

Describing himself as "radical" on issues such as race and religious freedom, Leonard is trying to respect Wake Forest's Baptist tradition. He is fending off conservative barbs, including some from Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary in Wake Forest, N.C., birthplace of Wake Forest University more than a century and a half ago.

Scheduled to open in the fall of 1999, Wake Forest's divinity school will recruit students who want to pastor Baptist and other mainline churches but don't like the conservative views at Southern Baptist Convention seminaries.

Wake Forest's is the latest of a dozen programs springing up nationally in reaction to the conservative takeover of the Southern Baptist Convention. Two in **Atlanta** are Mercer University's School of Theology and the Baptist studies program at Emory University's Candler School of Theology.

"You try to develop a divinity school that is a bit nomadic," said Leonard, a scholar of slight build surrounded by books in his office in the back of Wait Chapel. "You need to move quickly in response to the issues facing the church."

In the chapel's foyer, Wake Forest's first president, Samuel Wait, and his wife stare sternly from dark portraits, a sharp contrast to Leonard's attire of jeans, tweed jacket and green-and-black running shoes.

Students, Leonard said, will learn in a relaxed environment where they will be free to ask questions in the private university's liberal arts setting. Still, they'll study a core curriculum of Christian history, preaching, pastoral care and spirituality, he said.

As plans for the divinity school came together in recent years, Wake Forest Provost David Brown recalled that administrators and alumni concluded that "we need to be putting ministers in the pulpits . . . who are as well educated as the lawyers we are putting in the courtroom and the doctors we are putting in the operating room.

That approach strikes some critics as perhaps a bit too secular, even though Wake Forest University has never been affiliated with the Southern Baptist Convention. The Baptist State Convention of North Carolina started the school in 1834, and today the ties between Wake Forest and the state convention are informal.

"What kind of divinity school can you have in an atmosphere of multiculturalism where all of the religions are assumed to be more or less equal?" said theologian Ralph C. Wood, who resigned this spring from Wake Forest's religion department after 26 years.

Wood, who has taken a post at Samford University in Birmingham, said he is bothered by the gradual "diminution of the Christian witness" in Wake Forest academics and campus life.

Beer drinking at Shorty's, he said, "does not concern me, but not praying to God in Christ's name does."

Leonard said he hopes to steer Wake Forest's divinity school clear of theological frays, especially the long battle that split the Southern Baptist Convention, America's largest Protestant denomination.

"The worst thing we can do is start a seminary based on this old dispute," Leonard said. "I do not want to bring another generation of ministers into this dysfunctional cycle that has challenged Southern Baptist life for 20 years."



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Once **one** of the Southern Baptist Convention's most liberal seminaries, Southeastern is now strictly conservative. Under **Patterson**, who helped oust liberals from power in the convention, Southeastern contrasts sharply with Leonard's vision for Wake Forest University's divinity school.

Leonard believes women should be ordained as ministers. That's based partly on his belief that the Christian act of baptism "means everybody is free," including women who want to preach.

"I learned that from Baptists, not the women's movement," said Leonard, who was raised in Decatur, Texas.

"I think everybody should **own at least one**," **Patterson** quipped when asked about women.

He noted that more than 200 of Southeastern seminary's approximately 1,500 students are women. They are training to be missionaries, children's ministers and counselors---but not ordained preachers.

"The vast majority of Southern Baptist women have no desire to be in the pulpit," said **Patterson**, citing the admonition in 1 Timothy 2:12 that women not be permitted to teach or have authority over a man.

Compulsory chapel is a distant memory at Wake Forest University, but it's a daily requirement at Southeastern seminary. **One** recent morning, Jerry Rankin, president of the Southern Baptist Convention's Foreign Mission Board, urged students to sign up for foreign missions because Christians are called to spread the Gospel of Jesus Christ to the "utmost ends of the earth."

People who don't hear and believe Jesus Christ's teachings "are going to hell because the Gospel is a mystery to them," Rankin said. "I believe God is going to hold us accountable for every person who does not have an opportunity to hear."

Leonard's views of the afterlife have been shaped by his daughter's physical disabilities. "I am not interested in the Pearly Gates and places full of fire," he said. "I am interested in wholeness, justice and peace."

Patterson described Leonard's beliefs as "Dalmatian theology."

"He does not take the Bible to be true in every respect," **Patterson** said. "If the Bible is only inspired in spots and you are inspired to spot the spots, then it is inevitable that anything that makes you morally or ethically uncomfortable you will jettison."

The existence of so many denominations shows that the Bible is open to interpretation, Leonard said.

"All of us wear glasses when we read Scripture and participate in the life of the Christian church," Leonard said. "**One** of the things that separates me from **Paige Patterson** is, I admit that and he does not."

Graphic

Separate worlds: Bill Leonard (left), 51, a Baptist minister and scholar, heads up the new multid denominational Wake Forest seminary. / Special Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary President **Paige Patterson** says Leonard's approach to teaching theology and training ministers is inconsistent with Baptist beliefs. / CHRIS BURRITT / Staff
 Wait Chapel at Wake Forest University will be at the heart of the new divinity school, set to open in 1999. / Special
 Map: Location of Wake Forest University and Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary in North Carolina. / Dale E. Dodson / staff

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