



Old Bishop College ties go 897 miles

Ky. School honoring defunct Bishop College, hoping to boost black enrollment

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By Sam Hodges

Higher education experts say they've never seen anything like it.

Overwhelmingly white Georgetown College of Kentucky is leading a \$27 million campaign to preserve the memory and spirit of black Bishop College of Dallas, which closed in bankruptcy nearly 20 years ago.

Georgetown President Bill Crouch says he's captivated by Bishop's history and its graduates' accomplishments. But he also hopes the Bishop College Alive campaign will get Bishop alumni to send good black students his way.

That could help Georgetown land a Phi Beta Kappa chapter, an academic distinction Dr. Crouch has long coveted for the small Baptist school near Lexington.

The campaign includes Bishop Legacy Scholarships, a new building named for Bishop, and even a new line of Bishop T-shirts and ball caps.

While some Bishop faithful are on board, others are wary. Most of the Bishop College Alive campaign will occur at Georgetown College – 897 miles from the old Bishop campus in southeast Oak Cliff.

"My people – 90 percent of them – they're basically not in tune with this, because of the mere fact of the distance," said Bobby Moten, president of the Dallas-based Bishop College Alumni Association.

Bishop was founded by the Baptist Home Mission Society in Marshall, Texas, in 1881, and carries the name of a Northern couple who provided an initial \$10,000. The school moved to Dallas in 1961.

Through the twilight of segregation, and with the financial support of white philanthropists, Bishop grew. In the mid-1970s, the school had more than 1,200 students.

But administrators began to mismanage Bishop, amassing huge debts. By 1986, Bishop had lost accreditation. Within two years, it had filed for bankruptcy and closed.



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Predominantly black Paul Quinn College now occupies the old Bishop campus on Simpson Stuart Road.

Tradition of ministers

Though their school foundered, many Bishop alumni have flourished in business, law, medicine, education and – most prominently – ministry.

In recent years, the largest black Baptist denominations have been led by Bishop men. Bishop alumni who pastor prominent churches include Frederick Haynes III of Friendship-West Baptist in Dallas, Ralph Douglas West of The Church Without Walls in Houston and Denny Davis of St. John Baptist in Grand Prairie.

Many Bishop-educated pastors are friends of Joel Gregory, a white pastor who helped make the Georgetown link. Dr. Gregory is known for strong preaching but also for abruptly stepping down as pastor of the First Baptist Church of Dallas in 1992.

He re-entered preaching through invitations from black churches, and began to lead black pastors in preaching courses, including at Georgetown College.

Sharing a ride to the airport one day, Dr. Crouch complained to Dr. Gregory about Georgetown's struggle to recruit black students, exacerbated by Kentucky's small black population. He asked Dr. Gregory to introduce him to black pastors, figuring they could help with recruiting.

"He started introducing me to pastors, and I began to realize that they were all graduates of Bishop College," Dr. Crouch said. "Every time I asked, I would feel their pain that they no longer had an alma mater."

Dr. Crouch said he was reading the book of Proverbs during his daily devotional when "God began to plant the vision" for the Bishop project. The idea was consistent with a vow he'd made growing up white in Mississippi during the civil rights movement, to do his part for better race relations.

But he also saw Bishop alumni as the key to doubling Georgetown's 7 percent minority enrollment. That, he maintained in an interview, will benefit all students.

"You can't teach diversity by videotape. You've got to live it," Dr. Crouch said.



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Dr. Crouch acknowledges that boosting minority enrollment also is "absolutely critical" to his quest for a Phi Beta Kappa chapter.

"If you're in the hunt," said Jon Fuller, senior fellow at the National Association of Independent Colleges and Universities, "you're going to do everything you can to look at all the factors Phi Beta Kappa takes into account, and racial diversity is definitely one."

Dr. Crouch began about two years ago to talk up Bishop College Alive, making trips to Dallas. The project was unveiled a few months back.

It includes raising \$20 million to endow scholarships, with a preference for family or church members of Bishop alumni. Another \$4 million is to be raised for an academic building at Georgetown that will carry the Bishop name and be designed by a black architect.

Dr. Crouch says Georgetown will also annually award an honorary doctorate to a distinguished Bishop alum and reintroduce a Bishop clothing line. He has offered to host Bishop homecomings on the Georgetown campus.

"What excites me most is the vision that he has, as well as the compassion to actually revitalize a school that he had no association with," said Dr. West, the Houston pastor who is in a small group of Bishop alumni pledged to raising \$1 million for the project.

The first four Bishop scholarship students enrolled at Georgetown this term. One is Ralpheel West, Dr. West's son.

Alumni skeptics

While Dr. West is thrilled, fellow alum Mr. Moten is cooler toward the Bishop College Alive project.

Mr. Moten, a retired teacher and coach, formed the Bishop alumni group in 1991 and said he has spent much of his spare time running it ever since.

He said Dr. Crouch met with the pastors long before reaching out to other alumni. While strongly endorsing the scholarships for black students, Mr. Moten noted that the first recipients have connections to the pastors.



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Asked about that, Dr. Crouch said, "Next year, I think you'll see much more widespread [alumni] representation."

Mr. Moten said he's trying to remain neutral and feels caught between pastor advocates and rank-and-file alumni skeptics. He said his e-mail survey of alumni yielded about 400 responses and little support for keeping Bishop College alive in Kentucky. He noted that his group puts on an every-other-year homecoming in Dallas, including a luncheon on the old campus, and expects to begin awarding some scholarships this year.

Dr. Davis, the Grand Prairie pastor, predicted skeptics will be won over if they visit Georgetown College. He's been twice and is "overwhelmed" at the interest in Bishop.

"Where the resurrection of Bishop College takes place is not as important to me as the fact that it does have a resurrection," he said.

Outside the modest fray is Dr. Fuller of the National Association of Independent Colleges and Universities.

He has seen many college collaborations, but never one in which an active school embraces a ghost school of a distant state.

"This," he said, "is really quite unique."