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Editor's Note: Duke K. McCall is the tenth person featured in this Baptist Press series on Convention leaders.

(Picture to Baptist Papers)

Youth Reaches Decision
On Top Of Old Smoky

By Leonard L. Holloway
For Baptist Press

The 21-year-old youth at the wheel had been looking forward all summer to the weeks just ahead when he would enter Vanderbilt University Law School.

Only a short time before, he'd received the bachelor's degree, summa cum laude, from Baptists' Furman University at Greenville, S. C. Now he was driving through the Smokies of east Tennessee.

It was a rough enough drive in dry weather. The highway twisted sharply around the mountainsides. Now a storm of rain pelting down, against which windshield wipers made little headway, cut the visibility.

But, as the young man recalls later, the toughest part of the drive was going on inside the car: "The rain fighting the windshield wipers and the sharp curves matched the writhing of my spirit." He was wrestling with the future course of his life.

The road to becoming an attorney was not as sure as it had been.

The first jolt several years before seemed to have been weathered. Without his previous knowledge his hometown church suddenly licensed him to preach.

Up to that time, he had wanted to join his father's law office. The church action nettled him but the shock soon wore off and he went to Furman as a pre-law student.

Now the issue was clouded again.

Suddenly, he remembers, he was aware of what a voice on the car radio was saying. "Why not try God?" it pleaded.

He braked to a stop on the roadside. Then with bowed head, "I gave my life to God, even as when a Junior boy, I accepted Christ's death for my salvation," Duke K. McCall recalls.

At a highway intersection later, the car followed a different arrow than had once been intended. It matched the new interest of the driver. The course lay toward Louisville and the campus of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, rather than back toward Nashville.

Since the young man was mostly looking for quick answers, and did not plan to stay long at the seminary, he postponed his enrolment date at Vanderbilt Law School till January.

But in seminary classes, he began to "see how religion could be intellectually acceptable, and how it wasn't necessary to throw away all the things I had learned in order to be a devout Christian."

Soon he realized he should be a minister and would spend several years in seminary studies.

The next year he became pastor of an every-other-Sunday country church 340 miles away in Tennessee.

To get to the church he rode an overnight train from Louisville on Saturdays and returned on Mondays. So many student preachers rode the train and tried to sleep as they traveled that it became known as the "seminary sleeper."

Two years later he became pastor of the Centertown, Ky., Baptist Church and received a master of theology degree in 1938.

While completing a doctor's degree at Southern, he became pastor of Louisville's historic Broadway Baptist Church.

This was the first in a series of positions he held as the youngest man to have the jobs. He was now 25.

An old downtown church that at one time had been the most influential congregation in the city, slum areas moved in around Broadway Church and many members moved out.

Remaining church members were visited by the young pastor. He asked them to continue coming to the church if they were willing to serve the community where the property was located.

A less formal order of service was initiated; visual aids were introduced, and an old gymnasium was converted into a service men's center with early Sunday morning preaching and breakfast.

Attendance increased more than 300 per cent.

One year after Duke K. McCall received his doctor's degree in 1942, he was elected president of Baptist Bible Institute in New Orleans.

Still less than 30 years old, he was the world's youngest head of a theological institution.

Soon after arriving on the campus, a freshman asked the youthful looking McCall, "Are you new here too?" "Yes I am," he replied, "They have just made me president."

In 1946, he was named executive secretary of the Executive Committee of the Southern Baptist Convention.

During these years he became recognized as a "Baptist dynamo" and received international publicity by opposing President Truman's appointment of a representative to the Vatican.

A disagreement with Baptist leaders when a Joint Baptist Conference Committee filed a brief with the U. S. Supreme Court opposing Bible teaching in public school brought criticism because he publicly differed with a denominational agency.

He maintained his position of fighting any effort which would outlaw religion in public schools, although he opposed specific kinds of religious instruction.

His answer to critics was, "If being executive secretary robs me of the right to express my personal convictions, then I'll go to the pastorate of some country church where I can proclaim what I believe."

Major parts of his five years as executive secretary included directing a \$3½ million campaign for relief and rehabilitation of war-torn countries in Europe and Asia in 1946 and an "Every Baptist A Tither" campaign which resulted in the Southern Baptist Cooperative gifts exceeding \$6 million for the first time.

When, at the age of 36, Duke K. McCall was the youngest man ever elected president of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, a Louisville Courier-Journal editorial referred to him as having the "refreshed good looks of a college athlete. He has proved himself the heir--in conviction, vigor and independence of spirit--of those venerable men who have preceded him."

The now 48-year-old seminary president is a frequent world traveler, author and for 11 years has been a weekly panelist on a radio program, "The Moral Side of the News." He is a member of many civic, educational and denominational groups.

He is one of five children of Judge and Mrs. John W. McCall of Memphis. One sister is a missionary in Indonesia where her husband, Dr. Ralph C. Bethea, is a medical missionary.

Mrs. McCall, now deceased, referred to her son Duke and said, "When I get to heaven, the first person I want to look up will be Hannah. I have used her as an example more than any other character in the Bible. Like Hannah, 'For this child I prayed. And the Lord hath given me my petition when I asked of him.'"

When meeting others he frequently begins a conversation by asking the other person, "What is your favorite verse of scripture?" His favorite is Jeremiah 31:3.

On his 22nd birthday, he married Marguerite Mullinnix who was also a Furman University student. They are parents of four sons: Duke Kimbrough, Jr., and Douglas Henry (twins); John Richard; and Michael William.

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Baptist Press Photo

MERGER PAPER--Duke K. McCall, Louisville, president of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, signs legal documents merging Carver School of Missions and Social Work into the seminary. (BP) Photo