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No Retirement for a Prophet,  
Just New Roads to Travel

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By Michael Duduit

LOUISVILLE (BP)--How does a prophet retire?

When someone has spent his life seeking to practice Christian ethics and apply those teachings to society, how does he call it quits at age 65?

If the someone is Henlee Hulix Barnette, the answer is simple: he doesn't.

So when Barnette retired July 31 as professor of Christian ethics at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary (and became professor emeritus of Christian ethics) it was only to start a new career in a new setting: clinical professor of psychiatry at the University of Louisville Medical School. His first project there will be to write a book in the emerging field of bio-medical ethics.

Yet, even at age 65, beginning a new role is nothing unusual for Barnette. Pioneering has become a habit for a professor who originated an interracial pastor's conference in Birmingham in 1947, hosted Martin Luther King Jr. on the Southern Seminary campus before such things were fashionable, and was part of a delegation which met with Nikita Khrushchev in 1957 and laid the foundation for the U.S.-Soviet cultural exchange program.

His pioneering has compelled Barnette to "stick his neck out" for some unpopular causes, and this willingness to stand up for what he believes to be right has earned him both criticism as a rebel and praise as a prophet.

"He has pricked the social conscience of Southern Baptists--whether they've liked it or not," says his wife Helen, one of his former students.

"Henlee Barnette is an authentic prophet, but he speaks not out of bitterness and pessimism, but rather out of concern and hope," asserts Harry Hollis, another former student who now works for the Southern Baptist Christian Life Commission. The commission presented Barnette with its Distinguished Service Award in 1971, citing the professor as a "compassionate gadfly...and courageous prophet of God."

In presenting him a key to the city and a Distinguished Citizen Award recently, Louisville mayor Harvey Sloane pointed to Barnette's "strength and courage as an individual to act on (his) convictions" and said that his "influence will be realized for years to come."

His character was forged during lean years growing up in North Carolina.

Working at age 13 in a North Carolina textile mill for 18 cents an hour, 10 hours a day, he recalls: "At 74 pounds--and some of that was sweat--I was too tired to be a juvenile delinquent."

If Henlee Barnette has been a committed advocate of applying the Christian faith to social concerns, perhaps it is because he has seen so many things himself that have needed correction.

At age 19, he committed his life to Jesus Christ during a rare visit to a local Baptist church. Not content to be a "pew-sitter," Barnette went to "the worst slum in town--Frog Hoffer," held prayer meetings and organized a church which still stands today as Westpoint Baptist Church, Kannapolis, N.C.

After four years at Wake Forest University, Barnette came to Southern Seminary as a student in 1940. He recalls that he heard Clarence Jordan--later to be founder of the interracial Koinonia Farm in Americus, Ga.--speaking in chapel.

"He said if there's any young preacher out there not interested in getting First Baptist Church in 'Podunk,' there are 10,000 unchurched people down in the Haymarket (an inner-city area of Louisville)," remembers the ethics professor.

That was just the kind of invitation he was looking for, so Barnette spent the next six years--while a seminary student--working in what he says was "one of the worst slums in America."

He found thousands of people there--forgotten by society, including the church.

"The first house I went to was an old four-story tenement house. Upstairs I found a family with an oil burner and an improvised bed. They'd been living there 20 years, and

they said I was the first man of God that had ever visited there. I found thousands like that," he says.

Barnette still speaks with concern in his voice as he recalls the conditions in which he found many people living.

In one such family all the members were totally or partially blind except for one 12-year-old boy. As was his pattern, the young student would find persons in "fashionable churches" in the city to provide assistance to families in the Haymarket.

Today, the one sighted member of that family is legal counsel for a large corporation; a daughter is a professor of music; and another son, a history professor at a major college for seven years, is now studying for the ministry.

His work in Louisville's inner city earned him the title "Bishop of the Haymarket" from the Courier-Journal newspaper. He went on to teach sociology at Samford and Stetson Universities, and returned to teach Christian ethics at Southern Seminary in 1951.

He has written nine books in the years since, and his first, *Introducing Christian Ethics*, has become something of a classic in its field. The magazine *Christian Century* said the book should be read "along with the Bible itself."

The book almost never reached the publisher, Barnette remembers with a smile. Unhappy with his work, he had thrown the manuscript in the trash. His wife, Helen, however insisted that he "get that thing out of the waste can and do it right." It since has been through more than a dozen printings.

Over the years he has taught thousands of students who would go on to become congressmen and state legislators as well as pastors, teachers and denominational leaders.

When age 65 approached, Barnette knew that a rocking chair was not destined to be his home.

"Besides, I come from a part of the country where retirement is a dirty word," he says.

Not that that would stop Henlee Barnette if he thought it was the right thing to do. One thing that has characterized his career has been Barnette's independence and his concern for justice, freedom, and human dignity, even when his stands have brought him strong opposition.

If any theme would illustrate Barnette's life, it might be a few lines of verse by Robert Frost which he has scrawled in the front of his datebook: "Two roads diverged in a wood; and I--I took the one less traveled by, and that has made all the difference."