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October 11, 1995

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DALLAS--Texas association expels church for ordaining homosexual deacon.

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WRAP-UP

SBTS to end social work degree,
still seeking Carver transfer By Herb Hollinger

Baptist Press
10/11/95

LOUISVILLE, Ky. (BP)--Trustees of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary unanimously decided to discontinue the master of social work degree and continue seeking a home for the Carver School of Social Work, apparently rejecting a transfer offer from Samford University.

In their regular board meeting, Oct. 9-10, at the Louisville, Ky., campus, trustees spent an hour in a closed-door session before deciding to discontinue the social work program, based "on the realization that considerable differences exist in the structures, processes, and issues of social work education and theological studies."

An offer from Samford, a Baptist-affiliated college in Birmingham, Ala., to transfer the school was announced last month as the solution for the Carver school's status at Southern, but negotiations apparently hit a snag. Southern's trustees, in a statement for which officials refused to provide any details, said conversations with Samford "have raised the possibility that it may in the final analysis not be appropriate to transfer the school (to Samford)"

Pressed in a news conference following the trustee meeting, seminary President R. Albert Mohler Jr. would not give any details about the problem with the Samford offer although, he said, there was "not a mutual understanding."

Some campus sources have speculated Samford officials feel the proposal should include all that has been a part of the Carver legacy. Originally, the SBC Woman's Missionary Union, with offices in Birmingham, had a Carver school of missions and social work and over the years contributions to that legacy have included endowment for a teaching position and student scholarships. WMU gave the school to the Southern Baptist Convention in the 1950s and the school merged with Southern in 1963. The Carver School of Social Work was begun in 1984 by Southern.

The social work school found itself in controversy in March when Mohler dismissed the school's dean, Diana R. Garland, for breaching administrative processes by releasing a document criticizing Mohler's refusal to approve a social work faculty nominee.

The transfer proposal was initiated by Samford officials sometime after a five-member seminary trustee committee was appointed in April to study the future of the Carver school in relationship to the seminary.

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Trustees decided to consider other offers for the Carver school and authorized the administration and the special study committee to bring a recommendation for approval to the trustee executive committee. Although officials would not set a deadline to move the school to another institution, it was obvious trustees did not want to wait until their April 1996 meeting to vote on a recommendation.

Trustees voted to "continue conversations and negotiations with the goal of reaching an agreement which would allow the continuation of the Master of Social Work program at another appropriate institution and which would best protect the interest of students currently enrolled in the program." The Carver school has 63 students and two full-time faculty members but no longer accepts new students.

Although seminary officials said they have had inquiries about Carver from other colleges, they declined to give any details. However, trustees hope the process won't take long. The chairman of the study committee, North Carolina attorney Paul B. "Skip" Stam, told trustees, "The longer it drags on, the more difficult it is."

Speaking to the matter of discontinuing the social work program, Mohler said there was a "basic conflict" between theological education and social work "world views," including social work's code of ethics regarding homosexuality.

In other action, trustees elected two new trustees -- pastors Thomas Atwood, of Oxford, Miss., and James M. "Buddy" Gray, of Birmingham -- to fill slots vacated by trustees who moved out of their respective states. The new trustees will serve until the SBC annual meeting in June 1996.

Also, trustees approved the recommendations of an energy study of the campus which could provide \$122,000 in savings each year; OK'd the election, with tenure, of Bryan C. Richardson to the Christian education faculty in July 1996; approved sabbaticals for professors Glen Stassen and Doug Smith. Five professors were elected to "chairs" and a new master of arts degree in missiology, designed for furloughing missionaries, was approved.

The 60-member board also heard reports the seminary finished its 1994-95 year "fiscally sound" although there were shortfalls in student fees, endowment income and gifts. Seminary officials said student fee shortfalls last year, the result of declining enrollment, should be alleviated this year in part because 200 non-Southern Baptist students were expected but 340 have registered. Non-Southern Baptist students pay considerably more in registration fees while Southern Baptist students fees are subsidized in part by funds received from the SBC Cooperative Program.

The seminary's apparent improving condition was alluded to by both Mohler and trustee chairman Richard D. White, a Franklin, Tenn., pastor.

Mohler said the seminary has the marks of a blessing to the churches, rather than a curse, illustrating his points in alliteration: "focus, fidelity, fundamentals, family, friends, finances, facilities and future."

"We know where we are going; we have a vision," Mohler told the trustees in his board address.

White, re-elected -- in a change of trustee bylaws -- to an unprecedented third term as chairman in April during the Carver school controversy, made a special point to media, saying, "I have never been more excited about the future of Southern Seminary than I am today!"

However, both Mohler and White also said "conservative" trustees need to increase their level of support for the seminary.

Noting the change to a "conservative" direction in the SBC, White said conservative trustees have been "slower to step up to the plate" in financial support. He urged trustees to personally get involved in promoting and supporting the institution. Officials said less than half the board's trustees contributed \$45,000 to the school last year, less than half the \$100,000 goal for trustees. Alumni gifts also are down, trustee leaders said, and there is a need to tap a "new pool" of givers in the SBC.

Supreme Court debates case
involving homosexual rights

By Tom Strode

WASHINGTON (BP)--The issue of homosexual rights elicited stiff questions from and indirect debate among the justices of the U.S. Supreme Court during oral arguments in one of the new term's most divisive cases.

The court is not expected to announce its opinion in *Romer v. Evans* for several months. It promises to be one of the most fervently awaited opinions of the 1995-96 term. The decision also may be a pivotal one in the escalating battle over one of American culture's most hotly debated issues.

The case was accepted by the Supreme Court at the request of the state of Colorado and Gov. Roy Romer after the Colorado Supreme Court ruled as unconstitutional a 1992 initiative prohibiting current and future local or state laws granting civil rights status to homosexuals. In a 6-1 vote announced last October, the Colorado court upheld a lower-court ruling against Amendment 2, the first state provision against homosexual rights. In its opinion, the court said Amendment 2 violated the rights of homosexuals and bisexuals to equal participation in the political process.

In the Oct. 10 oral arguments, Associate Justice Antonin Scalia and Chief Justice William Rehnquist questioned why the state's voters should not be able to exclude homosexuals from receiving civil rights protection as a class. Meanwhile, Associate Justices Ruth Bader Ginsburg and Stephen Breyer were among those who questioned the validity of such an amendment.

Rehnquist wondered why "fencing out Mormons who engage in polygamy" was any different than the case under consideration. Jean Dubofsky, representing homosexuals and effected cities in the case, said *Romer v. Evans* deals with "personal characteristics."

Scalia compared classifying homosexuals as a class deserving protected status with providing protection to blue-eyed people or bigamists. More than once, he aided Colorado Solicitor General Timothy Tymkovich when he was questioned by other justices.

When Breyer asked Tymkovich if Amendment 2 would prevent police departments from fighting "gay bashing," Scalia asked the solicitor general if there were not a law against bashing all people, not just homosexuals.

Ginsburg questioned whether there had ever been a law in American history which specified one group could not be provided civil rights protection. It was doubtful the women's right-to-vote movement would have succeeded had an initiative been allowed to stymie the grassroots movement, she said.

Afterward, proponents and opponents of Amendment 2 differed on whether a sexual orientation ordinance provided special rights to homosexuals and bisexuals.

"The amendment deals with granting special protection on the basis of orientation and on the basis of conduct," said Gale Norton, attorney general of Colorado. "It's a question of special protection and a question of where that issue is to be decided."

Dubofsky, former Colorado Supreme Court justice, said, "The opportunity to seek protection from arbitrary discrimination is something all Americans have. It is never a special right."

Michael Whitehead, general counsel of the Southern Baptist Christian Life Commission, said homosexual activists "do not seek participation in the political process. They seek a dissenter's veto over the political process. This is a very anti-democratic lawsuit dressed up to look like a defense of the democratic political process.

"It is anti-democratic to say that a majority of the people in a state cannot amend their constitution to remove certain subjects from the whim of local legislatures. That is the nature of constitutional law and the power of one level of government to preempt action by lower levels of government."

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The CLC signed onto a friend-of-the-court brief written by the Christian Legal Society. It argues Amendment 2 protects religious freedom in a way religious exemptions would not. The Colorado court said such exemptions would provide adequate protection.

Focus on the Family, National Association of Evangelicals, Catholic League for Religious and Civil Rights and the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod joined the CLC and CLS on the brief.

Others filing briefs supporting the state include American Center for Law and Justice and Concerned Women for America, as well as the states of Alabama, Idaho and Virginia.

Among those filing briefs on the other side were the Human Rights Campaign Fund, the country's largest homosexual lobbying organization; NAACP; National Education Association; American Bar Association; AFL-CIO; American Psychological Association; American Psychiatrist Association; People for the American Way; American Jewish Committee; United Church of Christ Office for Church in Society; the bishop of the Episcopal Church, and several pro-homosexual religious groups, including Evangelicals Concerned. Also supporting the Colorado Supreme Court's decision were the states of Iowa, Maryland, Massachusetts, Minnesota, Nevada and Oregon.

Citing a lack of a federal role, Attorney General Janet Reno decided in June not to have the Department of Justice file a brief in the case. Some homosexual rights advocates expressed displeasure with the Clinton administration's refusal to join the case on their side. A White House spokesman confirmed the president still opposes Amendment 2.

Colorado voters approved Amendment 2 with 53 percent of the vote. It overturned homosexual rights ordinances already in force in Denver, Boulder and Aspen.

Southern Baptist leaders in Colorado were among those publicly supporting the amendment during the '92 campaign. The executive board of the Colorado Baptist General Convention unanimously endorsed it.

Will Perkins, chairman of the board of Colorado for Family Values, helped lead the fight for Amendment 2. Although a majority of the justices did not appear to favor the arguments for Amendment 2, Perkins remained hopeful.

"I just can't feel that the Supreme Court of America would turn its back on our history, the fundamental basis of our nation . . .," Perkins said outside the court building. "So, I just can't see the court ruling against us on this issue."

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**Texas association expels church
for ordaining homosexual deacon**

By Ken Camp

Baptist Press
10/11/95

DALLAS (BP)--Austin Baptist Association at its annual meeting ousted University Baptist Church, Austin, Texas, for ordaining a homosexual as a deacon last year.

Following a recommendation by the association's credentials committee, messengers voted 108-55 at the Oct. 9 meeting at First Baptist Church, Pflugerville, Texas, to disfellowship the church.

The issue in Austin came to a vote after what Larry Bethune, pastor of University Baptist Church, called "a difficult year, but a year of courage in the life of our church" and which associational officials termed a "long, deliberative process."

But parties on both sides agreed it was "a sad time" as the relationship between the church and association was severed.

"Our church had no agenda concerning the issue of homosexuality or ordination," Bethune said. "We did not ordain an orientation. We ordained a person."

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The person in question was one of six men and women ordained by University Baptist Church in June 1994.

"At no point was the question of sexual orientation raised or considered relevant in relation to the biblical qualifications for deacon outlined in our bylaws. Neither did the church choose to take a stand one way or another in regard to the question of sexual orientation," according to a letter to Austin Baptist Association signed both by Bethune and David Gavenda, chairman of the deacons. The letter of response was approved by the church in an Oct. 4 business meeting.

Bethune declined to reveal the deacon's name, citing his right to privacy. He said the deacon is in a "long-term continuing relationship" with another man, and Bethune was aware of his homosexuality before the ordination.

Gavenda said some church members knew about the deacon's sexual orientation prior to his ordination, and many others did not since he made no attempts either to conceal or flaunt his homosexuality.

"It was never raised as an issue," Gavenda said. "We don't inquire of deacons what their sexual practices are."

A few members left the church when the association began to press the issue and University Baptist Church chose not to revoke the ordination, Bethune acknowledged. But the congregation holds diverse opinions on a number of issues, he said, and "diversity is reflected in the life and leadership" of the church.

University Baptist Church is dually aligned with the Southern Baptist Convention and with American Baptist Churches in the USA. The church also is affiliated with the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship and the Alliance of Baptists.

But the church's relationship with the Southern Baptist Convention could change. After withdrawing fellowship in 1992 from two North Carolina churches, the convention amended its constitution to exclude from membership churches that approve of homosexual behavior.

Questions first were raised about the actions of University Baptist Church just prior to the 1994 annual meeting of Austin association, according to moderator Gordon Bergstrom, pastor of Kinney Avenue Baptist Church, Austin.

"The determination was made that rather than do something precipitously, we should take time to deliberately look into it," he said, noting the credentials committee did not want to act on unfounded rumors.

Bergstrom, director of missions Dale Gore and other members of the association's executive board and credentials committee met with Bethune.

"Basically, the credentials committee decided to back up to let the church determine what they would do on their own," said Bergstrom, who was chairman of the committee.

After several months, associational leaders again approached Bethune to discuss the situation. Determining University Baptist Church had ordained a homosexual as a deacon, the credentials committee decided "with no dissenting votes" to withdraw fellowship from the church.

"My feeling is that the matter was handled respectfully, giving plenty of time for the church to make its own determination. It was a long deliberative process that the credentials committee took, not something that was done quickly," said Bergstrom. "There was no rush to judgment."

Gore was out of his office on Oct. 11 and unable to be reached for comment.

Some news reports indicated the Oct. 9 vote was the second time that Austin association had expelled University Baptist Church, the first being about 50 years ago when the progressive congregation admitted blacks into membership. However, a review of Texas Baptist Annuals from 1945 to 1970 showed University as listed among other Austin association churches each of those years.

Bethune said he had not checked the church's historical records, but there was "a strong memory in the church and in the association" that some rebuke of the church by the association occurred. It was believed to have taken place after a black soldier was baptized at University Baptist Church in 1945 and the church voted three years later to oppose segregation.

"I am not sure if it was a specific action formally approved by the association, or whether it was just a general shunning of the church," he said.

In the formal letter of response to the association, University Baptist Church stated its belief that the association had no authority to dictate whom a church might ordain or how a church should interpret Scripture.

"We are alarmed that the association should choose to make any one issue over which Christians of good conscience and sincere discipleship might legitimately differ a test of fellowship, and fear what other issues the passion of the times might raise as a test of holiness among Baptists in Austin," the letter stated.

"Our church has historically and continuously sought to be inclusive of all people and has led the way in including people of all races and both genders as equals in the body of Christ, equally saved by grace and equally called to holy lives of loving discipleship in Christ. We have members in various stages of healing and redemption, none of whom would claim to have made one step beyond the need for the grace of God."

Bethune underscored University Baptist Church has no policy or agenda regarding sexual orientation.

Both he and Gavenda said members of University Baptist Church were "sad" the association voted to withdraw its fellowship from their church.

"We feel the work of the Lord is carried out best if all churches cooperate. We want to continue to cooperate to the best of our ability," Gavenda said.

For its part, the church is ready to move on, Gavenda said.

"This is not an important part of what we're about as a church. This is an issue that other people raised," he said. "It's not an issue to us."

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Montana Baptists reach
1st \$1 million budget

Baptist Press
10/11/95

GREAT FALLS, Mont. (BP)--Montana Baptists' first \$1 million budget was approved during the annual meeting of the Montana Southern Baptist Fellowship, Oct. 4-5 at Westside Baptist Church, Great Falls.

The 1996 budget -- \$1,001,369 -- was approved by 125 messengers representing the 136 churches, missions, preaching points and Bible studies in the state. The 1995 budget is \$960,459.

In Cooperative Program giving by Montana Baptists, 22 percent, unchanged from 1995, will be forwarded to Southern Baptist national and international missions and ministries. The budgeted 22 percent for the coming year is \$61,449.

James Shaver, pastor of First Southern Baptist Fellowship, Great Falls, was unopposed for fellowship president, as was John Hunn, pastor of Rimrock Baptist Church, Billings, for vice president. Bert Murphy, pastor of First Baptist Church, Valier, was re-elected recording secretary.

Next year's annual meeting will be Oct. 5-6 at Trinity Baptist Church, Missoula.

A book about the fellowship's history, "Stories of Montana Southern Baptists, 1952-1993," by Dorothy Hughes, a member of Blue Creek Baptist Church, Billings, can be ordered from the fellowship's offices in Billings, (406) 252-7537. The fellowship now numbers more than 77,000 Baptists.

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Her 200 volunteers involved
in wide range of ministries

By Rachel Gill

Baptist Press
10/11/95

MONTGOMERY, Ala. (BP)--On her first day on the job directing missions ministries for First Baptist Church, Jane Ferguson went to see her supervisor, then-pastor Dale Huff, to learn what he and the church expected.

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"During that conversation, he did an incredible thing," she recalls. "He set me free to do what I feel like needs to be done."

During her seven years at First Baptist in Montgomery, Ala., Ferguson has developed a myriad of ministry opportunities. But her most memorable achievement may be the army of more than 200 volunteers she has enlisted and trained.

Montgomery is a city with deep roots in the Old South. But in spite of early resistance, change has come to Montgomery and First Baptist, where wealthy, powerful people may share a pew with a member of another race. It's a church that takes the gospel of love and acceptance to the poor and powerless, to those they once shunned.

"These are the people Jesus would be spending time with if he were here on earth," Ferguson says.

Ina King, a 30-year member and a volunteer, says Ferguson made that happen. "Because of Jane, First Baptist is now known in the community as the church that cares," she says.

Ferguson serves as a catalyst, matching the church's willingness to serve with the community's needs. She visited 29 agencies or churches just to learn about their work. "After they told me what they were doing, I asked what First Baptist could do to help them."

She has come a long way from the self-described "shy, insecure girl from north Alabama." She was taught to obey and respect an angry, disapproving God. At age 11, she says, she made a profession of faith out of fear and guilt.

Even so, Ferguson never remembers a time when she didn't love Jesus. "As long as I can remember, I wanted to be what God wanted me to be." But at age 16, she was a high school graduate who had no idea what to do with herself.

When a newcomer to the church suggested she could work her way through college, Ferguson jumped at the chance.

When Jane met Barney Ferguson, a young ministerial student who came to pastor her church, "It was almost love at first sight for both of us," she says. At 18, she left college to marry him.

"I'm so indebted to Barney," she says. "He's my chief supporter. He taught me so much. He told me that God loved me for who I was. He brought me a whole new theology based on God's love."

After finishing his work at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Kentucky, Barney was called to be pastor of 18th Street Baptist Church in Louisville, where Jane ministered to the congregation's senior adults for 17 years. When their two daughters went off to college, she finished her college work and then was accepted at Southern's Carver School of Missions and Social Work.

As the closing days of her training neared, the couple realized their work at 18th Street church was at an end. God was leading elsewhere.

"One of the greatest gifts my husband ever gave me was to tell me the one of us who found a job first could choose where we went," she says.

Barney was in Alaska delivering pews he had made for a mission church when he got the news they were going to Montgomery. Ferguson calls her years in Montgomery the best of her life.

First Baptist's current pastor, Jay Wolf, affirms both Ferguson's work and the church's commitment. "In a time when many downtown churches have chosen to flee to the suburbs, First Baptist has chosen to stay and minister to this community," Wolf says. "Jane is helping us do that. She's providing us with exceptional leadership."

Wolf said the Caring Center is First Baptist's missions centerpiece. The Caring Center is where those in need of clothing, food, financial assistance and spiritual help are served by volunteer staff, except for Ferguson and part-time counselor Mike Avant.

Ferguson spends three long days each week at the center, counseling those in need and providing support for volunteers.

As important as the Caring Center is to First Baptist's community ministry involvement, it is only one of a long list. Ferguson believes one of the most important is its work with S.T.E.P. (Strategies for Elevating People), a community-based ecumenical organization that provides volunteers with challenging opportunities for ministry.

The S.T.E.P. director's office is donated by First Baptist and located at the Caring Center. Under the S.T.E.P. umbrella, First Baptist sponsors, staffs and houses a program to build self-esteem for teen-age mothers; tutors and provides summer camp for children from nearby Tulane Courts housing community; and provides four college scholarships to students from Tulane Courts.

A partial listing of other ministries at First Baptist include a literacy mission center for adult non-readers; a prison ministry; work with internationals; citizenship classes; and support groups.

"This church is so committed, so faithful," Ferguson says. "If we love people right where they are -- if we can respond the way Christ would -- we're putting ourselves in a position to make a difference in their lives."

Ferguson quotes former Southern Seminary professor Ken Chafin to describe what she and First Baptist are all about. "Evangelism moves best on wings of ministry," she recalls. "I love that."

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This article first appeared in MissionsUSA, July-August 1995. (BP) photo, horizontal, mailed to state Baptist newspapers by the Atlanta bureau of Baptist Press.

Campus in Ozark town of 2,000
attracting committed students By Debbie Von Behren

Baptist Press
10/11/95

MOUNTAIN VIEW, Mo. (BP)--It seems an unlikely situation, but what was once an old lumber company and warehouse building in a tiny Ozarks community is now a thriving college center packed with students and computers.

Southwest Baptist University-Mountain View is a success story that keeps writing new chapters. Since opening in 1986 with 33 students, the off-campus center in Missouri has grown to about 350 students enrolled for the fall semester.

Judging by what staff and students say, that amounts to about 350 people who probably would not be in college if not for the center.

Brenda Smith, a 32-year-old mother from Summersville, Mo., fits the profile of the typical student at SBU-Mountain View.

"I would not be about to graduate from college without this opportunity," said Smith, who currently is taking a 16-hour class load and will graduate in May 1996. "I had a six-week-old baby when I started here. There is no way I could have traveled, gone to school and raised a family."

"The students who come here are committed to an education," said Larry Price, the center's director the past three and a half years. "No one is sending them here; they want to be here. Many are adults who are returning to school. This is a most unlikely place, but it's a worthy thing to be involved in. We often have former graduates tell us there is no way they would have been able to graduate without this arrangement."

Since October 1989, the renovated lumber company and warehouse has become a mini-campus of six classrooms, a library and a 16-station computer lab.

This extension program, one of five under the guidance of SBU's Bolivar campus, provides a non-traditional learning environment for recent high school graduates, GED recipients and adults who have been out of school for several years. Classes meet once a week, with most classes scheduled in the evening.

"Our typical student is around 31 or 32, probably is married and probably has a job," Price said. "This student has numerous family and community responsibilities and takes an average of 10-12 hours per semester."

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"In addition to juggling all these responsibilities, many of our students are driving 40 or 50 or 60 miles to get here. Hardly any of our students are on academic probation. Everyone is committed to success." Even though older is the norm for SBU-Mountain View students, the campus meets the needs of other ages as well.

Eugenia Chilton of Winona, Mo., is 21 and goes to school full time, currently taking 16 hours. She plans to complete her college education in the traditional four years, with a graduation date of May 1996.

"I probably couldn't have handled going off to a big campus," she said. "I just don't think I would have been mentally prepared, and I would have been homesick. If it weren't for this school, I'd probably be working in a factory."

Price takes pride in such testimonies.

"We relish the idea of helping our students," he said. "It's the thing I enjoy doing most -- showing someone how they can accomplish a goal."

With 38 faculty members -- three full-time and 35 adjunct instructors -- the Mountain View center offers five degrees: bachelor of science in elementary education; bachelor of applied science in business administration; bachelor of applied science in human services; associate of applied science in business; and associate of applied science in accounting.

Elementary education degrees account for 34 percent of the students; 25 percent are business majors; 11 percent study human services; and the remainder are involved in other study areas.

While SBU administrators on the main campus at Bolivar determine textbooks and curriculum, the Mountain View center does all the scheduling.

"We're not sitting here creating things as we go; we are guided," Price said. "We try to meet the needs of this area, and we have total flexibility in scheduling."

To that end, the Mountain View campus has branches of its own, currently offering credit courses at Houston, Mountain Grove and Norwood, Mo. Price said this is a constantly changing situation. At other times, classes might be offered at Alton or Van Buren as requested by students in the area.

Despite the convenience of nearby classes, the comfort of modern facilities and the variety of course selections, what is mentioned most often as the key factor in the center's success is the faculty.

"The teachers who work here consider it a mission," Price said. "They don't get rich; money is not the driving force. We sense that we're in a place providing a unique service that no one else has ventured to try. The people working here are committed."

Jimmy Sellars is in his second year as an education instructor at Mountain View.

"The personal relationship of the faculty with the students is the strength of this school," he said. "There is more of a family type atmosphere, and the people who work here have a general caring attitude."

Sellars also credits the attitudes of the students with the quality of the program. "One advantage is that many of our students have been employed, often at schools as aides. Because of this, they are self-motivated. To be here, they have to be enthusiastic. By the time they get here, many have already worked an eight-hour day. They have to be committed."

Mainly non-traditional students are what Judy Carr sees when she looks at her psychology or sociology classes, which usually have enrollments of 30 or more.

"They are very eager to learn, especially in the upper levels," said Carr, who can compare the SBU students to those she has in classes she also teaches at Southwest Missouri State University's West Plains campus. "They're here to work on a degree and are excited and energetic. Because we are affiliated as a Southern Baptist school, I feel more comfortable including the Christian attitude in my classes, and I also hear more of the religious aspect here. We have a broader spectrum."

Carr, in her fifth year as an adjunct instructor at SBU-Mountain View, said the center has filled a void in this rural part of southern Missouri.

"It has been a real boon to this area," she said. "These students don't have the time or ability to move closer to a college campus. This location has opened the door for many people who wouldn't have been able to go to school."

Phil Rohrer, a psychology teacher, has been with the Mountain View center since its beginning. He has seen the growth firsthand. While his early classes might have had seven students, he often has enrollments in the mid-20s now. Early doubts about the feasibility of a college in a town of about 2,000 residents have been erased.

"At first I was a little concerned," he said. "After all, we're in the sticks and you can only go to the well so many times. I've been pleasantly surprised at the amount of growth, and we have maintained the stability and quality of students, and actually maybe even improved in those areas. Many changes have occurred to better meet the needs of the students."

A little over a year ago, the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools gave SBU an excellent rating. Carl Hamilton, chairman of the assessment team and provost of Oral Roberts University, Tulsa, Okla., had high praise for SBU's off-campus programs.

"We were really blown away by what we saw at Mountain View," he said. "We were very impressed by the programs, by the people and by the positioning of potential people to serve in that area."

Price, a Texas transplant who has been with the center a total of seven years, is proud to have been part of the growth of SBU-Mountain View, which has produced 175 graduates during its short existence.

"This is where the Lord put me," he said. "I felt that this is where I was supposed to be. I've never worked with a better group of people. The people who work here believe we have the obligation to respond to students' needs, and we have a unique, incredible mixture of faculty and staff."

Supervising 350 students and 38 teachers keeps Price busy, but he also is looking to the future.

"I think having 175 graduates is a startling number when you consider we've only been here nine years and have only been giving degrees since 1990," he said. "We're still discovering who we are and where we are going."

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Von Behren is a correspondent for Missouri Baptists' newsjournal, Word and Way.

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