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School of Divinity: Celebrating New Home

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SCHOOL OF DIVINITY: *Celebrating New Home*



Benjamin Mays

The rich legacy of Benjamin E. Mays and Howard W. Thurman was the theme of a three-day celebration in April as the School of Divinity marked a milestone in its 120-year history: its move to a lush new 22-acre campus in northeast Washington.

Located at 14th and Shepherd Streets, near the school's former Randolph Street headquarters, the new campus was purchased in 1984 from the (Roman Catholic) Holy Name College of the Friars Minor of the Franciscan Order.

The school's new home is an expansive beige-and-tan brick rectangular building with a figure of Christ atop its tower and sculptures of notable religious thinkers forming decorative columns on its sides. Renovated at a cost of \$4,000,000, it has approximately 110,000 square feet of classroom, library, office, dormitory and recreational space.

Included in the renovation was the construction of a new library beneath the building's inner courtyard. The comfortably furnished facility, designed to harmonize with the older structure surrounding it, includes individual study carrels, computer stations, an enclosed room for group study and enough shelving to store 145,000 books, including the school's unique collection on Afro-American and African religious traditions.

Another notable feature of the building is a 2,076-square-foot chapel with high, angled ceilings and wood paneled walls. Equipped with 280 movable chairs and a 15 rank pipe organ, it will be used for lectures, special convocations, community gatherings as well as worship services.

In the spring of 1985, Howard's Board of Trustees voted to name the new School of Divinity building The Benjamin E. Mays Hall, and its inside chapel The Howard



Thurman Chapel, after two giants in the history of religious education at the university — and far beyond.

Benjamin E. Mays, educator, clergyman, world churchman, counselor, civil rights activist and author, was the dean of the School of Religion (as it was formerly called) from 1934 to 1940, leaving an indelible imprint on its development. He was instrumental in increasing the school's library holdings, oversaw the school's occupancy of the first building designed to support its academic programs (the Carnegie Building) and shepherded the school through the process leading to its accreditation by the American Association of Theological Schools.

Even after he left Howard in 1940 to assume the presidency of Morehouse College (a position he held until 1967), he continued to maintain an interest in the divinity school. In his last will and testa-

ment, he left instructions that the school be invited to select books for its library from among his personal collection. He died in 1984.

Howard W. Thurman was dean of Rankin Chapel and professor of Christian Theology at the School of Religion from 1932 to 1944. In addition to being an educator, he was a mesmerizing preacher (selected by *Life* magazine in 1953 as one of the "12 great preachers of the century"), a theologian, mystic, counselor and the author of more than 20 books. His ideas on the possibilities of experiencing a direct and intimate relationship with God and the unity and sacredness of all life found passionate believers from all races, creeds and walks of life.

In 1944 in San Francisco, he co-founded the Church for the Fellowship of All Peoples, "an interracial church within the Christian tradition . . . for all peoples, whatever their color, whatever their

castes." He died in 1981.

"We are here to perpetuate the glorious memories of Howard Thurman and Benjamin Mays and to launch officially the facilities of the Howard University School of Divinity," said Howard President James E. Cheek in opening remarks at the dedication ceremonies.

And with lectures, sermons, prayers, hymns, a banquet and tours of the new building, the school's faculty, students, alumni and friends did just that. Some highlights of the three-day event:

■ School of Divinity Dean Lawrence N. Jones telling those assembled how the university's willingness to acquire the new site represented "a recognition of religion as a primary human experience and of the centrality of religious institutions in the life of the community." And reciting from the 126th Psalm: "God has done great things for us."



Howard Thurman



■ President Cheek reading a list of items stored in a time capsule placed inside the building's cornerstone, among them the handsome dedication program which opens with a quote from Mays that will be etched on the cornerstone's surface: "It is not environment, it is equality of minds, integrity of souls and determination of wills that determine futures and shape lives."

■ Atlanta Mayor Andrew Young, a United Church of Christ minister and an alumnus of the College of Liberal Arts, giving a speech in which he linked Mays and Thurman to the civil rights movement which helped change America.

"The political activism of a Benjamin Mays and the theological and spiritual depth of a Howard Thurman shaped a generation of preachers perhaps best symbolized by Martin Luther King, Jr.," he said. "Martin Luther King would not have been possible without a Benjamin Mays or a Howard Thurman. Mays was his academic and perhaps his political leader, but he traveled with Howard Thurman's books in his briefcase."

And he urged Howard's current divinity students to "shape the life of the world in the year 2000 through your ministry as they shaped ours through their ministries."

Moral leaders throughout history, he reminded the audience, "didn't seek 'happiness.' They sought to serve and their lives became meaningful and abundant not as a result of what they did for themselves but what they did for others. And that's the fundamental spiritual reality we've got to take to our congregations and to the world."

■ *Ebony* senior editor Lerone Bennett Jr., who has written about both Mays and Thurman, asking everyone in the chapel to remain silent "for a holy moment and call on Howard Thurman to bless this chapel." And then, preacher-like: "A people who can produce a Benjamin Mays and a Howard Thurman need not apologize to anyone . . . A chapel named Thurman must not be an ordinary chapel. A chapel named Thurman

must Thurmanize . . . It must be a frontier chapel always on the growing edge of hope."

For the school's dean, a new campus honoring Mays and Thurman seems an especially befitting symbol of the school's evolution into "one of the best [divinity schools] in the country." He cites the school's three-fold mission:

■ to prepare people to become professional leaders in religious and educational institutions as well as in other institutions which affect the quality of life in society;

■ to inquire into the phenomenon of religion itself, an inquiry that is international and cross-cultural and includes the study of moral, spiritual, ethical and humane values;

■ to provide graduate students with a quality theological education, with special emphasis on the cultural and religious heritage of Afro-Americans and the needs of Black communities.

The School of Divinity offers programs leading to the master of arts degree in religious studies, the master of divinity degree and the doctor of ministry degree. About 200 students are currently enrolled in the school and it has a roster of approximately 600 living alumni. □