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Wake Forest Divinity School opens

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Wake Forest University celebrated the realization of an old dream inside the dimly-lit confines of Wait Chapel Tuesday night.

The university celebrated with the help of a grand choir – which belted out harmonious sounds from a choir stand below a set of enormous organ pipes – and many of its faculty members, donned in their academic regalia, who looked on from the audience.

It was all to welcome “the new kid on the block,” the Wake Forest University Divinity School, which will open its doors for the first time Aug. 25. The inaugural convocation was one of many events planned to celebrate the opening of the school, which is the first professional school to open at WFU since the opening of the Babcock School of Management in 1969.

Fittingly, “Theology at the

Angelou encourages staff, students to ‘lay down burdens’; dean says school won’t lack diversity

Threshold of the 21st Century” was the theme of the celebration, which stretched on into Wednesday with a host of seminars and lectures. During the convocation, many speakers made mention of the millennium and religion’s role in it. All bets are that the university’s divinity school will be the final divinity school to open this century.

“You deserve congratulations for your bold decision to launch a divinity school at this moment in history,” said Patricia Sullivan,



Angelou

chancellor of the University of North Carolina at Greensboro, one of many religious and education leaders from around the country who were on hand to praise the new school. “Best wishes to you as you begin this journey.”

The journey to bring a divinity school to Wake Forest began 10 to 160 years ago, depending on whom you ask. The university’s board of trustees approved the formation of the school in 1989, but the board stipulated that adequate funds for the divinity school should be raised before it opened its doors. To that end, the university has been actively raising money for the new school.

The first donation to the school— \$500 – came from First Baptist Church in New Bern, a

church where Samuel Wait, the man who formed the school that would become Wake Forest University in the early 19th century, once served as pastor.

“This is the celebration of a founding purpose,” Thomas Hearn, president of the university said. Currently, the school has \$10 million in pledges and gifts.

Hearn went on to explain the stark changes that have taken place at the university since Wait’s day. In Wait’s day, the school and the church were one, Hearn explained.

Now, the line between the church and the school is solidly drawn and quite visible to everyone.

In fact, Hearn said, trying to find its niche in an “increasingly secular university and culture” will be one of the divinity school’s biggest challenges.

The divinity school’s faculty and staff are vowing that the

Divinity School

from page A1

school will be a place where everyone is welcome, a place where all opinions and beliefs are accepted, a place that will not only preach a philosophy of pluralism, but practice it as well.

"This school seeks to provide not only instruction but provocation ... that stirs up students. Learning is always dangerous and difficult to domesticate," said the school's dean, Bill Leonard, during an address that was part sermon and part stand-up routine.

With the divinity school, Wake Forest is severing another tie to its historic Baptist roots. The school will be the first university-based seminary in the United States to begin instruction without a formal denominational affiliation, although it will identify itself as "Christian by tradition, ecumenical in outlook and Baptist in heritage."

The school's inaugural class is overwhelmingly white and female, but Leonard said the school will push for diversity of all kinds.

Standouts among the 24 full-time students in class — who will work toward a master of divinity, the only degree offered by the school so far — are a local African American woman, who talked with faculty members about her fears about having her religious beliefs accepted before enrolling; a lesbian and a 77-year-old woman.

Most of the students will train at the school to minister at churches; some are studying so that they can, one day, teach.

Leonard said divinity schools historically have been hubs of controversy, hinting that not everyone will be pleased with the school's nontraditional direction.

"Open a divinity school and duck," he joked. "Controversy will strike immediately if not sooner."

No official, formal Wake Forest ceremony would be complete without words from Maya Angelou, Reynolds Professor of American Studies. The convocation was no different.

Mixed in with the celestial music and thoughtful speeches, Angelou brought her own gospel to the occasion, highlighting a night full of highlights.

She walked to the podium and immediately let loose a rendition of the old Negro standard "Down by the Riverside," which echoed off the chapel's stone walls.

Borrowing the popular refrain from the song, Angelou talked about laying down loads. She praised the students for coming to the divinity school and laying down their heavy loads of racism and discrimination.

"Here, at this brand new school, in this wonderful institution — here, you have the chance to really lay down your load," Angelou said. "When we lay down our heavy loads, how lighter and brighter our world will be."

Officials at the divinity school expect its ranks to grow by next year. Plans to bring new faculty members are under way, including a full-time African American fac-

ulty member; currently the school has only one black faculty member, visiting professor Brad Braxton. University officials also expect to have upward of 125 students enrolled in the school for the 2001–2002 school year.

School faculty members say that excitement about the school is spreading slowly but surely across

campus, but they still have the daunting task of proving themselves to the campus community.

"The opening of the divinity school offers a new meaning to the mantra 'Go Deacs,'" said Elizabeth Sherertz, associate dean for faculty services at Wake Forest School of Medicine, as she welcomed the newcomer to the ranks of professional schools.

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