

Former city resident named pastor at powerhouse church

BY LAYLA FARMER
THE CHRONICLE

A search committee voted unanimously to name a former Wake Forest University professor as senior minister of New York City's famous Riverside Church.

Dr. Brad Braxton, most recently a member of the faculty at Vanderbilt University Divinity School, will lead the congregation of more than 2,400 when he takes over the pulpit from Dr. James A. Forbes Jr. next month.

After Forbes, Braxton, 39, will

become only the second African-American to serve as senior minister of the storied 75-year-old church, which was largely built with the money of billionaire John D. Rockefeller, Jr., who was a member.

The pulpit that Braxton will stand behind has been graced by legends like Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., Nelson Mandela and Bill Clinton, all whom have visited the influential church.

"Part of what religious communities do in their best moments is to seek after the truth with a sense of humility and a sense of the common good," Braxton told the New York Times, "so I certainly would hope to continue in that marvelous legacy of congregational care internally, and bold, courageous, prophetic action externally, for which the Riverside Church has been known so many years."

Braxton served at Wake Forest Divinity School for four years prior to assuming his position at Vanderbilt. Wake Forest Divinity School Dean Bill Leonard says it was evident then that he was destined for greatness.

"I think we've all traced his strengths and the possible future," Leonard said. "I think most of us (faculty members) knew that sooner or later he would end up in a prominent pulpit."

During his time in Winston-Salem, Braxton penned two books and developed a reputation as a gifted teacher.

"It was really wonderful to watch him mentor students in preaching," Leonard commented. "He really has an ability to communicate not just how to preach, but why one should. That's one of his great skills."

The Rev. Dr. Cedric Rodney, James A. Gray Distinguished Professor of Religion and Ethics at Winston-Salem State University, befriended Braxton during the time Braxton was in the city.

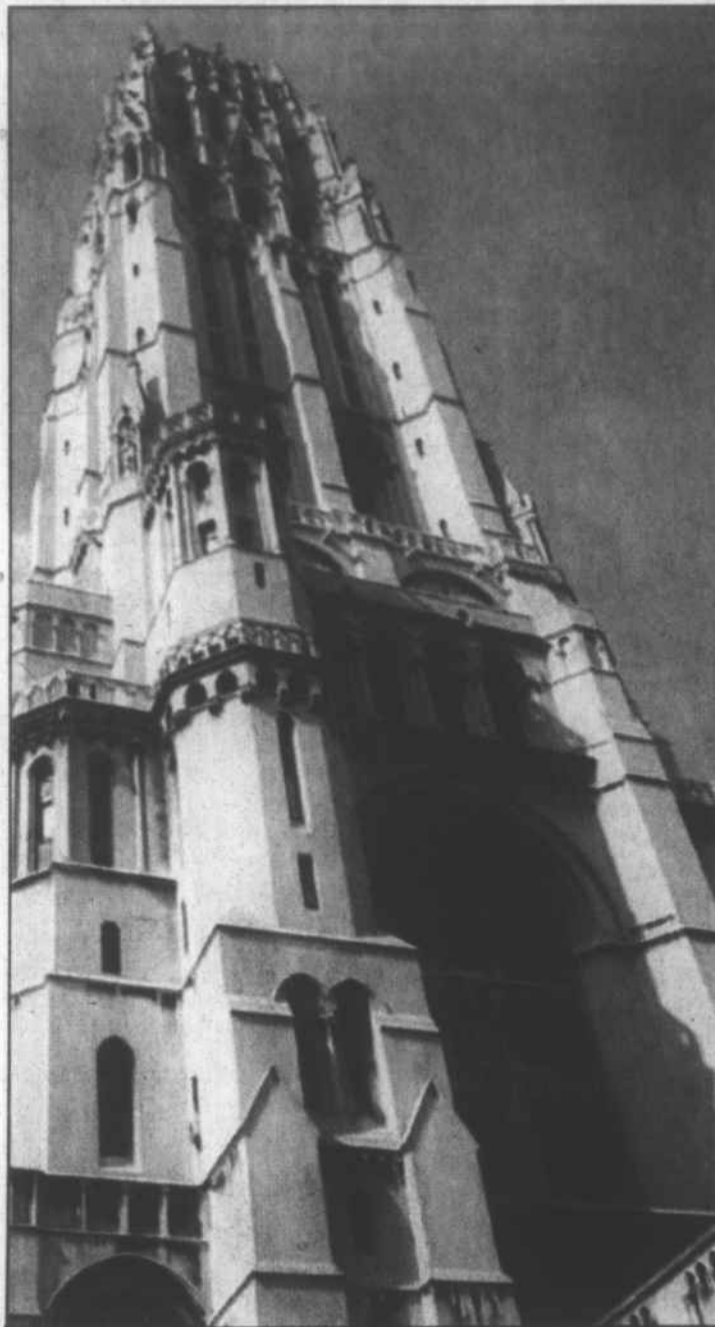
"I see in this young man the gift of the Holy Spirit," said Rodney. "He can exegete a portion of Scripture in a way and make it come alive, but still keeping the focus on heart and mind."

Rodney has served as coordinator of WSSU's James A. Gray lecture series, a religion and ethics focused program that is open to the community, since its inception. Of the more than 65 esteemed theologians who have served as speakers over the last 16 years, only two have spoken more than once. Braxton has graced the podium four times so far, most recently in April.

"You can't go to sleep on Brad Braxton. This fella, he's like a plane taking off," declared the professor. "His voice is like the voice of Moses, a booming voice."

Forbes, 71, became the first black senior minister at Riverside, which has an interracial and international congregation, when he assumed the position nearly two decades ago.

Forbes, once hailed by Newsweek magazine as one of the 12 "Most Effective Preachers" in the English speaking world, will also make a repeat performance at the



The highly-respected Riverside Church in New York City.



Braxton

lecture series when he speaks at Winston-Salem State early next year.

Braxton's appointment as Forbes' successor was the right choice for the church, says Rodney, who added that he envisioned Braxton in the pulpit of Riverside when he visited the church years ago.

"I told him God had answered my prayers," Rodney reported telling the young pastor when he heard the news of his new position. "I hope the hand of God will always be in his hand. If you put your hand in God, He will lead you."



WSSU Photo by Garrett Garner
Dr. Cedric Rodney



Members of The Pond Reunion Planning Committee.

Pond

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Pond had children, and if they didn't, they claimed some."

A group of former residents started the annual reunion 17 years ago to help keep the spirit of the old neighborhood alive.

"This is the oldest African-American community reunion in Winston-Salem," Delores Scales, historian for the group, proudly proclaimed. "People come from everywhere just to remember how it used to be."

A close knit group of Pond committee members planned the 2008 reunion, which was held Saturday at the Martin Luther King Jr. Recreation Center in the heart of The Pond. Scales and the other committee members served home cooked food to current and former residents. Live music, fellowship and reflections from community members rounded out the four-hour affair, which attracted hundreds.

Claude Rucker, 96 spent more than 70 years of his life "on The Pond," before moving to his current home on Carver School Road. Rucker, a deacon at Union Baptist Church, is a living example of the caring nature many residents were said to have.

"He used to take in every stray cat, every stray dog, every stray kid..." joked daughter Emma Dismuke. "He couldn't stand to see anyone go without."

Rucker's daughters say he used to slaughter his own hogs and give the meat to neighbors in The Pond who couldn't afford such things.

"I tried to help a lot of people," he said matter-of-factly. "The Lord has blessed me."

Seeing how her childhood home has grown and changed over the years is meaningful, said Claudia Rucker-Foote, Rucker's elder daughter.

"It's just wonderful to be able to see the progress that has been made and then to be able to share it with our children and grandchildren," she remarked.

Flora Golden, 92, also grew up in The Pond. She was a member of one of the first classes to attend the nearby Kimberly Park Elementary School.

"(Kimberly Park) had a room for everything, and that was odd for us; we had come from a smaller school," she related.



Top photo: Delores Scales with Alberta Black. Above: Flora Golden with Ella Giles.

"We had some of the best faculty in the county," added Golden, who went on to spend 40 years as an educator herself.

One of the guests of honor was Ella Giles. The 100-year-old came to the reunion to reconnect with old friends.

"I come particularly to see people," said the former hairdresser. "I think the friendliness of the people is what makes this neighborhood special."

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