NEW FACES AT UNIVERSITY BAPTIST — Dr. H. Mitchell Simpson, who preached his first sermon as new pastor of University Baptist Church on South Columbia Street, holds son Andrew, 2½, while his wife Betty holds Aaron, 3 months. Simpson earned a B.A. from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill as a Morehead scholar.

New University Baptist pastor says Southern convention in grave danger

By SUSAN KAUFFMAN
Staff Writer

Fundamentalists have struck mortal blows to the Southern Baptist Convention, according to the new pastor of University Baptist Church.

"The best of the Southern Baptist Convention as I have known it as a preacher's son is dead and gone forever," said Mitchell Simpson, a native North Carolinian from Siler City and the son of a Baptist pastor.

Many media accounts miss the true cause of the convention's demise, he said in an interview Sunday. Southern Baptists founded the convention in 1845 for the wrong reasons, he said. "It wasn't theological," he said. Southern Baptists split from northern Baptists in defense of slavery, Simpson said.

"When you premise yourself on the wrong foundation, ultimately you will fall," Simpson said.

Simpson, 40, gave his first sermon yesterday in the oldest Baptist church in Chapel Hill, flanked by a choir in white robes. He and his family have bought a home here and will soon move from Wingate, a town near Charlotte where he held his last pastorate.

Simpson's resume impressed the church search committee. He earned a degree in English literature while a Morehead scholar at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. He then took a Master of Divinity degree from Duke University and went on to become a Rockefeller Fellow who earned his doctoral degree in humanities from Florida State University.

University Baptist Church had operated with an interim pastor after Dr. Thomas W. Downing retired due to illness in May 1989.

Simpson calls the fundamentalist takeover a political power struggle. Rather than weep, he said he will focus on ministering locally and internationally with little regard to the "dead husks of the convention."

Church members, not Simpson, will decide how much they want to continue contributing financially to the Southern Baptist Convention, he said. University Baptist Church did not send any representatives to the convention in New Orleans this year.

Despite sadness at the schism between fundamentalists and moderates, Simpson said these are exciting times to be assuming pastoral duties.

"Baptists can be the most democratic faith," he said. "What I love about the Baptist tradition is the religious liberty, separation of church and state, local autonomy and the belief in the competency of each individual soul to find God.

"Now is the opportunity for Baptists to re-discover who they were called to be," Simpson said. "We need to discover what we are, what we have been, and what it means to be a Baptist."

Simpson said he will draw from a wide variety of traditions in her sermons. He referred to author Flannery O'Connor and clergyman-physician Albert Schweitzer Sunday. In addition to preaching, Simpson wants his sermons to educate, he said.

A promise that he would have the freedom to speak his mind drew Simpson to University Baptist Church, he said. "It's my understanding that it's a free pulpit," Simpson said. "By that, I mean that everybody has a right to his own interpretation." He added, "I speak for myself, not for others. I speak as a member of the congregation," he said.

Simpson said he feels comfortable with University Baptist Church's tradition of hiring educated clergy, involving people in prayers and offering very stable leadership.
"The pastor is not the chief executive officer of the church," he said. "Many churches have embraced the wrong model, the mentality borrowed from corporate American business. It’s the mentality that the power is at the top and support comes from the bottom." Jesus taught that power is vested in the people, he said.

The eucharist or breaking of bread Jesus shared with his disciples before he was crucified has overshadowed the importance of Jesus washing the feet of his disciples, he said.

"I do think it’s a delightful thing to be a Baptist," he said. "At best we’re an irascible, rowdy bunch always willing to say to the Emperor, you’re wearing no clothes."
stairs); the historic house on the corner of Cameron Avenue and Mallette Street, reported to have been a station on the underground railroad and home of photographer Bayard Wooten. I hope the Merritt/McDade house won't be the fifth.

Since I came to Chapel Hill in 1957, I have seen West Franklin Street and West Rosemary Street dissolve from private housing to commercial sites. Not all such sites were worthy of preserving; I feel strongly that the Merritt/McDade house is well worth saving. It represents a particular history in Chapel Hill, is of classic local architecture, and the last residence left on West Franklin Street.

While I lived in Hill House in 1959-62, I rented a room upstairs in the house next door (Merritt/McDade) to use as an art studio. Others who rented space were Robert Shannon (MFA, UNC-CH); aspiring writer Robert Fowler, now proprietor of Fowler's Gourmet at Brightleaf Square, Durham; and Jane Haslem whose Jane Haslem Gallery continues in Washington, D.C., as a nationally successful gallery. The Haslem gallery exhibited many prominent North Carolina artists and was the first commercial art gallery in Chapel Hill. This was in the back part of the house, also the site of the Chapel Hill Service League's first Country Store.

I think fondly of my neighborhood in 1959. There were residences along West Franklin Street and West Rosemary Street; Belk's and the A&P were still downtown along with Fowler's. Much has changed, but the Merritt/McDade house remains. Will the Baptists be best remembered for its destruction? I fervently hope not.

I pray that the University Baptist Church will feel compelled to join in conserving Chapel Hill and to continue to allow the presence of the McDade-Merritt house on its property. Three houses are already gone from that property. A Chapel Hill with all of its heritage gone will surely not be the Chapel Hill any of us will want to remember.