

DISPATCH
LEXINGTON, N.C.

Al Martin
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A season for change

Martin leaves First Baptist after 24 years to pursue new career

By ANA AGUD

The Dispatch

Sunday marks a beginning and an end for the Rev. Al Martin, minister of music at First Baptist Church on West Third Avenue. After 24 years of service to the church and the community, he will end his tenure at the church to begin a new career.

"There are special rewards with longevity in a church situation, but there are special problems, too," Martin said. "The timing just seems right."

It is difficult to say which came as more of a surprise — his decision to leave or his newly chosen direction. On Tuesday, Martin begins a career in furniture sales in Atlanta.

The decision to make a change has been two years in the making. He describes himself as a "safe sort of person" not inclined to take risks. However, Martin sees this change as a chance for more personal growth.

"It will allow me to explore more of who I am," he said. "I am thinking in more personal terms than professional. Somewhere down the road, I'll direct again."

Martin acknowledges, with a laugh, that he probably chose Atlanta before choosing the career path. He is familiar with the area, having graduated from Emory University, and has remained in touch with friends there from his college days.

The decision to pursue the furniture business comes from his love of the arts.

"I consider the design of furniture to be artistic in nature," he said. Martin will be "learning from the ground up" and the learning starts with training classes.

"Naturally, the hope is that I will succeed at it."

While wishing Martin the best in his new career, the Rev. Dr. Ray Howell, senior minister of First Baptist, spoke of his surprise and his sadness at the departure of his friend.

"He's almost an institution, not only to the church, but to the community," Howell said. "Personally, I'm going to miss him because he's been a great friend ... a friend of my family."

As the third minister of music with whom he has worked, Howell characterized Martin as an easy, non-demanding individual who worked hard to coordinate with him on the theme of Sunday services.

"Al has been a joy to work with," Howell said. "I have always marveled at the major productions he has been able to pull off."

Those major productions top the list of Martin's warmest memories. They include: the presentation of "A Festival of Nine Lessons in Carols," a Christmas tradition begun at First Baptist by Martin in 1974; "Noye's Fludde" (Noah's Flood) in 1976, and "Amahl and the Night Visitors" in 1977.

Yet, Martin beams with pride when recalling two of this year's presentations — "Elijah," which the Sanctuary Choir presented in conjunction with two other choirs, and "Godspell," which the church's youth choir presented.

"We did two superlative things with 'Elijah' and 'Godspell,'" Martin said. "'Elijah' was absolutely the best thing they've (the adult choir) ever done. And you couldn't top 'Godspell.'"

Martin's legacy to the community was in relocating the Community Candlelight Service from the church to the Edward C. Smith Civic Center.

In its early years, the program would alternate between churches in the community. Martin suggested the program be moved to the civic center in 1981, allowing for the use of more secular music.

Still, the memories and the legacies will not make leaving any easier. "There's sadness, tears and a lot of hugging," Martin said. "It's very difficult to break these relationships. You're like family."

However, saying goodbye properly and allowing a grieving period is part of the process, Howell said. After Martin's final service Sunday, in which he has been given "director's choice," a luncheon will be held in the fellowship hall.

"We will do several things to honor him and reflect back," Howell said. Several people, representing various segments of Martin's ministry, will speak.

Howell also expects the replacement process to be slow. He does not anticipate the selection process to begin before the new year and, realistically, does not expect a new minister of music to be in place for possibly another year. Jeanne Davis will be interim minister of music.

For Martin, though, there are no regrets. He spoke of finding old correspondence in his files while cleaning out his office.

"I could see a different person then," he said. He recognized that the energy from his earlier years is



The Rev. Al Martin, minister of music for First Baptist Church on West Third Avenue, holds the sheet music for the hymn 'He Comes For Us' Tuesday at the church. Martin is leaving after 24 years with the church.

gone, perhaps replaced by experience.

Being a part of church music was a calling by God, he explained.

"I never doubted this was the

place to be," he said. "Just as now the calling is to leave."

As he is being wished success, Martin's prayer for this church is that "they continue be a great

church ... to continue to be a loving and caring community.

"And always aspire to greatness," he said. "Mediocrity is not acceptable."

Retired professor Martin dies

University Professor taught interdisciplinary and MALS courses

James A. "Al" Martin ('37), who had a distinguished academic career before "retiring" to Wake Forest where he taught interdisciplinary undergraduate and graduate courses for 20 years, died Jan. 24, 2007, in Decatur, Ga. He was 89.

A memorial service will be held Feb. 4 in Decatur, where he had moved after the death of his wife, Nell, in 2005, to be close to his brother. He is survived by a brother and several nieces and nephews.

Martin had already taught for nearly 40 years when he retired from the religion department at Columbia University, returned to his native North Carolina, and joined the faculty at his alma mater in 1983 as a University Professor—the first person hired to fill an interdisciplinary appointment. He had also taught at Amherst College and held a prestigious professorship at Union Theological Seminary, and had written numerous books on religion and philosophy.

Martin retired in 2003 from Wake Forest, where his academic career had started in the 1940s. He had remained close to the University throughout his career, said Provost Emeritus Edwin G. Wilson ('43). He received an honorary degree in 1965 and the Distinguished Alumni Award in 1971.

He was in his mid 60s and was chairman of the Board of Visitors of the College and Graduate School of Arts and Sciences—a voluntary position—when he was invited to join the faculty as the first University Professor. "He was a man with a superb background in religion and philosophy," Wilson said. "He was known to be a splendid teacher, and he had authored a number of publications."

Martin, who was an ordained Deacon in the Episcopal church, taught "Meaning and Value in Western Thought" in the religion department, but he was better known for the wide-ranging interdisciplinary honors and humanities courses he taught over the years including "Dante, Descartes and Gandhi," "Forms and Expressions of Love," "The Promise and Perils of the Nuclear Age" and "Images of Aging in the Humanities."

He also taught in the Masters of Arts in Liberal Studies program. He was a "star" in the MALS program, whose classes were always full, said Cecilia Solano, director of the program and interim dean of the Graduate School of Arts and Sciences. He taught one course—alternating between "Cultural Pluralism and Values" and "Literary Classics of World Religions"—almost every year between 1987 and 2002.

He supervised seven theses between 1994 and 1998 on subjects as varied as Gandhi, gypsies and Georgia O'Keeffe, demonstrating his wide range of knowledge, Solano said. In 1995, he won a national award for the best teacher in a graduate liberal studies program.

Martin was the author of several books, including *Empirical Philosophies of Religion* (1944), *Ways of Faith* (1953), *Faith, Fact and Fiction* (1960) and *The New Dialogue between Philosophy and Theology* (1966). After coming to Wake Forest, he wrote *Beauty and Holiness: the Dialogue Between Aesthetics and Religion*, published in 1990 by Princeton University Press.

Martin was a native of Lumberton, N.C. After graduating from Wake Forest, he received his master's degree from Duke University in 1938 and then returned to Wake

Forest where he taught philosophy and psychology for two years. He earned his Ph.D. from Columbia University in 1944 and served as a chaplain in the Navy for two years.

He taught at Amherst College from 1946 until 1960 and at Union Theological Seminary from 1960 until 1967, where he was the Danforth Professor of Religion. He joined the faculty at Columbia University in 1967 and chaired the religion department for 10 years, before retiring in 1982 and moving to Winston-Salem.

-- Kerry M. King ('85)
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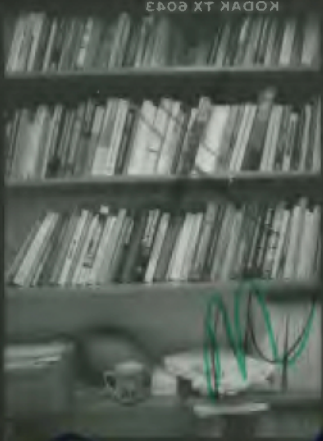
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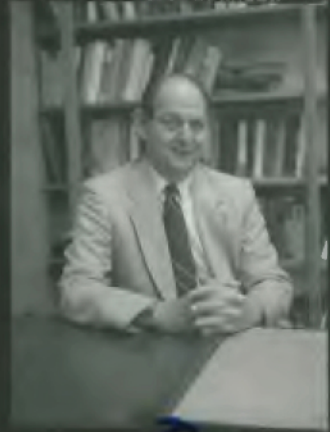


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