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Seminary launches campus adjacent to Bellevue Baptist

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After 20 years in Memphis, **Mid-America Baptist Theological Seminary** is investing \$28 million in its dream campus at Appling Road and Goodlett Farms. Construction on the 130,000-square-foot main building will begin in March 2005 and is expected to be completed in June 2006.

Bellevue Baptist Church gave 35 acres to Mid-America for the project, but the seminary purchased another 16 acres adjacent to the main facility where it will construct 250 student housing units. The seminary is spending about \$15 million on construction of the main campus and about \$13 million on the student housing.

The new campus is designed by Fisher & Arnold, Inc., and will be built by **R.E. Linkous** Contractors. The school currently has 349 students in Germantown, 80% of whom are married, but the new campus will be able to accommodate 1,000 students.

Michael Haggard, director of development and communications for Mid-America, says the main idea for the new campus was to put every aspect of the seminary on the same property. Throughout its history, Mid-America has always leased or borrowed its facilities.

The two institutions, Bellevue and Mid-America, are not affiliated, but "knew each other" and actually share some members and board members. When Bellevue Baptist was located on Bellevue in Midtown, Mid-America was housed nearby in the old **Temple Israel** synagogue at Poplar and Montgomery.

"We've been a faith-based institution since our inception," Haggard says. "Most of our income is generated through donations and tuition, so we've gone from borrowed to leased facilities before we acquired our current facility."

The current facility, which was previously the home of **Germantown Baptist Church**, was sold to the seminary in 1998. **Methodist Germantown Hospital** purchased the seminary's property in December last year, leaving Mid-America with enough cash to build its own campus.

The main building will include a gymnasium with an indoor track for student use, a 1,000-seat auditorium, a full-service bookstore that will be open to the public, 13 classrooms, four lecture halls, four seminar halls and a fellowship hall.

The new campus will provide student housing for the first time in the seminary's history, Haggard says. Mid-America's student housing is currently located in Olive Branch where the institution owns 192 apartment units at the corner of Old Goodman and Highway 78. The seminary still owes about \$4 million on that housing facility, but hopes it can be marketed as a multi-family property.

Despite the vast improvements proposed for the new campus, Haggard says the seminary originally wasn't looking to move.

"Our current home is the first place we've had that is debt free, but Methodist made us an offer we couldn't refuse," he says. "There's also a church (Bellevue) that has given us 35 acres of prime real estate. It's great to have a front row seat for what God does for his people."

Bellevue had the land on the market for years, but decided to hand it over to Mid-America after a church-wide vote. Randy Redd, Bellevue's minister of church programming, says the church has a strong affiliation and affinity for Mid-America. Bellevue didn't have an imminent need to profit off the land because it has no debt on its own campus.

"We really did feel the Lord led our church to make that as a gift to the seminary," Redd says. "We have many businessmen in our church, and we're not anti-business at all, but that seems to be where the Lord led our leadership and confirmed that with church-wide approval."

The former **Powertel** headquarters, developed by **Weston Cos.**, sits along Goodlett Farms Parkway adjacent to Mid-America's new campus. The land Mid-America is building on was previously zoned light industrial, but the institution's leaders had to change that zoning to college/university. Haggard says the rezoning was "a big paper hoop," but did not present any difficult challenges.

Mid-America originally planned to get the housing and campus buildings on the 35 acres donated by Bellevue, but that plan would have restricted the seminary from future growth.

Jordan Northcross, project manager for Fisher & Arnold, says the building will replicate the seminary's current building and incorporate designs from its original facility in the old synagogue. The main administration building on the new campus will feature a large dome reminiscent of that building, as will the new library.

The school's current library houses some books that are hundreds of years old, and Northcross says it will be a centerpiece of the new campus. The current library is in the basement of the old Germantown Baptist Church.

David Baker, Fisher & Arnold's director of design development, says Mid-America's new campus will be wired to incorporate new technology as the seminary conducts distance learning classes with its satellite in Albany, N.Y.

The campus will include infrastructure improvements to make the area more traffic friendly; a park and playground for students and family members; several ponds and walking trails; and a pedestrian bridge across a creek for access to and from student housing.

Northcross says the seminary is making a wise investment in its future and Bellevue is doing the same by ensuring a desirable neighbor moves in next door.

"I'm sure they had a lot of potential buyers, but there were some things that concerned them," he says. "This will be the first facility they've (Mid-America) ever had that will be designed for them. Everything they've ever done has been a retrofit and they've had to make do."

Northcross says one of the few conditions Bellevue insisted on when they donated the land was to make sure the church's landmark crosses are not obscured from view, and that was figured into the design.

"The layout of the seminary is to take advantage of the sight lines of those three crosses," he says. "The lobby, classrooms and offices will all have views of the crosses and actually, the seminary will have a better view of

them than Bellevue has because they'll be in the seminary's front yard."

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