A SHORT HISTORY OF THE ORA BYRAM ALLISON MEMORIAL LIBRARY, 2011

Dr. B. Gray Allison, the founding President of Mid-America Baptist Theological Seminary, has spoken on Monday nights of Founders’ Days in August of each academic year since the school’s inception. While audience members note particular aspects of Dr. Gray’s account that they recall with clarity, amusement, astonishment, or favor, the keen listener grasps one noteworthy theme—Mid-America’s need for a strong, vibrant, and resourceful Library facility. Throughout the years, Dr. Allison has sounded this seminal subject repeatedly, “the Library, the Library, the Library” on Monday nights, emphasizing this special section of the school. Indeed, The Ora Byram Allison Memorial Library retains both a singular place in the history of Mid-America Baptist Theological Seminary and a historical account unto itself.

The Library of Mid-America Baptist Theological Seminary began with nothing—no space, no books, no staff, no director, and no name. When the Seminary started classes in 1972, in Little Rock, Arkansas, it commenced the Library with multiple donations from original faculty members, including Drs. Roy Beaman, J. Philip Allison, and B. Gray Allison. From the outset, the faculty and students realized the critical role that a library affords the life of any academic institution, as its serves as the intellectual hub of learning, research, and attendant matters.

Operating fairly informally, but recognizing the overriding necessity of place, materials, and staff, the Library organized under the guidance of its initial officer, Suzanne Allison Grigsby, daughter of Dr. B. Gray and Mrs. Voncille Allison. Besides establishing a place for the Seminary’s first library, in a temporary “out building” at Olivet Baptist Church, the Seminary’s initial home, Mrs. Grigsby laid a foundation that her successors in the Library and generations of students understood to be of vital importance: Mrs. Grigsby placed all library materials in the Library of Congress classification system, one that lends itself to in-depth specialization, such as music, nursing, law, or theological studies. From the Library staff’s point of view and, indeed, all users of the facility for nearly four decades, this original and profound choice has blessed countless people. By the autumn term of 1973 the Library counted over 7,500 items in its budding collection.

When Mid-America moved to Memphis, Tennessee, for classes in the fall of 1975, the Library...
relocated into temporary quarters, again, in an old house on Montgomery Street, directly across from the recently acquired Jewish property. While the Seminary renovated the Temple estate, classes took place in the facilities of old Bellevue Baptist Church, and the Library offered services from the large, two-story dwelling on Montgomery. Holdings in the Library measured nearly 14,000 volumes.

By October, 1976, the Seminary had completed its remodeling of the Jewish Temple site, and both classes and the Library entered the new accommodations. Given the literal weight of Library materials, the Administration placed the Library’s holdings and offices on the ground floor of the school’s education wing, flanked by Montgomery Street and Bellevue Baptist Church. Mrs. Grigsby left the Seminary in 1978 to have a child, as the Library approached the possession of 50,000 items, and Dr. Reginald Barnard assumed the position of Librarian.

During Dr. Barnard’s short tenure as Librarian, the Library acquired thousands of theological works from another institution that closed. Also, the Library gained, finally, its official name in 1979—The Ora Byram Allison Memorial Library, as designated by the Board of Trustees. The ceremony bestowing the new title came in Founders Days services, Tuesday, August 21, 1979, with various members of the Allison family on the program, along with Dr. Thomas Lane of Bellevue.

Dr. James Edwin Powell succeeded Dr. Barnard who, while teaching in the Theology Department, retained the title of Library Consultant for a number of years. In Dr. Powell’s term as Librarian, the Allison Library made its first contact with computerization by joining OCLC in late 1981, permitting the Library to transact interlibrary loan cooperation electronically and to produce computerized card sets, eliminating the arduous typing of multi-page paper cards for the catalog. The staff under Dr. Powell, on the cusp of computerization, included 10 full-time and 4 part-time staff. Dr. Powell brought to the staff Mrs. Ada Sumrall, a librarian of some note and years of experience from Mississippi, in order to assist the Library in its preparations for seeking accreditation from SACS. Two other new staff members included professionals Ms. Nancy Taylor, Technical Services, and Mr. Terrence Neal Brown, Serials Librarian in May, 1981.

By the summer of 1982, with the Library nearing 80,000 titles in its holdings, more changes enveloped the Allison Library. Dr. Powell moved into full-time teaching in the New Testament and Greek Department while a tandem began administering the Library. Mr. Bill Hair, whom the Administration had sent to the George Peabody Library School, received appointment by the Board of Trustees as the first Director of Library Services, effective July 1, 1982, and Mr. Brown became Assistant Director, the only person ever to hold the position at Mid-America. By the Christmas break the Allison Library moved yet again, transferring from the old synagogue site to the renovated Shriners’ Building, a three story edifice next door at 1257 Poplar Avenue. Books and some study area occupied the basement floor—again, due to literal weight—while offices, including Technical Services and Circulation, the catalog, more study areas, and the Reference Room took the second, main level, with journals, storage, and Ph.D. study carrels shifting to the upper, third story. Connected to the main campus by a covered walkway, the Library would reside at 1257 Poplar for exactly thirteen years.

Several years of change marked the conclusion of the 1987-88 academic year when Mr. Hair departed Mid-America for Golden Gate Seminary. In the 1988-89 school year Dr. Barnard returned as Interim Director of Library Services, and the Allison Library registered its 100,000th title, *The Correspondence of Roger Williams, Volume 1*, 1629-1653 in November. Mr. Brown assumed the Interim Director’s role for 1989-1990 after Dr. Barnard’s health prevented his serving longer.

The Board of Trustees voted Terence Brown as Director of Library Services, effective July 1,
1990, after he completed a year as Interim Director. Mr. Brown has served in the role of Director since the 1990 appointment.

In the “Brown Years” of the Allison Library the theme that has emerged predominant comes as change. Under Mr. Brown, the Allison Library has relocated twice more—to Germantown in December, 1995, and to the present Cordova Campus in the summer of 2006. Computerization has continued apace with the entire paper catalog transferred to an electronic database in 1995, just before the move to Germantown. In the succeeding sixteen years all acquired resources have entered the Library by way of the OPAC—on-line public access catalog. To complement this invaluable tool, the Allison Library has purchased databases, including EBSCOHOST’S ATLA Religion databases, the Southern Baptist Periodical Index, EBSCO’s Academic Search Elite (primarily for undergraduates), and ATLA's twin Historical Monograph Databases, of 29,000 titles, lifting the Library’s total holdings, in both traditional print and electronic modes to over 163,000 titles, as of July 1, 2011.

**LIBRARIANS/DIRECTORS OF LIBRARY SERVICES**

- Mrs. Suzanne Grigsby – 1973-1978
- Dr. Reginald Barnard – 1978-1979
- Dr. James E. Powell – 1979-1982
- Mr. William B. Hair, III – 1982-1986
- Mr. Terrence Neal Brown – 1990 -- present