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It's official: Mary Holmes is closed

Historic Presbyterian college comes to an inglorious end

by **Evan Silverstein**

LOUISVILLE — The Presbyterian Church (USA) has officially hung a "closed" sign on the door of troubled Mary Holmes College in West Point, MS.

The denomination's Office of Racial Ethnic Schools and Colleges announced the official closing in a press release dated March 3.

The shutdown had appeared inevitable since the Mary Holmes College Board of Trustees voted on Aug. 22, 2003 to suspend operations of the financially strapped, 113-year-old private college about 40 miles south of Tupelo in northeast Mississippi.

The Presbyterian-related college, which has a long tradition of educating African-American students, did not open for classes in the fall of 2003 and had remained closed to students ever since.

Bankruptcy proceedings are nearing the final stages.

The closing of the historic, two-year college was widely known, but there had been no official announcement from Mary Holmes or PC(USA) officials. Until now.

"The school leaves behind a legacy of great importance to the community and to the church," Beneva Bibbs, associate for the PC(USA)'s Racial Ethnic Schools and Colleges, told the *Presbyterian News Service*. "Our focus and remembrance should be on the number of students who passed through this school's rich and illustrious 113-year-history."

Mary Holmes, which was supported partially by Christmas Joy Offering funds, faced mounting financial pressures in recent years, many caused by declining enrollment and a deteriorating physical plant. It had lost its accreditation and access to federal education funds.

The school's trustees voted on April 22, 2004 to file for Chapter 11

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bankruptcy protection, beginning a process that should be completed this spring.

The PC(USA), which owned most of the 100-acre campus, assumed control of the property last month.

The Mary Holmes board had delayed a vote to close because the bankruptcy proceedings involved the dissolution of "the Mary Holmes Corporation," according to Joey Bailey, the PC(USA)'s executive vice president, chief financial officer and treasurer.

"When the final gavel comes down on the bankruptcy, which will be sometime between March 10th and May 30th, there officially will be no Mary Holmes," Bailey said. "It will have no operating entity."

An initial report on the status of the property will be presented later this month to the PC(USA)'s National Ministries Division and Mission Support Services committees of the General Assembly Council (GAC), which will consider what should be done with the school's remaining assets.

An office administrator and a maintenance worker are the only two remaining staff members, according to the news release.

"Student records and other vital statistics will be maintained at the campus for the immediate future," it said. "The property and grounds are being evaluated and monitored, including two buildings that will likely be demolished due to safety concerns."

For decades, Mary Holmes, with its open enrollment policy and financial-aid programs, gave many young people an opportunity to attend college who otherwise may have not had the chance, some Presbyterians said last week in commenting on the long-anticipated closure.

"Mary Holmes made it possible for the dreams of young African-Americans in Mississippi and from all over the country to be fulfilled, dreams that otherwise would likely have been denied," said the Rev. Curtis Kearns, director of the PC(USA)'s National Ministries Division, which oversees the denomination's office of Racial Ethnic Schools and Colleges.

"While it is sad to see this rich tradition come to a close," Kearns said, "we believe that the luster of its distinctive history and its contribution to the church and society will never fade, but will live on in its alumni."

Jack Baugh, a former chairman of the Mary Holmes board, said it improved the lives of many young people: "Oh yes. Very definitely. Very definitely."

Baugh, also a former GAC member, said last week that many Mary Holmes students were able to advance to four-year institutions and continue working toward better futures.

"Mary Holmes would take those people that couldn't pass that (college

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entrance) test and get them turned around," he said. "Most of them, they'd later get into a four-year college and away they'd go, with a very high success rate."

Mary Holmes board members Thomas Hood of St. Louis, MO, and Mary Davidson, of Woodland, MS, did not return phone calls seeking comment.

Mary Holmes College found itself about \$2.5 million in debt after years of poor management and low enrollment, said Heather Lee, the Birmingham, AL attorney handling the bankruptcy proceedings.

"Typically this is a reorganization," Lee said. "In this case, it also can be used as a way to orderly liquidate. ... The church already owned the great majority of the real property on the campus, and we just essentially liquidated what was left."

The Mary Holmes debt includes a \$456,000 loan approved by the GAC in 2001 and \$491,000 borrowed from the U.S. Department of Education for renovation of a dormitory, Lee said.

She said it also owes about \$500,000 to Great Western Dining, a food-services company, and more than \$100,000 to the Internal Revenue Service for payroll taxes the school had withheld.

"At first we were trying to restructure," Lee said. "We tried for several months for another school to come in. We just tried to reduce debt. ... But it was just too late. There was too much debt at that point."

The Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS) dropped the college from its membership rolls in December 2002. Without accreditation from SACS or a similar agency, Mary Holmes was ineligible for federal funding, the source of financial aid for almost every student.

"What prompted the whole bankruptcy was the loss of accreditation," Lee said. "I mean, period. That did it."

Mary Holmes College, founded in 1892 by the Presbyterian Church's Board of Missions for Freedmen, was known originally as Mary Holmes Seminary. It was named for the wife and mother of the school's principal founders, the Rev. Mead Holmes and his daughter, Mary, who wanted to honor the senior Mary Holmes for having dedicated her life to helping former slaves.

The school, then in Jackson, MS, originally was dedicated to the Christian education of young women "in the domestic sciences." Private schools like Mary Holmes became the primary producers of black teachers in the American South.

Eventually the school opened its doors to male students. In 1959 it dropped its high school program and became Mary Holmes Junior College.

Mary Holmes was owned and operated for many years by the Board of

National Missions of the United Presbyterian Church in the United States America, the old "northern church," a predecessor denomination of the PC (USA).

"The Presbyterian Church has a rich history of supporting education because we believe that God expects us to approach and express our faith with our whole being — body, mind and spirit," said Allison Seed, chair of the GAC's National Ministries Division committee. "This demands that we come to the gospel prepared to the best of our ability. ... Mary Holmes College has provided that preparation for countless students over the years."

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