

Baylor School of Social Work welcomes alumni from Carver School

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WACO—A movement birthed more than a century ago from passion to obey Jesus' commandment to love one's neighbor as oneself lives on through [Baylor University's School of Social Work](#).

Recently, the Baylor School of Social Work served as host for a reunion for alumni of the Carver School of Church Social Work—a pioneering institution in the area of Christian social work.



Sandy Wisdom-Martin (left), executive director of Woman's Missionary Union of Texas, enjoys a visit with Diana Garland, dean of the Baylor School of Social Work, during a reunion of the Carver School. (PHOTOS/Baylor School of Social Work)

Established in Louisville, Ky., the school was founded in 1907 as the Woman's Missionary Union Training School—a place for women who wanted to serve in ministry but were not allowed to attend seminary.

Over time, the school relinquished ownership to the Southern Baptist Convention, changed its name to honor prominent professor W. O. Carver, and prepared hundreds of men and women for careers in church and community ministry.

Diana Garland, dean of the Baylor School of Social Work, served as the Carver School's dean from 1993 to 1995.

"I am the grandmother who knows all of you and where you come from even though you may not know your distant cousins in the room," Garland told participants at the reunion.

"It brings tears to my eyes to gather a group like this who have been through so much in their own personal lives and in our own history together—one of tragedy and one of triumph—and we are here tonight to celebrate the triumph."

Garland referred to a history written in fresh ink, as the alumni listening to her speech knew all too well their school's history. Their alma mater erupted in controversy in the mid-1990s after a change in leadership in the Southern Baptist Convention and the seminary.

[Southern Baptist Theological Seminary](#) dismissed Garland as dean and eventually shut down the institution in 1997. That same year, the Carver name and some of its physical assets were sold to Campbellsville University. The university changed the name slightly, from the Carver School of Church Social Work to the Carver School of Social Work.



Elizabeth Smith, an alumnae of the Carver School of Social Work, examines a timeline showing the school's history.

(PHOTOS/Baylor School of Social Work)

Patty Villarreal, Carver class of 1993, recalled the difference the school made in her life and expressed sorrow over its demise.

"I had grown up with a tradition that, as a Latina, the place and the role of the woman was not very prominent. She was not worthy to stand behind the pulpit," said Villarreal, national director for church and community initiatives for Buckner International.

Carver transformed her theology, Villarreal said, and gave her hope.

"The training that I received there is just so valuable, and it is sad that that it ended the way that it ended," she said.

Seven years after the school closed, national [Woman's Missionary Union](#) called a summit in Birmingham, Ala., to discuss what should be done to keep alive the school's mission.

"The outcome was the group's blessing and encouragement for Baylor to lead out in organizing the church social work network, including alumni of all the graduate schools that Baptists have supported to prepare women and men for social work and leadership of the Christian social ministries

and missions of Baptist congregations,” Garland reported. So, Baylor adopted the graduates as “alumni-by-choice.”

“Indeed we do share a collective sorrow as to the circumstances but are reminded of the scripture that ‘except a seed die, it does not grow again.’ The seed must die, and then it gives fruit, and it’s not just one thing, but much fruit,” said Timothy Johnson, a former professor at the Carver School.

Johnson then offered his advice on how to view the situation.

“It’s important to let the sorrow of the past go, because that is the fertile soil in which God prepares the next blessing. In his providence, (Carver’s closure) happened, and it pushed us out much as the disciples had to be pushed out from Jerusalem to do what Jesus said—go into all the world—and so we’ve gone across this country.”

Alumnae Darla Bailey called the transition a “work in progress.”

“We’ve been talking about this and talking and wanting to get together to celebrate who we are and celebrate not just the Carver legacy, but also what is happening here at Baylor University,” said Bailey, a Carver School representative on the Baylor School of Social Work board of advocates.

“I hope this is the beginning of something great that’s going to happen on an ongoing basis—something that’s going to start tonight and continue—and I’m looking forward to watching us and seeing where we end up on our journey.”