Disciples of Christ and the University of Alabama School of Religion That Wasn't, 1920-1935

Prior to the 1966 formation of the Department of Religious Studies at the University of Alabama, courses related to the study of religion were taught under the auspices of a Department of Religion staffed by clergy, primarily Protestant, from the Tuscaloosa area.[1] The origins of this structure can be traced to the 1925 suggestion by a local Baptist minister to create a university-affiliated "Bible Chair," a program which would offer college credit for courses taught by area denominational representatives.[2] Such an arrangement had been pioneered by the Disciples of Christ at the University of Michigan back in 1893,[3] and the format had already spread to numerous colleges and universities by the 1920s.[4]

However, in 1920, members of the Disciples of Christ in Alabama had offered, and the UA Board of Trustees had accepted, an audacious proposal to create a fully Disciples-sponsored "University School of Religion"[5] which, according to one laudatory newspaper article, would have led to "a new era in combining theological seminaries… with the advantages of a fully

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[1] "Religious Studies: A Part of the Human Sciences," Department of Religious Studies, University of Alabama, accessed March 9, 2021, https://religion.ua.edu/links/religious-studies-a-part-of-the-human-sciences/.

[2] Michael Cager Thomas, "Organized Religion at a State University: A Sociological Analysis" (MA thesis, University of Alabama, 1966), 39. See also Laura L. Savage, "From the Center to the Fringe: Religious Student Organizations Experience Change, 1945-2000," in *Voices From the Capstone: A Reflective History of the Student Experience at the University of Alabama, 1945-2000*, 215, http://www.welcometothemachine.info/pdf/VoicesfromtheCapstone.pdf.

[3] Rick Rowland, "The History of Campus Ministry in Churches of Christ," in *Ministering on the College Campus*, eds. Tim Curtis and Mike Matheny (Nashville, TN: 20th Century Christian Foundation, 1991), 12.

[4] Ronald Bruce Flowers, "The Bible Chair Movement in the Disciples of Christ Tradition: Attempts to Teach Religion in State Universities" (PhD diss., University of Iowa, 1967), 77. Flowers also helpfully defines a Bible Chair as "an arrangement at a state university by which religion is taught by an instructor selected by the church and, usually, recognized by the university. Students take religion courses at the Bible Chair and the university grants credit for them on the students' degree programs." See Flowers, "The Bible Chair Movement in the Disciples of Christ Tradition," 1.

[5] The school was referred to by a handful of names during its gestation, including the "School of Religion at Tuscaloosa," as it appears in its one reference in D. Duane Cummins, *The Disciples Colleges: A History* (St. Louis: CBP Press, 1987), 109.

equipped state university…"[6] Yet as with many educational efforts in the cash-strapped region,[7] funding never fully materialized, and organizers ultimately shelved the project by the late 1920s. Adding insult to injury, the Disciples would later be denied from participating in UA's Bible Chair program in 1955,[8] five years after First Christian Church of Tuscaloosa began its Disciples Student Fellowship.[9]

Relying on contemporary periodicals, as well as a trio of unpublished or otherwise obscure manuscripts[10] on the history of the University of Alabama, this paper reconstructs the story of the "University School of Religion" that wasn't and explores the broader relationships between southern state universities and religious bodies in the early twentieth century. These connections were forged in a climate of limited financial resources and of public suspicion toward supposedly godless state universities.[11] The solutions these universities developed often

[6] "University Opens Door To Churches For Join Work: Christian Denomination First In Cooperative Movement School As Adjunct: Seminary To Be Built On University Land: Theological Students To Take Regular Academic Courses At State Institution," *Birmingham News*, May 28, 1922.
[7] For the story of a similarly-fated institution connected with Churches of Christ, see John Young, "Dixieland's Demise: T.B. Larimore's Dixieland College and the Tenuous Position of Christian Colleges within the Churches of Christ," *Restoration Quarterly* 58, no. 3 (2016): 143-159.
[8] Thomas, "Organized Religion at a State University," 46.
[9] James B. Sellers, "History of the University of Alabama, Volume II: 1902-1957," rev. and ed. W. Stanley Hoole (unpublished manuscript), James Benson Sellers manuscript, W.S. Hoole Special Collections Library, University of Alabama, 508.
[10] James B. Sellers originally composed "History of the University of Alabama, Volume II: 1902-1957" as a follow-up to the predecessor work, which was published as *History of the University of Alabama* Vol. 1, *1818-1902* (Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press, 1953), though the second volume remains unpublished in the W.S. Hoole Special Collections Library at the University of Alabama. Despite not being formally published, Sellers's second volume was a key source for Michael Cager Thomas's 1966 master's thesis (already cited above) on the role of organized religion at UA. Thomas's thesis, in turn, served as a key reference for Laura L. Savage's contribution (also previously cited) to the student-led research project *Voices From the Capstone*; Savage's 2000 work focuses on the changes faced by religious student organizations on UA's campus. Taken together, these three closely related manuscripts give readers a relatively clear, if hard to track down, sense of how religious life changed at the university across the entirety of the twentieth century. Yet none of the three mentions the proposed "University School of Religion."
[11] Sellers, "History of the University of Alabama," 497.

reflected a remarkable amount of institutional flexibility and academic creativity—when they did not run afoul of First Amendment prohibitions, that is.[12]

The decades following the American Civil War, like most, if not all, were tumultuous ones for state universities. Administrators often found themselves fending off criticisms from state officials who wanted to give them less money and from church officials who saw them as corrosive to religious belief. As Frederick Rudolph observed in *The American College and University: A History*, "Their dependence on legislative support exposed them to all the vicissitudes of politics [and] denominations regarded them as godless or as friendly to some *other* denomination."[13] Somewhat ironically, this denominational skepticism toward state universities helped bring about a greater level of engagement by the churches in university culture and student life to "compensate for the loss of religious vitality…"[14]

Yet despite the very real challenges posed by the representatives of both church and state, American institutions of higher learning, including state universities, were growing by leaps and bounds as the nineteenth century rolled over into the twentieth. According to one reckoning, "while the nation's population increased by 75 percent" in the earliest decades of the new century, "attendance at American colleges and universities skyrocketed an astounding 400

[12] For instance, the University of Texas suspended its connection to its Bible Chair program in 1987 after the state's attorney general, Jim Mattox, issued legal opinions finding the arrangement unconstitutional. In part, one historian notes, this was because "instructors were paid by religious organizations, while the university was granting credit for the courses." For more, see Rick Rowland, *Campus Ministries: A Historical Study of Churches of Christ Campus Ministries and Selected College Ministries from 1706 to 1990* (Fort Worth, TX: Star Bible Publications, 1991), 51-52.

[13] Frederick Rudolph, *The American College and University: A History* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1990), 280.

[14] Rudolph, *The American College and University*, 459. Rudolph adds that this engagement often took the forms of "the assignment of clergymen to work among college students, the growth of closer relationships between students and community churches, and the encouragement of denominational organizations in the colleges and universities."

percent."[15] The scope of American universities grew at a rate proportional to this spike in enrollment, as these institutions expanded to include more and more vocational and professional educational programs to meet the perceived needs of the workforce.[16] In an appropriately sweeping sentence, Rudolph writes that

> The American university, in one of its characteristic manifestations, thus became a collection of postgraduate professional schools, schools which replaced the apprentice system in law, put responsibility into the study of medicine, tended to relegate theology into a separate corner, created education as an advanced field of study, and responded—in one institution or another—to the felt necessities of the time or the region, thus spawning appropriate schools at appropriate times, whether they were schools of business administration, forestry, journalism, veterinary medicine, social work, or Russian studies.[17]

The University of Alabama felt each of these trends acutely. During the presidency of George H. "Mike" Denny (he of Bryant-Denny Stadium fame), the university expanded rapidly in spite of the challenges it faced from state legislators and religious critics. When Denny took over as president, UA employed a mere twenty-nine faculty members, only twelve of whom held PhDs; two decades later, the faculty population had grown to 172.[18] Denny also oversaw a massive campus building endeavor; out of the fifteen buildings which he proposed to UA's Board of Trustees in 1920, "the University managed to construct eleven [and] update two others"

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[15] David O. Levine, *The American College and the Culture of Aspiration, 1915-1940* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1986), 68.
[16] Levine, *The American College and the Culture of Aspiration*, 89.
[17] Rudolph, *The American College and University*, 343.
[18] Sellers, "History of the University of Alabama," 45.

while substantially padding its endowment and implementing several new programs.[19] To that end, UA saw a significant expansion of its course offerings, largely through its extension but also through the addition of "the School of Commerce and Business Administration, the School of Home Economics, the School of Chemistry and the Graduate School."[20]

Again, all of this growth took place within a climate of relative hostility to the state's universities. Giving a sense of the picture's bleakness, Wayne Flynt notes that "Not surprisingly, Alabamians traditionally spent as little on higher education as they did on public schools. In 1918 Alabama ranked eleventh among 12 southern states on money expended for colleges."[21] (Mercifully, at the behest of Governor Thomas E. Kilby, the state legislature boosted Alabama's educational spending beginning the following year; "spending for education increased more than 100 percent, rising from $3,750,000 in 1919 to $8,269,596 in 1922.")[22] Denny also had to navigate a sizable controversy when a 1928 FTC investigation into utilities companies discovered that the head of UA's extension program, James S. Thomas, a member of the Disciples of Christ, received part of his salary from the Alabama Power Company. Although there was no university policy precluding that arrangement, and while Denny supported professors using their expertise in pursuit of statewide development, he did recommend to the Board of Trustees that they establish a clearer policy on the matter going forward.[23]

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[19] Delbert Reed, *Mike Denny: The Shadow of a Single Man* (Tuscaloosa, AL: Paul W. Bryant Museum, 2016), 75.
[20] Reed, *Mike Denny*, 48. For visual evidence of the university's growth during these years, see (literally) Suzanne Rau Wolfe, *The University of Alabama: A Pictorial History* (Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press, 1983), 112 and following.
[21] Wayne Flynt, *Alabama in the Twentieth Century* (Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press, 2004), 237.
[22] Michael A. Breedlove, "Thomas E. Kilby, 1919-1923," in Samuel L. Webb and Margaret E. Armbrester, eds., *Alabama Governors: A Political History of the State*, 2nd ed. (Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press, 2014), 195.
[23] Leah Rawls Atkins, *"Developed for the Service of Alabama": The Centennial History of the Alabama Power Company, 1906-2006* (Birmingham, AL: Alabama Power Company, 2006), 156-157.

Too, UA continued to be plagued by accusations of godlessness.[24] As historian James B. Sellers noted in the unpublished second volume of his history of the university, "such suspicion… was one of the factors which undermined University prestige in the late Nineteenth Century—and it remained for many years a bothersome undercurrent in the Twentieth."[25] Denny had faced a related challenge during his earlier tenure as the president of Washington and Lee University, where he successfully outmaneuvered a group of trustees who, mostly for financial reasons, wanted to officially link the university to the Presbyterian Church.[26] Likely on the basis of this prior experience, "Denny recognized early in his administration that only positive action" could clear the cloud of suspicion that hung over the school, opening the door for the Disciples of Christ and other denominations to make inroads on the campus.[27]

Despite a wider public disapproval of UA's religious tenor, or perhaps because of that disapproval, the period was "one of extensive cooperation between University officials and the local churches of Tuscaloosa."[28] For the first time, a number of area congregations hired campus ministers who could focus their efforts solely on university students. Too, at the suggestion of Dr. Joseph T. Boone of the First Baptist Church of Tuscaloosa, a Bible Chair program was established which allowed, at first, three denominational representatives to teach classes for UA credit. These ministers—growing in number to seven by 1953[29] and eight by 1955[30]—constituted the earliest version of UA's Department of Religion, one of several "strong, semi-vocational

[24] For their part, as Wayne Flynt reminds us, leaders of state universities often looked with suspicion upon denominational colleges and their "classical curricula," which they saw as "symbolic of impractical, elitist, isolated colleges." See Flynt, *Alabama in the Twentieth Century*, 237.
[25] Sellers, "History of the University of Alabama," 497.
[26] Reed, *Mike Denny*, 17-18.
[27] Sellers, "History of the University of Alabama," 497.
[28] Thomas, "Organized Religion at the State University," 39.
[29] Sellers, "History of the University of Alabama," 499.
[30] Savage, "From the Center to the Fringe," 221.

courses designed to prepare young men and young women for useful and interesting careers."[31] Boone's 1925 proposal of the Bible Chair program and its implementation in 1927,[32] then, proved to be significant turning points in the history of religious instruction at the University of Alabama. Russell T. McCutcheon adds in his history of the modern UA Department of Religious Studies that while "the current department developed from various antecedents that do not much resemble what we today call comparative religion, the history of religions, or simply religious studies," the scope of the earlier program was impressive, especially considering "the voluntary nature of the instructors staffing these courses…"[33]

But even though the origins of UA's Bible Chair program,[34] its transformation into a Department of Religion, and its eventual replacement by a Department of Religious Studies are stories which have all been told before, one sizable wrinkle which has generally been overlooked is that Boone was not the first minister to propose a denominationally-supported program of religious instruction at the University of Alabama, nor was his proposal the first to be accepted by UA's Board of Trustees. Both of these honors go instead to the Disciples-sponsored "University School of Religion," a project supported most strongly by Alabama Disciple Oscar Pendleton (O.P.) Spiegel.

Spiegel's school-to-be has left very little impact on the history of Disciples educational efforts, or on the history of the Disciples in Alabama. Disciples historian D. Duane Cummins

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[31] Sellers, "History of the University of Alabama," 162. Sellers lists five "of sufficient uniqueness to deserve special consideration—music, journalism, speech, radio, and religion."
[32] Sellers, "History of the University of Alabama," 499.
[33] Russell T. McCutcheon, "Afterword: Reinventing the Study of Religion in Alabama," in *Writing Religion: The Case for the Critical Study of Religion*, ed. Steven W. Ramey (Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press, 2015), 213. McCutcheon's entire essay (p. 208-222) is worthwhile reading for those seeking to understand the history of religious study and instruction, variously defined, at the University of Alabama across the decades.
[34] For more on the involvement of Churches of Christ in UA's Bible Chair program, see Rowland, *Campus Ministries*, 35-37.

refers only once to the "School of Religion at Tuscaloosa" in *The Disciples Colleges: A History*, where he provides a concise chart of church membership and economic statistics for the regions represented by various Disciples schools in 1926.[35] George H. Watson and Mildred B. Watson devote about a page to the school in their *History of the Christian Churches in the Alabama Area*, where they lament that "There is no way to estimate the impact that such a school might have made upon churches of the area. Its students could have served struggling churches and its graduates been equipped for the larger pulpits."[36] Aside from these brief references, though, the story of the University School of Religion has, to date, remained confined to the primary sources.

The core of the school's story begins with the 1866 birth of its greatest champion, O.P. Spiegel, who hailed from the area outside of Falkville, Alabama, and who attended T.B. Larimore's Mars Hill College in his youth. Spiegel continued his education at the College of the Bible, Kentucky University,[37] and the University of Chicago.[38] He was the second of three brothers who would all play major roles in the history of Alabama Disciples, with older brother J.E. holding various pastorates throughout the southeast and editing the *Alabama Christian*, and younger brother S.P. serving as State Evangelist and sponsor of the Alabama Young People's Conference.[39] For his part, O.P. likewise served as State Evangelist, held several ministerial positions in Alabama and Georgia, and edited both the *Gospel Messenger* and the *Alabama*

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[35] Cummins, *The Disciples Colleges*, 109.
[36] George H. Watson and Mildred B. Watson, *History of the Christian Churches in the Alabama Area* (St. Louis: Bethany Press, 1965), 117.
[37] The predecessor of Transylvania University, not the University of Kentucky.
[38] Donald Alfred Nunnelly, "The Disciples of Christ in Alabama, 1860-1910" (BDiv thesis, The College of the Bible, 1954), 138. For more on Mars Hill College, see Young, "Dixieland's Demise," 150. Based on his rural upbringing and wide-ranging educational path, Spiegel himself nearly embodied singlehandedly the scope of David Edwin Harrell Jr.'s observation that "Disciples religion and Disciples social thought were as different as were 'peckerwood' sharecroppers in Alabama and sophisticated professors at the University of Chicago." See David Edwin Harrell Jr., *A Social History of the Disciples of Christ*, vol. 2, *Sources of Division in the Disciples of Christ, 1865-1900*, 2003 ed. (Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press, 2003), 350.
[39] Nunnelly, "The Disciples of Christ in Alabama," 137, 139.

Christian.[40] O.P. married Anne Brawner Widener of Franklin, Kentucky, in 1893, and eventually passed away in early 1947, preceded in death by both of his brothers and his wife.[41] Spiegel is remembered (or misremembered, as Chris Cotten has compellingly argued[42]) in Stone-Campbell Movement circles today primarily for an open letter which he wrote to his former mentor, T.B. Larimore, and for the subsequent controversy it provoked.[43] Yet this middle son clearly was a Disciples dynamo in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and had a number of tangible accomplishments, his status as a controversialist notwithstanding.

Stirrings of the desire to establish a Disciples-affiliated school in Alabama can be found at least as far back as the 1906 statewide convention in Mobile, which elected a "Brother Caldwell, minister of the Selma Church… chairman of an educational committee and empowered him to solicit funds."[44] This Selma school never materialized, largely because Caldwell soon left to take a job with Atlantic Christian College, but an educational seed was

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[40] Nunnelly, "The Disciples of Christ in Alabama," 138-139. These papers, Nunnelly notes, are particularly important as historical sources, since the early meetings of the Alabama Christian Missionary Cooperation were otherwise not well documented.

[41] "Oscar Pendleton Spiegel, 1866-1947," History of the Restoration Movement, accessed March 9, 2021, https://www.therestorationmovement.com/_states/alabama/spiegel.htm. For more on O.P. Spiegel, albeit from a largely critical angle, see both Earl Kimbrough, "O.P. Spiegel's 'Anti-Room," *Alabama Restoration Journal* 1, no. 4 (November 2006): 10 and Larry Whitehead, "O.P. Spiegel: The Maverick from Morgan County," *Alabama Restoration Journal* 4, no. 2 (April 2010): 19-22. Interestingly, neither of these articles mentions Spiegel's unsuccessful attempt to start the University School of Religion.

[42] Though their discussion takes us beyond the scope of this paper, Cotten has laid out this case in a trio of blog posts. See Chris Cotten, "On the Larimore-Spiegel Exchange," *Anastasis* (blog), August 14, 2018, https://ccotten.wordpress.com/2018/08/14/on-the-larimore-spiegel-exchange/; Chris Cotten, "On the Larimore-Spiegel Exchange—Part 2," *Anastasis* (blog), August 26, 2018, https://ccotten.wordpress.com/2018/08/26/on-the-larimore-spiegel-exchange-part-2/; and Chris Cotten, "On the Larimore-Spiegel Exchange—Part 3: Reflections," *Anastasis* (blog), September 7, 2018, https://ccotten.wordpress.com/2018/09/07/on-the-larimore-spiegel-exchange-part-3-reflections/.

[43] The only indexed reference to Spiegel in the *Encyclopedia of the Stone-Campbell Movement* is found in the entry on T.B. Larimore, where Douglas A. Foster writes that "In 1897 former Mars Hill pupil and Alabama state evangelist Oscar Pendleton Spiegel (1866-1947) in an 'Open Letter' challenged Larimore to declare his position on matters dividing the movement, including instruments in worship, missionary societies, and salaried preachers." See Douglas A. Foster, "Larimore, Theophilus Brown (1843-1929)," in *Encyclopedia of the Stone-Campbell Movement*, eds. Douglas A. Foster et al (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2004), 453.

[44] Nunnelly, "The Disciples of Christ in Alabama," 90.

planted all the same.[45] Disciples in the neighboring state of Georgia likewise felt an acute need for a more permanent institution to train young church members. While C.A. Young had tried to start a Bible Chair program at the University of Georgia in the late 1890s, according to Ronald Bruce Flowers, "The Bible work died in the spring of 1899 and it would not be until 1949 that the Disciples again made an attempt to teach religion at the University of Georgia."[46] Disciples from both Alabama and Georgia, as well as those from Florida and Mississippi, would have a vested interest in the successful establishment of the Tuscaloosa school.[47]

The University School of Religion made a splash from the get-go, with numerous stories about the project appearing in local and regional papers in the weeks and months following a policy announcement by the Board of Trustees which made the Disciples-sponsored school feasible. Without mentioning the Disciples' project specifically, James B. Sellers notes that in 1920, "the board declared… that it would welcome religious programs for students sponsored by denominations 'having a substantial following among the people of Alabama.'" While remaining committed to observing the separation of church and state, the university would do its part to support the work of campus ministers, who "would have 'perfect liberty in extending their services to all University students desiring their good offices.'" [48]

The earliest reference to the University School of Religion appeared, one day after the Board's announcement, in the May 25, 1920, *Birmingham News*, which revealed that the trustees, "in addition to passing upon routine matters, voted to accept a proposal of the Disciples of Christ Church to establish a school of religion at the university." The writer of the article

[45] Nunnelly, "The Disciples of Christ in Alabama," 90.
[46] Flowers, "The Bible Chair Movement in the Disciples of Christ Tradition," 127-128.
[47] Watson and Watson, *History of the Christian Churches in the Alabama Area*, 76.
[48] Sellers, "History of the University of Alabama," 498.

asserted that the church had already raised $250,000 for the school (this was decidedly not the case, however), and that the Disciples would pay all expenses for the school-to-be while the university would supervise the program and give students credit for the work they completed in it.[49]

Perhaps to build support for the school, Alabama Disciples held their annual statewide convention in Tuscaloosa later that same year. In advance of the meeting, O.P. Spiegel, at the time working with a congregation in Montgomery, praised the city highly, and the boosterish *Tuscaloosa News* article announcing the convention's location claimed that "the delegates will be shown all the advantages of Tuscaloosa, both as a great educational center and as a residential city."[50] A brief recap in the same paper following the convention recounted that those assembled, including Disciples member and UA professor James S. Thomas, voted to begin work on the school as soon as economic circumstances improved: "It will be possibly be [sic] but a few months."[51]

As the Disciples waited, little tangible progress was made in 1921, though the statewide convention—held in Athens—once again demonstrated its support for the project by appointing a committee to develop more concrete plans for the school.[52] 1922 proved to be a more momentous year, as the first substantial steps toward the construction of the school were taken by a team of Disciples, consisting of D.P. Taylor, W.E. Allen, L.G. Pierson, and R.D. Neely, which traveled to Tuscaloosa to evaluate the proposed building site on the university campus.

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[49] J.F. Rothermel, "Commencement At University Closes: Diplomas Are Presented To Class Of 133 By President Denny," *Birmingham News*, May 25, 1920.
[50] "Convention Meets Here," *Tuscaloosa News*, August 2, 1920.
[51] "Work on Building Will Begin Soon as Market Settles Down," *Tuscaloosa News*, November 21, 1920.
[52] Thomas W. Spencer, "Mears Elected By Christian Church: Athens Man Named New Head Of Organization At State Convention," *Birmingham News*, November 10, 1921.

"Taylor said that in the advent that the proposal… to build the school on the University grounds was accepted," students would benefit from the university's facilities while receiving a theological education superior to that offered at a standalone college.[53] The laudatory *Birmingham News* article cited near the outset of this paper followed shortly thereafter, providing the most extensive reportage on the school to that point. "The denominational authorities," the unnamed reporter wrote, "are to have absolute charge of the buildings and land, to engage the theological faculty and do other things necessary to train preachers," while the students would enjoy the benefits available to all others enrolled at UA. Somewhat ironically, the article mentions that the opportunity to create similar programs "will also be made applicable to any other denomination which may desire to avail itself of this opportunity, and it is thus hoped to do away with duplication of efforts in trying to build and keep up universities on the part of the various denominations…"[54] Fortuitously for the school and its early supporters, O.P. Spiegel decided to suspend his ongoing campaign for the state senate in August of 1922, saying that "he has not indulged in personalities" during the race and "has made no promises except to do right by the citizens of the county and the state."[55] Spiegel would soon need all the time he could muster to get the school up and running.

As had the 1920 and 1921 statewide conventions, the 1922 assembly again voiced its support for the school—in this instance, by adopting a "resolution looking to the building of a school of religion in connection with the state university" shortly after O.P. Spiegel finished his

[53] "Taylor, Pierson And Neely At Tuscaloosa," *Selma Times-Journal*, May 3, 1922.
[54] "University Opens Door To Churches For Join Work: Christian Denomination First In Cooperative Movement School As Adjunct: Seminary To Be Built On University Land: Theological Students To Take Regular Academic Courses At State Institution," *Birmingham News*, May 28, 1922.
[55] "Reverend Spiegel Closes Campaign," *Montgomery Advertiser*, August 6, 1922.

Wednesday evening address on the Disciples' educational efforts.[56] Even though Professor Thomas was unable to deliver the "chief address" of the convention, the reporter for the *Montgomery Advertiser* assured readers that "Plans are forming for the establishment" of the University School of Religion "and will be given to the public later."[57]

Despite the interest of Thomas and other UA officials in the project, little else was heard regarding the University School of Religion until late 1923, when the Alabama Disciples made another major announcement about the school. Though some discrepancies appear between the various newspaper reports, it is clear that by this point, the already lofty goals for the school had been raised even higher. Supporters of the school now sought to raise $750,000 for the project; the *Anniston Star* reported that the money would go towards the construction of three buildings costing roughly $250,000 each, whereas the *Gadsden Times-News* claimed that only one building was to be built, with the remainder of the money going into an endowment fund for the school.[58] Either way, the announcement also revealed several key details about the project. Up to fifty students would be able to enroll for the fall 1925 semester, and the school, located on Thomas Street, would employ three faculty members at its opening, with significant increases to both figures expected later.[59]

For the school to open in the fall of 1925, Alabama Disciples would have to make significant progress in 1924, and all outward signs indicated that they were doing just that. The Watsons' *History of the Christian Churches in the Alabama Area* argued that the "effort to

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[56] "Christian Church Meeting Closes: Regarded As One of Best Conventions Held in State," *Selma Times-Journal*, November 18, 1922.
[57] "Enthusiasm Feature Christian Convention: Dr. W.E. Allen of Selma Is Elected President; Progress Is Noted
[58] "$750,000 School Of Religion Planned For Tuscaloosa," *Anniston Star*, December 14, 1923; "$750,000 School Of Religion At State University," *Gadsden Times-News*, December 15, 1923.
[59] "University To Get Christian Church School Of Religion: $750,000 Regional School On Thomas Street To Be Built Soon," *Tuscaloosa News*, December 14, 1923.

establish a Disciples School of Religion began in 1924,"[60] and while there were clearly steps taken prior to that time, 1924 would find the Disciples redoubling their efforts. The July 24 issue of the *Christian-Evangelist*, a Disciples publication, relayed to readers that "The board of trustees has perfected its organization" and that leading UA figures, including Denny and Thomas, had provided "the heartiest co-operation" to school organizers. The board was also getting ready to start a major ($200,000) fundraising campaign, half of which would go to the construction of the school and the other half to its endowment.[61] Earlier that year, the *Montgomery Advertiser* had reported that O.P. Spiegel had just returned from Jacksonville, Florida, where he had spoken three times to the Southeastern Evangelistic Institute regarding the Tuscaloosa school.[62] And in mid-September, the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* provided the scoop that Wallace Tharp, a longtime area pastor within the Disciples, was leaving Pennsylvania for Alabama, where he would "take up a pastorate at the Christian church of Tuscaloosa and will combine that work with a lecturate in the school of religion of the University of Alabama, at Tuscaloosa."[63]

An early 1925 article by H.O. Pritchard in *World Call* provided Disciples readers an in-depth report on the recent progress that Spiegel and company had made. The state conventions from Alabama, Florida, Georgia, and Mississippi had each nominated three trustees for the school's board; these twelve included E.E. Linthicum, J.R. McWane,[64] and O.P. Spiegel

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[60] Watson and Watson, *History of the Christian Churches in the Alabama Area*, 117.
[61] "Alabama School of Religion," *Christian-Evangelist*, July 24, 1924.
[62] "Spiegel Speaker Before Jacksonville Institute: Pastor of Central Christian Church Presents New Plan," *Montgomery Advertiser*, January 12, 1924.
[63] "North Side Pastor to Take Up Educational Work at Tuscaloosa: The Rev. Wallace Tharp Resigns After 42 Years in Ministry," *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, September 17, 1924.
[64] Both Linthicum and McWane were substantial donors to the work, as noted in Watson and Watson, *History of the Christian Churches in the Alabama Area*, 117: "It… received endorsement of the states concerned and financial support of two prominent Birmingham men, E.E. Linthicum and J.R. McWane."

(Alabama); John T. Boone, Sam I. Smith, and Samuel C. Taylor (Florida); L.O. Bricker, Claud Mayne, and John H. Wood (Georgia); and W.T. Donaldson, J.B. Lehman, and Fred O'Bannon (Mississippi). This board met for the first time in Tuscaloosa on December 17, and in this initial meeting, the members

> formally organized; adopted articles of incorporation; drew up a tentative constitution and by-laws; passed important actions affecting the organization and promotion of the undertaking; elected officers and an executive committee. O.P. Spiegel was chosen chairman of the board of trustees and by a unanimous vote was requested to become the organizer and director of the enterprise, particularly in the earlier stages of development. A resolution was also adopted asking the Board of Education through its department of endowment to lead in the financial campaign which is soon to be launched.[65]

Pritchard filled readers in on a number of other important details. UA planned to deed the land over to the University School of Religion's board of trustees, though UA would retain the right to buy back the land (which Pritchard estimated was worth north of $100,000) in the event that the property wasn't maintained, or to keep it from "falling into the hands of commercial enterprises or from being used for purposes which might not be agreeable to the University authorities."[66] Further showing the Disciples' commitment to the cause, Pritchard revealed that Southeastern Christian College in Georgia was going to be closed at the end of the spring 1925 semester "to put all the resources back of this new venture of faith."[67]

[65] H.O. Pritchard, "Our Youngest College," *World Call*, March 1925.
[66] Pritchard, "Our Youngest College."
[67] Pritchard, "Our Youngest College."

Despite the rosy picture painted in *World Call*, however, cracks were already beginning to appear in a foundation that had yet to be laid. The *Albany-Decatur Daily* reported in February 1925 that construction on the school of religion had been "authorized to begin early in the fall,"[68] a timeline which would pose obvious problems for a fall 1925 start. A short report in *Our Southern Home* (a paper from nearby Livingston) pushed this schedule back even further, claiming that "The first unit of a school of religion… will be begun January 1"[69] of 1926. The *Monroe Journal* confirmed this new target date and added that a survey committee would meet in Tuscaloosa on September 1, 1925, to "decide the kind and how many buildings the school will require." Following the recommendations of the committee, a team of fundraisers based in Indianapolis would then canvass the four states contributing to the school (Alabama, Florida, Georgia, and Mississippi) for the necessary donations.[70]

Perhaps because of the lack of visible progress, rumors began to spread about the project, and O.P. Spiegel took to the pages of the *Christian-Evangelist* both to defend the work and to ease donors' concerns. In particular, Spiegel had taken umbrage with an article by P.B. Hall in an earlier issue of the same paper, in which Hall had written (according to Spiegel) that "The prospect of opening a seminary at Tuscaloosa in the fall has drifted behind a cloud of doubt, which, perhaps, is a good check upon what might have been a hasty action." Seeking to rebut Hall's interpretation, Spiegel argued that "it has been published in all the State papers of these four States monthly for several years… that a campaign would be put on in the fall of 1925 to secure funds with which to open the school in the fall of 1926." While one might contest Spiegel's characterization of the news coverage surrounding the University School of Religion,

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[68] "Progress Throughout Alabama," *Albany-Decatur Daily*, February 19, 1925.
[69] "State News," *Our Southern Home*, July 15, 1925.
[70] "Church to Build School at University: Actual Work on Religious Institutions to Start January 1," *Monroe Journal*, July 16, 1925.

he also forthrightly acknowledged that the Disciples' track record in establishing schools had not been strong, but that his project was aiming to devote half of the funds it raised to the school's endowment so that it could survive for the long haul.[71] Aside from his writing endeavors, Spiegel engaged in a lengthy series of trips around Alabama, speaking about the school and seeking donations for the cause.[72] (By this time, he had stepped down from his position at Central Christian Church in Montgomery and could be gone on extensive fundraising ventures on behalf of the school.)[73]

Even though the fall semester of 1925 came and went without the opening of the school, Spiegel and the other supporters pressed on. The *Mountain Eagle* reported on February 24, 1926, that classes would begin that fall, with the school occupying an existing building on the UA campus.[74] The *Tuscaloosa News* added on May 30 that Spiegel had returned to Montgomery "after an automobile tour of five weeks in South Alabama, Florida, Georgia and East Alabama." Spiegel claimed at this point to have raised $100,000 for the school.[75] A week later, the paper informed readers that Spiegel would be traveling to Tuscaloosa to fill in for Wallace Tharp for a special service at First Christian Church; George H. Denny was expected to attend as a guest of honor, and the service, with a focus on the University School of Religion, would be held in a local junior high school auditorium to accommodate the expected crowd.[76]

In what was mostly a promising development, the *Tuscaloosa News* reported on September 15 that the first class of prospective students for the University School of Religion

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[71] O.P. Spiegel, "University School of Religion," *Christian-Evangelist*, October 8, 1925.
[72] See, for instance, the coverage in both the title and the actual article of "Rev. Spiegel Here in the Interest of The University School of Religion to be Established at the University of Alabama: Two Donations of $25,000 Each Already Received. $150,000 to be Total Cost," *Selma Times-Journal*, November 24, 1925.
[73] Watson and Watson, *History of the Christian Churches in the Alabama Area*, 75-76.
[74] "Alabama Briefs," *Mountain Eagle*, February 24, 1926.
[75] "Church Workers Raise Big Fund," *Tuscaloosa News*, May 30, 1926.
[76] "Dr. Spiegel to Make Report on Religious Plan," *Tuscaloosa News*, June 6, 1926.

had, in fact, enrolled at UA that semester. Even though the School of Religion itself was not open, these students would be able to complete some of their general coursework at UA in anticipation of earning "their degree as bachelor of divinity when the new school opens." Spiegel came to Tuscaloosa to celebrate the occasion, and according to the paper, "pointed out that regular work in the new school would begin next fall if present plans materialize." Those plans included construction of the school's building, which was "planned to be begun next spring with regular [course] work to begin next fall."[77]

But neither of those things happened. In fact, the project stalled out in 1927, a year in which a member of the Disciples became governor of Alabama.[78] Although Spiegel again claimed in the July issue of *World Call* to have received over $100,000 of the necessary $150,000 and to be expecting the remainder within the next two months,[79] fundraising efforts were suspended that year.[80] Compounding the Disciples' difficulties, UA was also moving forward with the Bible Chair program; the *Tuscaloosa News* revealed in late July that Harry P. Clause had accepted the "Baptist Bible Chair at the University of Alabama," and that his courses would "parallel those offered in denominational colleges. They will be properly accredited."[81] The Bible Chair program would, of course, survive and even thrive on UA's campus in the decades following, negating much of the justification for the Disciples' school.

Few references to the University School of Religion crop up in the historical record from this point forward, and those that do give no indication that construction ever began on the

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[77] "Divinity Pupils Take Course at University Now," *Tuscaloosa News*, September 15, 1926.
[78] Wayne Flynt, "Bibb Graves, 1927-1931, 1935-1939," in Samuel L. Webb and Margaret E. Armbrester, eds., *Alabama Governors: A Political History of the State*, 2nd ed. (Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press, 2014), 207.
[79] O.P Spiegel, "University School of Religion, Tuscaloosa, Alabama," *World Call*, February 1927.
[80] Watson and Watson, *History of the Christian Churches in the Alabama Area*, 117.
[81] "The Bible Chair," *Tuscaloosa News*, July 25, 1927.

school or that students ever successfully enrolled in it. A late 1928 *World Call* article asserted that "There was a recess in this undertaking for a while, but once again Mr. Spiegel is at work and it is hoped to have the first unit of a building completed in the very near future."[82] Spiegel apparently spoke to the Capitol Heights (Montgomery) PTA meeting on February 23, 1929, and was described in the *Montgomery Advertiser*'s write-up as the "chairman of the board of trustees and financial field agent of the University School of Religion" in Tuscaloosa.[83] Too, 1928 and 1931 issues of *Christian Education* briefly mention a "University of Alabama, School of Religion" with O.P. Spiegel listed as chairman.[84] Yet by 1931, Spiegel had left Montgomery and moved to Valdosta, Georgia, to work with a congregation there, making it unlikely that he was involved with any school-related efforts there or in Tuscaloosa at that time. The 1934 *Christian Education* list makes no reference to Spiegel or to the University School of Religion.[85]

In the long run, the University School of Religion probably would have met the same end as UA's Bible Chair program. The main strength of the Disciples' arrangement from UA's standpoint—namely, that someone else was footing the bill for a shiny new program—would not have given it any competitive edge over the Bible Chair setup, and unless the physical footprint established by having an on-campus site for the school was significant, it seems unlikely that a program sponsored by a single denomination would have outlasted a more cooperative effort less beholden to any one church's financial circumstances. (Admittedly, the University School of Religion operating by itself would have avoided one of the major pitfalls of UA's Bible Chair

[82] "Digest of Annual Report," *World Call*, October 1928.
[83] Mrs. O.D. Marshall, "Capitol Heights News," *Montgomery Advertiser*, February 24, 1929.
[84] "Schools of Religion and Foundations," *Christian Education* 11, no. 8 (May 1928): 538; "Schools of Religion and Foundations," *Christian Education* 14, no. 4 (January 1931): 302.
[85] "Schools of Religion, Foundations, and Interdenominational Councils," *Christian Education* 17, nos. 4-5 (April-June 1934): 283-290.

program—the unnecessary duplication of courses[86]—though if the two programs had existed side-by-side, the problem would have been even more pronounced.)

But even if the school would not have profoundly impacted the long-term trajectory of religious instruction at the University of Alabama, it might very well have been a shot in the arm for Alabama Disciples and a feather in the cap of O.P. Spiegel, whose numerous contributions to the Disciples have mostly been overshadowed by his skirmish with T.B. Larimore. So, why did the University School of Religion fall short of its lofty goals and fail to enroll, much less graduate, a single student?

Watson and Watson attribute the collapse of Spiegel's project to broader economic woes, writing that "by the end of 1927, with unfavorable economic conditions approaching, the campaign was abandoned."[87] More specifically, they argue that "when the country entered the depression, the campaign fell through," linking the school's fate primarily to national economic developments rather than regional or religious variables.[88] To an extent, this connection makes sense, as the onset of the Great Depression would have undoubtedly sounded the death knell for any project already on shaky financial footing. Yet it is not clear that the school could have been established successfully even in the absence of the Great Depression, as its numerous construction delays, fundraising shortfalls, accusations of insufficient planning, and general state of non-existence all preceded 1929.

An enlightening comparison can be made between the ill-fated University School of Religion and the nearby Alabama Christian College of Berry, a slightly earlier Churches of

[86] Savage, "From the Center to the Fringe," 221-222.
[87] Watson and Watson, *History of the Christian Churches in the Alabama Area*, 117.
[88] Watson and Watson, *History of the Christian Churches in the Alabama Area*, 76.

Christ-affiliated school located about thirty-five miles north of Tuscaloosa. That school, perhaps best known for its impact on Churches of Christ preacher Gus Nichols,[89] opened in the fall of 1912 in the building of the local Church of Christ but moved a few months later into a "new two-story brick building with steam heat, modern lights and furniture… on an eight acre campus."[90] By the start of the second semester, the school had over one hundred students, and enrollment reached one hundred and eighty by 1914.[91] Yet from that point, this seemingly well-established school experienced a continued decline in enrollment until its closure in 1922, a decade after the first classes were taught.[92]

Two main hypotheses have been put forward to explain the closing of Alabama Christian College of Berry. Larry Whitehead, writing in the *Alabama Restoration Journal*, places much of the blame on World War One, contending that "Possibly the war had an impact, especially on the male enrollment." [93] Elsewhere, Earl Irvin West has argued that despite its sizable enrollment, "the school was located in a poor section of the state, so responses to the appeal for funds were never enough to fill the needs."[94] Almost certainly, World War One played a role in the school's collapse, but West's observation about the broader economic landscape remains salient and should inform our thinking about the University School of Religion, too, since it would have drawn students and support from a similar geographic region.

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[89] For more on Nichols's connections to Alabama Christian College of Berry, see Scott Harp, *The Sage of Jasper: Gus Nichols: A Biography* (Charleston, AR: Cobb Publishing, 2019), 54-56, 60.
[90] Earl Irvin West, *The Search for the Ancient Order*, vol. 3, *1900-1918* (Indianapolis: Religious Book Service, 1979), 296.
[91] West, *The Search for the Ancient Order*, 296.
[92] Earl Kimbrough, "Alabama Christian College of Berry, Berry, Alabama 1912-1922," *Alabama Restoration Journal* 2, no. 1 (February 2007): 24.
[93] Larry Whitehead, "Alabama Christian College of Berry, Alabama, June 1912-June 1922," *Alabama Restoration Journal* 1, no. 1 (November 2005): 3.
[94] West, *The Search for the Ancient Order*, 296.

In the end, the most compelling interpretation of the evidence is that the already tight economic circumstances faced by both the University of Alabama and the state's Disciples—the same circumstances which encouraged UA to look for unusual funding sources and which opened the door for a program like the University School of Religion—also undermined the Disciples' ability to actually pay for the school while leaving the door open for the more financially viable multi-denominational Bible Chair program to step through instead. And if the school nevertheless remained on the hearts and minds of organizers like O.P. Spiegel, the Great Depression closed and locked the door securely.

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