

# InClass

*A spotlight on faculty and their work*

## Purified Minds, Sanctified Tongues

*More than technique, good preaching requires recognizing one's own tenuous grasp on the truth.*

By FRYE GAILLARD, BA'68

SOMETIMES WHEN BRAD BRAXTON is teaching his classes, when he's talking about what it means to be a preacher and the students are clearly caught in his words, his mind will flash back to his father's church—to that white frame building in Salem, Va., with its stained-glass windows and warm wooden pews. His understanding of the ministry began in that place, and when he started his journey through the world of academia—when he entered the University of Virginia, then earned his master's degree at Oxford, and later his Ph.D. at Emory—one of the church elders quietly took him aside and gave him a simple piece of advice.

"Boy," she said, staring into his eyes, "act like you're from southwest Virginia. Don't get educated away from your people."

On a recent afternoon at Vanderbilt, as the spring semester was starting to wind down, Braxton smiled as he told that story to his students. He was teaching a homiletics seminar to a small and gifted group of future preachers, and he said he wanted them to understand that being good in the pulpit was more than simply a matter of technique. Yes, he videotaped their sermons and pored over gestures and choices of words, as a coach might study

the film of a game. But in the end, he said, good preaching is inevitably rooted in substance—in those subtle understandings of healing and justice that gradually grow deeper in the course of a lifetime.

Good preaching is, in part, a matter of

people was his father. For 33 years James Braxton Sr. was pastor of the First Baptist Church in Salem, a place that had long been a symbol of hope. In 1867 a group of freed slaves had laid the cornerstone of the building, fulfilling a dream that had been made possible just a few years before. On New Year's Eve 1862, former slaves from all over the country, many of them joined by white abolitionists, came together in churches and town meeting halls to learn if the glorious news was really true. The word had slowly spread through the land that on Jan. 1, 1863, President Lincoln would issue his Emancipation Proclamation.

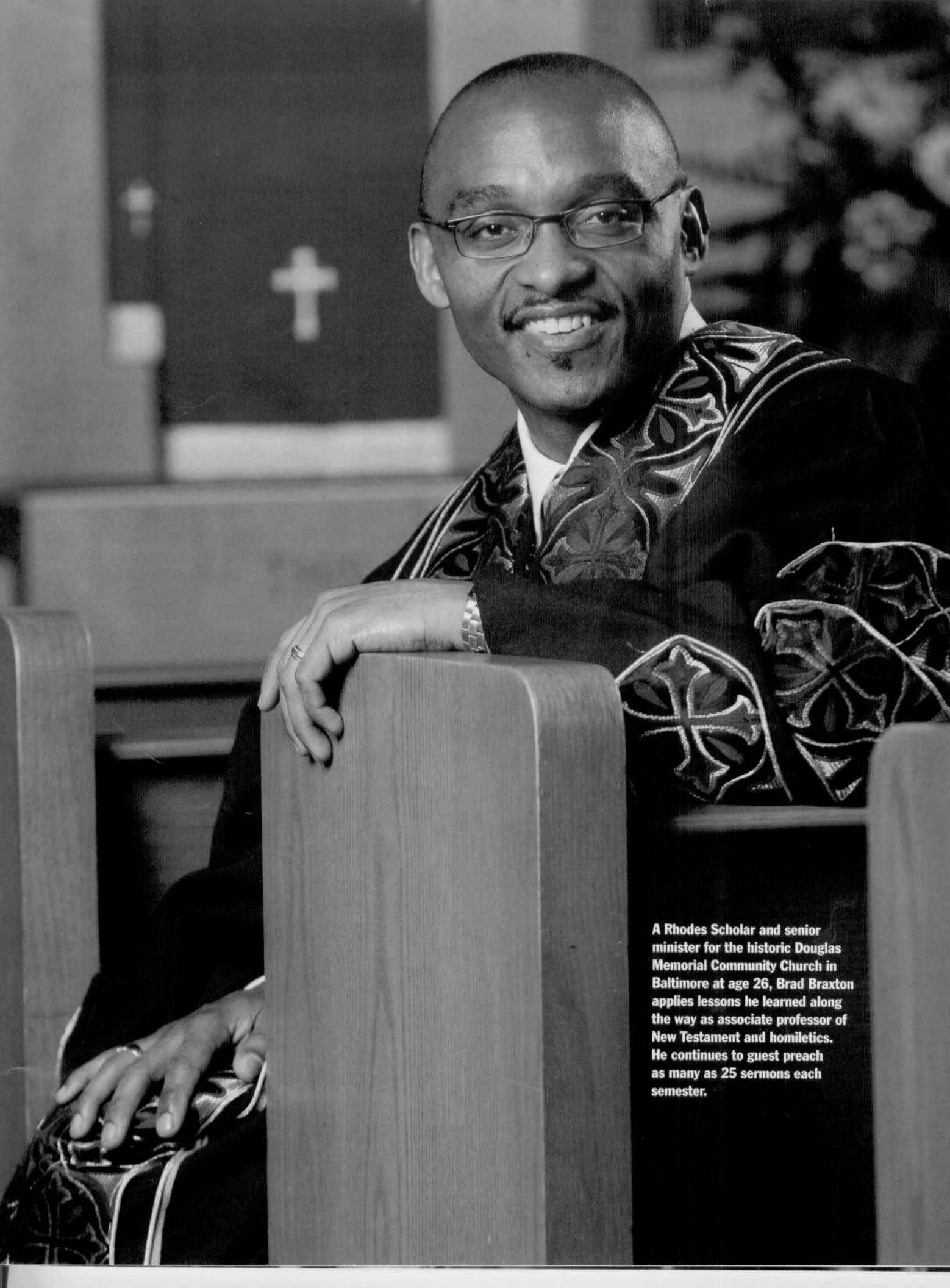
When the great moment came, followed two years later by the end of the war, the former slaves quickly built churches of their own, and for many of them, one of the most sacred occasions of the year was the Watch Night service on New Year's Eve. They sang and prayed and reenacted the hopeful waiting of their elders. And for young Brad Braxton growing up in Virginia, the faith of his father was never more real. There was something about this community of Christians that James Braxton served with such wisdom and grace. They seemed to understand the old sacred link between their tradition and the search for justice in the world, and, along with their minister, they believed



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academic study or biblical scholarship. But in Braxton's experience, there is just as much value in learning from the elders, from those ministers and laymen who are touched by grace, and somehow embody the wisdom that they preach.

For Braxton the most important of those



**A Rhodes Scholar and senior minister for the historic Douglas Memorial Community Church in Baltimore at age 26, Brad Braxton applies lessons he learned along the way as associate professor of New Testament and homiletics. He continues to guest preach as many as 25 sermons each semester.**

that faith was a source of healing and strength.

As an associate professor of New Testament and homiletics, Braxton often talks about his father's faith with his students. "I remember," Braxton said in one of his classes, "how I learned my first homiletics from my father—the intonations, the gestures, the words laced with love." But even as a boy, he could see there was much more to it than that. There was also the need to be "honest and fair," as his father liked to put it, to look the members of his church in the eye, and treat them with a kind of "intellectual charity," particularly in moments of disagreement or strife.

Braxton carried those lessons on his academic quest, from the days when he studied as a Rhodes Scholar at Oxford to the pursuit of his Ph.D. at Emory. And when he ascended to the pulpit at the age of 26, becoming senior minister at an inner-city church in Baltimore, he felt that he was prepared for the job.

Not that he expected it to be easy. Dou-

glas Memorial Community Church had developed a strong and active congregation. It had been named for its founding minister, Frederick Douglas, who was himself named for the great abolitionist. And after a long and distinguished career, Douglas was succeeded by Marian Bascom, a civil rights leader and colleague of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Bascom served 46 years before retiring at the age of 70, and Braxton knew he would be a hard act to follow.

In addition to his deeply intellectual sermons, Bascom had established a tradition

of activism, a passion Braxton shared. But the young minister wanted to make his own mark. He began a series of Bible study classes, complete with a syllabus, reading list and exams, and he established an interfaith dialogue with the impressive Jewish community in the city. He also started a gospel choir to supplement the formal Sunday morning singing, and the energy that came from all those things made it, he says, a highly satisfying time.

But the world of academia still called. In the summer of 2000, after a whirlwind

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*—Ethel Battle, MSN'70*

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stay of five years, Braxton left his pulpit in Baltimore to join the faculty at Wake Forest University. He taught preaching and New Testament in the divinity school, before moving again in 2004 to join the divinity school at Vanderbilt. He was 35. And if there had been a certain restlessness about him, he found himself now in a comfortable place where he could apply the lessons he'd learned along the way.

"It's an exciting community to be a part of," he says, "coming to a faculty where there is not only a strong commitment to justice, but a Ph.D. program in homiletics and linguistics. I have outstanding colleagues, and our dean, James Hudnut-Beumler, is deeply rooted in the life of the church."

In the fall he will teach the courses Preaching in the African American Tradition and Interdisciplinary Approach to Preaching and Worship. But one of his favorites is the seminar course he taught in the spring—Preaching, Healing and Justice, in which he sought to tie together with his students the

two great callings of the Christian ministry: those pulpit proclamations about justice in the world, and the pastoral care of their future congregations.

He liked to begin each session with a prayer—"Holy Spirit, purify our minds and sanctify our tongues"—as well as a reminder about the need for humility in the face of the massive task set before them.

"Each of us," he declares, "has a tenuous grasp at best on the truth." Braxton often refers to his students as "colleagues" and says he learns from them every day. "These students," he concludes, "have done brilliant homiletic work."

Braxton has written three books and is working on another, and has continued to do guest preaching on his own, as many as 25 sermons each semester, including one last year at Westminster Abbey.

He says he expects someday to return to a full-time pulpit ministry. But for now at least, he has found at Vanderbilt a place where the pieces of his life come together. ▼

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