Jackson closes a chapter

by James M. Wall in the June 21, 2000 issue

It was the winter of 1967, and Jesse Jackson was completing his master's degree at Chicago Theological Seminary. The young Baptist minister had left his native North Carolina to attend a northern United Church of Christ school, in part, he recalls, so that he could concentrate on his studies away from his civil rights activities.

But Jackson's passion for civil rights traveled with him. One of his field projects at CTS was to create a grass-roots organization of African-American clergy, Operation Breadbasket, which eventually evolved into Operation PUSH. Jackson and CTS president Howard Schomer traveled to Selma, Alabama, to march with Martin Luther King Jr. King was so impressed with the student activist that he asked him to stay. "You will learn more from working with me in six months then in six years at seminary," King told Jackson, who signed on with King and never returned to finish his degree.

Until now, that is. CTS's new president, Susan Thistlethwaite, recently examined the school's alumni list and found Jackson listed as a former student, not as a graduate. (His son, Congressman Jesse Jackson Jr., is a graduate serving on the school's board of trustees.) Jackson had done all the work needed for his degree except for final courses in three areas.

Without informing Jackson, Thistlethwaite showed his record to a faculty committee, which determined that his "life experience" in those three areas—international affairs, homiletics and pastoral care—made Jackson a natural candidate for a final oral exam. Thistlethwaite then called Jackson and asked if he would be willing to submit to an examination by a faculty committee. Absolutely, Jackson said, even though "one of the reasons I delayed ever coming back was that I feared I wouldn't pass the exam. I understand test phobia."

What would make a former presidential candidate, renowned preacher, counselor to presidents, and domestic and international negotiator face his test phobia? Finishing what he started is no doubt a major motivation, but I see something else at work here. Based on conversations I have had with Jackson over the past several years, it

is my guess that he hopes he can use such events to broaden his base of support. Although he is one of the world's best-known political and religious figures, Jackson is frustrated that he hasn't been able to corral mainline Protestants into his network of activism.

As anyone who has ever worked with him knows, Jackson is dogged in his pursuit of both immediate and long-range goals. He has developed a media savvy that guarantees media attention for whatever project he undertakes. As a member of the class of 2000, Jackson's master's degree testifies to his fellow graduates that he is one of them now, and he wants to recruit them into a concept of ministry that will include a passion for healing and reconciliation. Chicago Theological Seminary prepared Jackson for his role as activist by pushing his thinking beyond the borders of southern pietism. I asked him which of his CTS professors he remembers as most influential. He named Ross Snyder, who taught Christian education and spirituality. Snyder helped Jackson learn to think outside a narrow religious box. "I had a certain certainty about God," he says, "but at CTS they took God out of the box, and that took me to some strange places." Jackson recalls that Snyder encouraged students to "look inward" for a spirituality that Jackson says has always undergirded his nonstop activism.

His nonstop activism does run into barriers. Last winter he antagonized local school officials in Decatur, Illinois, who refused to accede to his demands that students expelled for fighting at a football game be allowed to graduate. At other times, his high public profile makes it easier for his fellow clergy to join him in public battles, as when he recently persuaded African-American clergy to join him in voluntarily being tested for the HIV virus, thus drawing attention to the increasing AIDS rate among African-Americans. To Jackson, a seminary education is a not just a license to practice ministry, but a mandate to serve the oppressed and afflict the powerful.

His foreign forays have been both condemned and praised. Adotei Akwei, African advocacy director for Amnesty International, says that in his role as President Clinton's envoy to Africa, Jackson has lost some of his freewheeling freedom because he has been forced to deal officially with some of the world's least attractive figures, notably Sierra Leone's Foday Sankoh and Liberia's Charles Taylor. But Akwei acknowledges that Jackson continues to admonish dictators such as Kenya's aging president, Daniel arap Moi, who was told by Jackson that he should halt the country's military attacks on Moi's political rivals.

Jackson asked that Andrew Young, his old friend, a former congressman and ordained UCC minister, be invited to speak at the CTS graduation. Young told the graduates: “You have the advantage of having sent out a scout into the promised land. He’s come back to you, and the university has confirmed his report, that you can possess the land.” In the audience were guests invited by Jackson—the students from Decatur whose expulsion for fighting had caused them to miss their own graduation. Jackson said he wanted the students to see him graduate. It was his way of telling them that it is never too late to finish what you start.