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All of Louisville has a stake in Simmons College success, Cosby says

By Peter Smith
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The Rev. Kevin Cosby brought his appeal for help to rejuvenate Simmons College of Kentucky to the Rotary Club of Louisville on Thursday, saying it's crucial to creating a "college-going culture" among African Americans in western Louisville.

"You may ask the question, why does it matter to me?" said Cosby, president of the historically black school, to the predominately white members of the club at a lunchtime speech at the Galt House.

"It matters to you, as a Rotarian, because there is an interconnectedness with all communities in Louisville," Cosby said. "If the strength of the strong does not help lift up the weak in our community, then the weakness of the weak will cross the fence and undermine the strength of the strong. This community cannot go up if west Louisville does not go up."

Cosby — who is also pastor of St. Stephen Church in western Louisville, one of the largest congregations in the state — became president of Simmons in 2005. In his speech, he recounted the school's formation after the Civil War by ex-slaves who recognized "the only true path for upward mobility was education."

He said one of his grandfathers moved to Louisville to take advantage of an education at Simmons, learning to read and eventually earning a seminary degree.

Simmons closed most of its programs during the Depression, selling its Seventh Street campus to the University of Louisville and maintaining a Bible college at a smaller building further west at 18th and Dumesnil streets.

St. Stephen church reacquired the Seventh Street campus in 1997 and later turned it over to Simmons, which Cosby said amounted to a rare instance of a historically black college retrieving property it had lost.

And that's crucial, he said, because cities with strong historically black colleges and universities tend to generate higher rates of graduates among African Americans.

Already, Simmons has partnerships with the University of Louisville — enabling students to enroll in both institutions at once — and other colleges, which he said is helping Simmons expand beyond religious education into what he called a "de facto junior college."

At the same time, Simmons last year attained candidacy for accreditation by the Association for Biblical Higher Education, which enables students to apply for federal loan and grant programs. As a result, he said he projects the current enrollment of 100 to grow to as much as 250 by this fall.

Cosby quipped that he has "learned one thing about being president — how presidents shake hands."

He demonstrated by reaching out with his palm up.

The Rotarians' standing ovation indicated his fund-raising gesture might get results.

After Cosby's speech, Jefferson County Judge Fred Cowan told the gathering that Simmons' reputation has traveled far. He said that several years ago, he toured the home of former South African President Nelson Mandela and saw an honorary citation from Simmons on display there.

Louisville Urban League President Ben Richmond, who introduced Cosby, touted his work in helping work toward a goal of 15,000 African Americans in Jefferson County receiving college degrees by the year 2020.

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