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By Marv Knox

Editor

ATLANTA (ABP)—Baptist higher education faces a monumental crisis, due in large part to abuses of control and financial dependence, longtime university president Kirby Godsey told participants at the Whitsitt Baptist Heritage Society's annual meeting.

Godsey will retire this summer after 27 years as president of Mercer University in Macon, Ga. He received the Whitsitt Society's 2006 Courage Award and delivered the society's Penrose St. Amant Lecture on "The Future of Baptist Higher Education."

"Baptist politics are wreaking havoc on Baptist higher education," Godsey said. "Baptist higher education has never been more fragile."

Because of their dependence upon Baptist state conventions, which provide a portion of their budgets and typically elect at least a majority of their trustees, Baptist schools increasingly are being "forced to sacrifice their intellectual integrity to ensure the flow of funds," he reported.

Two Baptist universities have been involved in lawsuits with Baptist state

conventions with which they are affiliated, and a suit looms on the horizon for another university and convention, Godsey said.

While Baptist educators and denominational leaders can chart a course of hope that benefits both church and school, “our present course is terrible,” he stressed.

“If they do not create a relationship based on mutual respect, Baptist educators will have to make the choice between being Baptists and being educators,” he added.

Control—most particularly financial control—breeds difficulty, he said, noting state conventions’ control over funding is being used to “enforce rigid religious orthodoxy.”

Some Baptists insist that their colleges and universities teach only concepts and ideas that align with their view of the world and religious beliefs, Godsey observed. But such narrow thinking restricts the schools from fulfilling their central mission, he added.

“The university’s highest obligation is to pursue the truth and teach the truth,” he insisted, calling for commitment to academic inquiry and intellectual freedom. “A college or university cannot be a good Baptist college or university without first being a good college or university.”

Baptist schools traditionally have identified themselves with the denomination through “money and history”—receiving partial funding from and/or having a historical relationship with a Baptist convention, he said.

Now schools must “determine what it means in substance to be a Baptist university,” he added.

“What does the college do differently or what priorities are more prevalent because we are a Baptist college or university? ... Without coming to terms

with our own sense of destiny, we have no place to stand.”

Godsey prescribed several suggestions for advancing educational or intellectual freedom while strengthening churches. They included:

— Re-thinking trustee selection.

In recent years, many schools have been impacted negatively by trustees who are appointed to the institutional boards with specific political/theological agendas, which narrow the schools’ focus, he said.

This “unseemly intrusion of the Religious Right ... reflects the fear of a decaying denomination,” he noted. The selection process that puts such trustees in place is outmoded and ineffective, he added.

And it puts pressure on trustees to act against the best interests of the schools whose interests they represent, Godsey said.

“Trustees should not be forced to choose between what’s right for the institution and what’s acceptable to the denomination. ... Churches should get out of the business of selecting trustees.”

— Elevate the school’s mission above politics.

“Trustees are accountable not to a church constituency, but to (the school’s) mission,” he explained.

— Replace “language of control.”

Much of the rhetoric surrounding Baptist educational institutions has focused on power, control and win-lose scenarios, he reported, noting this “must yield to the language of cooperation.”

“Baptist churches must be free, and Baptist colleges and universities must be free to pursue intellectual freedom,” he explained. “Denominational

leaders trying to control educational decisions is no more appropriate than schools seeking to control pulpits.

“Let the preachers preach and the teachers teach. God’s truth will prevail.”

— Reclaim the power of administrative leadership.

College and university administrators must “lead with resolve,” he said. Administrators, not faculty, are responsible for preserving academic freedom, preventing a “spiral of academic decay.”

“Lead with conviction and courage,” he exhorted university presidents and other administrators.

— Invest in the Baptist ideal.

Baptist principles have “seriously eroded in recent years,” Godsey said, asserting the schools are responsible to “keep alight the light of freedom.”

“Baptist institutions of higher education should take greater responsibility for sustaining the substance and significance of the Baptist witness,” he said. “It’s not the job of the church alone. Hold high the Baptist ideal of freedom.”

After retiring as president at Mercer, Godsey will serve as chancellor and professor at the school, until recently affiliated with the Georgia Baptist Convention.

On receiving the Whitsitt Society’s courage award, Godsey noted: “You don’t always ask to be courageous. You get pushed into it. ... Courage is being scared to death and saddling up anyway.”