

# Transitions spotlight new face of Baptist higher education

January 6, 2006

Posted: 1/06/06

Beneath  
the  
shadow of  
the cross,  
Dallas  
Baptist  
University  
students  
walk  
across  
campus to  
classes  
after a  
chapel  
service.  
(Photo  
courtesy  
of Dallas  
Baptist  
University)

# Transitions spotlight new face of Baptist higher education

By **Hannah Lodwick**

*Associated Baptist Press*

DALLAS (ABP)—Three of the nation's largest Baptist universities each have chosen a different strategy in selecting the president who will shape the school's future. Now pundits wonder which model will emerge as the new face of Christian higher learning.

Baylor University's election of John Lilley, 66, as president comes after a time of division among alumni, faculty and administrators over academic freedom and the nature of Christian education. Lilley's status as an “outsider” from Nevada could help defuse the strife.

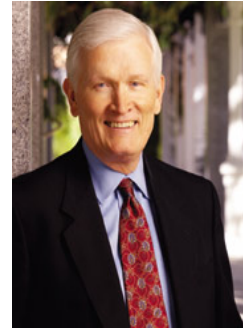
Mercer University, recently cut loose by the Georgia Baptist Convention, elected a champion of academic freedom, Baylor Interim President Bill Underwood, as president—raising a flag for the historic Christian liberal-arts tradition.

And Samford University seems to have chosen a safe route. Presidential nominee Andrew Westmoreland is president of Ouachita Baptist University, which has preserved close ties with Arkansas Baptists and avoided the conflict that has divided so many other denominational schools.

While each school's vision of a Christian college is different, each could play a role in defining the future of the Baptist university—and Christian higher education as a whole.

But the presidential changes at three of the five largest Baptist schools—educating a total of 25,000 students—are only part of the picture.

Baptist colleges from coast to coast are experiencing upheaval of one sort or another.



John Lilley

On the same day in mid-November that Mercer and Georgia Baptists parted ways, Georgetown College left the Kentucky Baptist fold, and Tennessee Baptists acknowledged Belmont University is cutting ties as well.

These are only the latest in a string of defections dating back several decades—Averett, Furman, Stetson, Wake Forest, Richmond. While other schools retain their Baptist ties, the trend is well established and accelerating—the largest and richest Baptist colleges are going it alone, and others who have the ability will follow.

At Baylor, Lilley's arrival creates an opportunity for change at the world's largest Baptist university.

Lilley, characterized as a consensus builder, comes in as a relative unknown from outside the “Baylor bubble,” untainted by the unrest at the university.

While he has been a Presbyterian in recent decades, many believe this son of a Baptist pastor still has the Baptist credentials to get the job done.

Provost Emeritus Donald Schmeltekopf supports Baylor's policy that its president be a practicing and active Baptist Christian.

“John Lilley passes this test in his willingness to join a local Baptist church in Waco just two days after he was named president-elect of Baylor,” Schmeltekopf said. “I think this approach should also be used as needed in the hiring of members of our religion department.”

Although Schmeltekopf affirms that Baylor is explicit about its Christian affiliation, he notes that no Baylor documents refer to an official confession of faith, as is the case at Samford.

“I believe Baylor and Samford are much closer in their commitment to the unity of knowledge as expressed through faith and reason than Mercer is,” Schmeltekopf said. “While there is a great deal of divergence on this point at both Baylor and Samford, both tend to see faith not only as an expression of redemption, but also as a genuine source of understanding.”

That concept of the “unity of knowledge”—that faith and learning not only cohabit the Christian college campus but confirm and nurture each other—is at the heart of the conflict at Baylor and other schools.

Despite differing opinions about how to apply statements of faith, Schmeltekopf said, most large Baptist universities still are intentional about being Christian, if not explicitly Baptist.

Ironically though, Schmeltekopf says one of the conflicts in the Baptist denomination today is that church members have permitted relatively minor issues to “trump our common membership in the Christian family of faith, the community of all believers.”

“The one and only acceptable 'ideology' of the Baptist university is the God-ideology of the historic Christian faith, the God who is revealed in Scripture and in the church—the God who is at work in the world,” Schmeltekopf said.

“That's a radical ideology, and we must be discerning personally and in our institutions to understand what God's will is.”

Others at Baylor believe the historic Christian faith plays an important role not just in the president's office but in the classrooms filled by Baylor's 13,800 students.

Randy Wood, professor of education at Baylor, sees Lilley's arrival as a unifying force on campus. He said the faith emphasis at Baylor separates it from other schools like the University of Texas and Texas A&M University. For Wood, Baylor's "faith component" comes from biblical Christianity more than a specifically Baptist background.

While Baylor's changing of the guard comes as a potential turning point in the history of the university, Bruce Gourley, associate director of the Center for Baptist Studies at Mercer University, said Mercer President Kirby Godsey has kept the Macon, Ga., school close to its Georgia Baptist ties.

In Gourley's opinion, shared by many, the challenge of a successful Baptist university involves balancing a Christian worldview with competitive academics. Gourley believes Godsey has done both.

"He has been very committed to the Baptist heritage and continually staying connected to our Baptist roots," Gourley said. "I've been very impressed that he was and is striving to emphasize that heritage."

Godsey, 68, will retire June 30. His replacement—Underwood, formerly a law professor at Baylor—added his personal touch to Baylor soon after he became interim president. He immediately shook up the administration, replacing Provost David Lyle Jeffrey. Underwood and Jeffrey disagreed about the proper role of academic freedom at a Christian university.

Jeffrey declined to comment for this article.

Union University President David Dockery, a former visiting professor at Samford, said Baptist schools are first and foremost Christian institutions

that should hire the best and brightest Christian scholars. Within those contexts, he said, schools that remain Baptist should give priority to hiring Baptist scholars.

“I think it is healthy to have a majority of Baptists on the faculty,” Dockery said. “I think it is valuable and healthy, however, to have representation from different traditions as well. We need commitments characterized by serious and rigorous academics and an unapologetic commitment to the Christian intellectual tradition.”

Some faculty members at Samford feel the same way. For the Alabama Baptist university of 4,440 students, an intentional focus on Christian distinctives fosters academic freedom in the midst of a specifically Baptist heritage.

Samford has not tried to loosen its relationship with the Alabama Baptist Convention. And while it adheres to the Baptist Faith & Message statement, it uses the traditional 1963 version, not the more rigid 2000 revision.

Samford's president of 22 years, Tom Corts, will retire in May.

David Chapman, dean of the Howard College of Arts and Sciences at Samford, said the new president must “provide a clear signal to the direction of the university, ensure that the academic mission of the school is upheld, and relate well to all of the university's constituents.”

“Samford has attempted to chart a course in which the school remains loyal to its Baptist heritage without becoming a political football in denominational politics,” Chapman said.

“Christian colleges and universities have a pivotal role to play at this time when the nation seems divided over many moral and spiritual issues. Instead of ignoring controversial issues, the college needs to provide a

space where the issues of our day—from al-Qaida to Terry Schiavo—can be discussed intelligently and civilly, regardless of one's faith tradition.”

As strife in Baptist life has increased and denominationalism waned, many Baptist colleges have recreated themselves to appeal less to the traditional Baptist student and more to the broader Christian, or evangelical, one.

The real challenge for Baptist universities comes in balancing this openness to other “faith traditions” with ties to their Baptist state conventions. And that is where the drive for quality Christian education becomes intertwined with two factors usually viewed as unbecoming for Christians to crave—cash and control.

For more than a decade, the drive for academic excellence has led some colleges to reduce or sever ties with Baptist conventions, especially when the convention expects its financial support to translate into influence over the school's decision-making.

Occasionally the university has used fear of a convention takeover as justification for breaking away—as was the case with Baylor in the 1990s and Belmont more recently. And to be fair, the rise of conservative influence in some state conventions has brought calls for tighter reins on Baptist college curriculum and student life.

Chapman insists control is the wrong model. Instead of churches and conventions viewing colleges as children to be controlled, he said, the relationship should consist of mutual respect and cooperation.

“Baptist colleges fulfill an important role not only in preparing future clergy but in educating young people with a variety of vocational goals who will be the backbone of the churches they attend,” he said. “They also serve as places where Baptist history is researched and archived, where the connections between Christianity and culture can be discussed openly, and where church leaders can meet for dialogue and inspiration.”

The most recent convention-college split is taking place at Belmont University, which has decided not to remain affiliated with the Tennessee Baptist Convention, although the convention helped found the school in 1952.

Meanwhile, at Mercer, President Godsey recently reassured students that the school's split from Georgia Baptists is not a crisis. "It's not going to have a huge impact on students, and administrators are taking care of it." Godsey also said he hopes the "school stays a Baptist university"-a desire echoed by his successor, Underwood.

Messengers to the Georgia Baptist Convention voted to sever their 172-year-old ties to Mercer and its 7,315 students because of significant disagreements over doctrinal and social issues, particularly homosexuality.

Walter Shurden, executive director of the Center for Baptist Studies at Mercer, said although the convention unilaterally has begun the process of terminating its relationship with Mercer, he sees no signs it will "impact Mercer's sense of mission as an institution of Christian higher education."

Thanks in part to the intensity of rising academic standards and the emergence of national rankings of universities, Christian schools face increasing pressure to compete with secular universities.

Schmeltekopf worries that pressure will push some Christian colleges to concede the high moral ground on hot-button issues-those driven by ideology.

And with even the smaller private schools aspiring for academic recognition, critics say, the Christian worldview and lifestyle take a back seat on campus-relegated mostly to the liberal arts school or religion department.

Schmeltekopf maintains this need not be the case.



“The Christian college or university is a total experience, made coherent by our commitment to God and to the community of faith which surrounds us,” Schmeltekopf said. “Importantly, this means that there is no place where God is off limits, and that includes in particular the classroom and the research lab and the professor's office.”

It is precisely that assertion—that academic excellence and Christian character are inseparable—which has caused such a stir at Baylor. While people on both sides of the argument agree the two go hand-in-hand, they seldom see eye-to-eye on what such an integration of values looks like.

For some, like Wood and Schmeltekopf at Baylor, staying true to the Baptist heritage doesn't necessarily mean severing all ties with state conventions. At Baylor, 25 percent of its board is named by the Baptist General Convention of Texas.

For the 850 full-time faculty members at the school, that means the university is kept before the Baptist people in a concrete way without subjecting it to denominational control.

Union's Dockery is a conservative who believes Baptist institutions must become “intentional about reclaiming the Christian intellectual tradition.” He said truth and love are much more than social constructs—they are grounded in God's self-revelation in Christ.

“Christian colleges and universities must help the church at large move out of the intellectual ghetto,” Dockery said. “The kind of anti-intellectual, personal, inward and subjective Christianity we see around us in popular Christianity is not representative of the best of the great Christian intellectual tradition, which we must work to reclaim and revitalize.”

As the leadership in Baptists' flagship colleges changes hands, some wonder if Christian higher education will be the same.

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