

Former Samford president Tom Corts dies

February 4, 2009

BIRMINGHAM, Ala. (ABP) — Former Samford University President Thomas Corts died unexpectedly Feb. 4 of an apparent heart attack.

Corts, 67, died after being taken by ambulance to Brookwood Medical Center in Birmingham, Ala., accompanied by his wife of 44 years, Marla.



Thomas Corts

Corts held the title of president emeritus at Samford, a Baptist-affiliated university in Birmingham, which he led from 1983 until his retirement in 2006. After that he served briefly as executive director of the International Association of Baptist Colleges and Universities.

He also served as interim chancellor of the Alabama College System in 2006 and 2007. He had recently returned home to Birmingham after serving the Bush administration as coordinator of basic education for

all United States government assistance to the developing world, an appointment he accepted in 2007.

Corts' 23 years at Samford's helm were some of the brightest in the school's history. During his tenure Samford's endowment grew from \$8 million to \$258 million. Thirty new buildings were constructed on campus, and Corts signed and presented more than 17,000 diplomas at Samford.

"There is no way to measure the impact of Tom Corts' life and ministry on this university and the thousands of lives whom he touched," said a statement from Samford President Andrew Westmoreland, who succeeded Corts at Samford in June of 2006. "We have all lost a great friend."

Corts was born in Terre Haute, Ind., the fifth of seven children in his family. He grew up in Ashtabula, Ohio, and graduated from Georgetown College in Kentucky in 1963. He went on to earn a master's degree and doctorate from Indiana University.

He was president of Wingate College (now Wingate University) in North Carolina for nine years before becoming Samford's 18th president. An ordained minister, Corts originally aspired to a career in journalism.

He was a former president of the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools, an accrediting agency for 11 states spanning from Virginia to Texas, and a founding director of the Council for Higher Education Accreditation.

Corts also formerly chaired Alabama Citizens for Constitutional Reform. The public-interest group formed in 2000 to seek to replace the state's 1901 constitution, which critics say institutionalizes racial and economic inequalities from the days of segregation. Despite backing from many centrist and progressive religious leaders, the effort failed at the polls after strong opposition from the Religious Right and some business interests.

Along with his widow, Corts is survived by two married daughters, a married son and six grandchildren. Funeral arrangements are pending.

-Bob Allen is senior writer for Associated Baptist Press.