

# **Palm Beach Atlantic founder Jess Moody dies at 93**

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WEST PALM BEACH, Fla. (BP)—Jess Moody, a visionary evangelistic pastor who influenced the field of education and the entertainment industry, died Dec. 7 in West Palm Beach, Fla. He was 93.

Moody was the founder of Palm Beach Atlantic College (now University) in West Palm Beach in 1968 and later, in the Los Angeles area, a witness to Hollywood.

He also was one of three nominees for Southern Baptist Convention president in 1992. He served as the 1965 president of the SBC Pastors' Conference and addressed its sessions in 1964 and 1972.

## **'Visionary dreamer'**

William M.B. Fleming Jr., Palm Beach Atlantic's president, said in a Dec. 8 tribute to Moody on the school's website, "As the university celebrates its 50th year, we give thanks for a giant of a Christian crusader, a Bible preacher, a visionary dreamer and our founding president.



Jess Moody led in the creation of Palm Beach Atlantic College while

serving as pastor of First Baptist Church in West Palm Beach (now Family Church) from 1961 to 1976. He concurrently served as the school's president from 1968 to 1972. (Photo / Palm Beach Atlantic University)

“Dr. Moody’s mark is on every Palm Beach Atlantic graduate and student. His sweet love and unlimited devotion to young people is legendary. Stories will continue to be written and told about Dr. Jess Moody, a servant for all seasons and all mankind.”

Moody led in the school’s creation while serving as pastor of First Baptist Church in West Palm Beach (now Family Church) from 1961 to 1976. He concurrently served as PBA president from 1968 to 1972.

The university, which was affiliated with the Florida Baptist Convention for an extended time, now has 3,706 students in undergraduate and graduate courses in West Palm Beach, at a campus in Orlando and online.

Moody and his wife Doris initiated the school’s “Workshop” program requiring all 2,000-plus full-time undergraduate students to volunteer at least 45 hours annually at nonprofit agencies, schools or churches.

## **Pastor to Hollywood stars**

Moody left West Palm Beach in 1976, turning his sights to California as pastor of the Los Angeles-area First Baptist Church in Van Nuys. He led the church into cooperation with the SBC “after considerable resistance,” as described by the *Los Angeles Times* in a 1997 article.

In the mid-1980s, Moody led the church to relocate to Porter Ranch, Calif.,

where it was renamed Shepherd of the Hills Church.

“Jocular and garrulous, Moody attracted a number of entertainment figures to his church,” the *Times*’ 1997 article noted. “He performed the wedding of actor Burt Reynolds and actress Loni Anderson. The annual Passion Play at Shepherd of the Hills draws thousands every Easter.”



Jess Moody, founder of Palm Beach Atlantic University, spoke at a 2010 graduation ceremony. (Photo courtesy of Palm Beach Atlantic University)

He was a religious consultant for 20th Century Fox, an article in *MissionsUSA* of the SBC Home Mission Board reported in 1984.

The church created an Act I ministry in 1982 that grew to about 125 actors, directors, producers and others in the film industry, according to *MissionsUSA*. Act I’s meetings included presentations by such LA luminaries as producer-writers Harry and Linda Thomason, two-time Academy Award-winning composer Al Kasha and radio disc jockey Rick Dees.

Phil Boatwright, a veteran movie reviewer, was a member of the church from 1977 until Moody’s retirement in 1995. Boatwright described an example of Moody’s influence involving the re-filming of a major motion

picture.

“In 1976, Hollywood had a hit with *The Omen*, about the coming of the Antichrist. As Hollywood is prone to do, they made several follow-ups,” Boatwright recounted. “The producer (or director, I can’t remember which) of the 1981 sequel *The Omen II: The Final Conflict*, concerning an adult Antichrist plotting to eliminate his future divine opponent, showed a rough-cut to Dr. Moody.

“Doc (as Boatwright called Moody) praised the production’s strengths but made it clear the sensationalized conclusion wasn’t scriptural. Due to Moody’s kindness and scriptural knowledge, the filmmaker said, ‘If you’ll rewrite the ending, I’ll film it.’ Doc did. The producer did. And to this day, I tell people, skip through the film to get to the ending. It’s spiritually rewarding. (I wouldn’t bother with the rest of the film.)

“Knowledge and kindness. That’s part of the armor we should all clothe ourselves in. Doc did.”

Boatwright also noted Moody’s “appreciation for every soul.”

“Like our beloved Billy Graham, Jess had a love for the lost and a great ability to make each person feel important. When these men said, ‘God loves you,’ you felt it—you believed it,” he said.

## **Nominee for SBC president**

Moody ran for SBC president in 1992, seeking to be a unifier amid the conflict among Southern Baptists.

Ed Young, senior pastor of Second Baptist Church in Houston, received 62 percent of the messengers’ vote at the annual meeting in Indianapolis. Moody received nearly 22 percent while a third nominee, Nelson Price, pastor of Roswell Street Baptist Church in Marietta, Ga., received 16

percent.



Jess Moody

Moody was nominated by Mississippi comedian Jerry Clower, who said Moody loved people on both sides of the SBC controversy and that the witness of Southern Baptists would be helped by the election of a pastor who was not from the South.

Clower also said he constantly met laypeople in his travels who didn't want a pastors' fight, as he called it.

"There are 39,000 of y'all (pastors), but there are 15 million of us, and we want it stopped," Clower said.

Moody had said prior to the annual meeting: "My feeling is if there is hope for reconciliation in our convention, then one last-ditch stand ... ought to be done. I believe every word of the Bible. As far as the Bible goes, I am as conservative as you can get. I also believe in freedom. I love my denomination. I want to bring us together."

Fermin Whittaker, retired executive director of the California Southern Baptist Convention, said Moody was "willing to listen to my storyline" as a

native of Panama serving as the leader of the state's Baptists.

"He was not the kind of leader who said, 'I don't have time for you.' He was never negative. He was always encouraging and always a friend, sincere in his heart to reach the lost for Christ," Whittaker said.

Moody also was among 11 nominees for SBC president in 1966, when messengers in Detroit elected Nashville pastor Franklin Paschall to the post.

## **Founding member of Youth for Christ**

A native Texan, born in Paducah, Moody sensed a call to preach at age 17. As a student at Baylor University, he flew a Piper Cub airplane to lead evangelistic meetings across the Southwest and Midwest, leaving after class on Fridays and returning on Sunday nights.

As a founding member of Youth for Christ at age 22, Moody preached to thousands of students across the Southwest and, in 1946, led a YFC team to war-torn northern Europe while Billy Graham led a team to southern Europe.

After earning a Master of Divinity degree from Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Ky., in 1956, Moody was called as pastor of First Baptist Church in Owensboro, Ky., serving there nearly five years. In 1961, Moody was part of a Graham team in West Palm Beach when members of First Baptist were drawn to his preaching and called him as their pastor.

A movie was made of Moody's life in 1967 by Gospel Films titled *Riding the Pulpit*. He was the author of several books, including 1999's *Club Sandwich: Goes Great with Chicken Soup* in which he told a number of his favorite stories, some of which involved Burt Reynolds and Randy and

Dennis Quaid.

Moody was preceded in death by his wife of 64 years. He is survived by a son, Patrick, and daughter, Martha; and three grandchildren.