

Baylor regents vote to allow non-Baptists on board (Updated)

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Editors Note: *The story has been updated to include a quote from Truett Theological Seminary Dean David Garland after the 30th paragraph.*

DALLAS—The governing body of [Baylor University](#), the world's largest Baptist academic institution, now may include Christians who are not Baptists.

Baylor's board of regents voted Feb. 11 to amend the university's bylaws, allowing members who are active in Christian—but not Baptist—churches to comprise up to 25 percent of the board.

The bylaws require 75 percent of the board to be Baptists, and the [Baptist General Convention of Texas](#) will continue to elect 25 percent of the overall board. 

In steps Baylor leaders described as maintaining the Waco university's ties to the Baptist denomination, the regents also voted to create the Baptist Studies Center for Research and to increase the amount of financial aid available to children of Baptist ministers and missionaries.

Baptist identity

Despite the change, Baylor will maintain its strong Baptist identity, regent Chairman Dary Stone of Dallas pledged.

"We have been for 166 years ... and always will be a Baptist university," Stone said. He cited creation of the Baptist center and increases in

scholarships for Baptist ministers' and missionaries' children as examples of Baylor's faithfulness to Baptists.

But expanding regent qualifications to include non-Baptist Christians reflects Baylor's large non-Baptist constituency, he added.

"Changing our governance is in great part an accommodation to obvious demographic changes in church labels and affiliation," he said. For example, the composition of the freshman class is slightly less than one-third Baptist, and the majority of the overall student body is non-Baptist.

"But we think the vast majority (of students) are very baptistic," even though many of their families attend churches that do not bear the Baptist name, he noted. Many non-Baptist students' families formerly attended Baptist churches, he acknowledged.

"First and foremost, our commitment is to the lordship of Jesus Christ," Stone said. "But the 'Baptist' label alone disqualifies many Baylor families" from representation on the regent board. "We're responsible to reach out and reclaim many people ... and many former Baptists."

Although some future non-Baptist regents may not have studied at Baylor, he predicted the vast majority of them will be chosen from among Baylor alumni.

"It could be in Baylor's interest in some way, way future date, that someone who is an outstanding Christian leader elsewhere and who could advance Baylor's mission would be chosen. But now, basically, we're looking at people who went to Baylor, who chose it because of its Christian mission ... but are, for whatever reason, not Baptists now."

Seeking input?

Baylor is in the process of developing a new strategic vision. Consequently,

administrators are holding listening sessions with constituents throughout Texas and across the nation.

Some opponents of non-Baptist regents have questioned why the regents did not place this issue on the agenda for the listening sessions and defer a decision until after that process is completed.

“This conversation at the board level has been going on for several years,” Stone said. “We didn’t wake up to this yesterday. This is something we have been wrestling with for a long, long time.

“We have gleaned a very deep body of opinion, some of which is negative, but the vast, vast majority is enthusiastic about broadening the tent.”

BGCT executive staff response

BGCT executive staff leaders learned Feb. 9 the regents planned to consider changing the requirement that the university’s entire governing board be Baptists.

“While we had heard throughout the fall that this was a possible consideration, this was the first official word we received,” said Steve Vernon, associate executive director of the BGCT Executive Board.

“Based on the vote concerning a similar situation with [Houston Baptist University](#) taken at the annual meeting in McAllen, I wrote by e-mail to the Baylor board of regents to express our opposition to the move. The vote did not go as I believe Texas Baptists would desire.”

Messengers at the annual meeting turned aside a BGCT Executive Board recommendation that the state convention revise its agreement with Houston Baptist University, allowing HBU to elect a minority of non-Baptist Christian trustees.

The special agreement between HBU and the BGCT allows HBU to elect 75

percent of its own trustees, with the BGCT electing the remaining 25 percent. All trustees HBU elects must be Baptist but not necessarily from BGCT-affiliated churches. The revised agreement rejected in McAllen would have allowed up to one third of the trustees elected by the university — one-fourth of the total board — to be non-Baptist Christians.

The Baylor regents' action "does not change the percentage of Baylor regents the BGCT elects," Vernon added. "Baylor is still a valued member of the Texas Baptist family."

Baylor receives about \$1.5 million a year in direct institutional support through the BGCT Cooperative Program, he reported. Including funds for ministerial student scholarships, the BGCT budget provides about \$2.8 million annually to Baylor. From 2000 to 2009, the BGCT provided more than \$26 million to the university.

A special agreement between the BGCT and Baylor — negotiated after Baylor's governing board unilaterally changed its charter in 1990 — stipulated that all the university's regents will be Baptist, but it also stated that requirement could be changed by a two-thirds majority of the regents without BGCT approval.

According to Baylor's articles of incorporation, the BGCT recognizes the school as "an independent, nonprofit, nonmember corporation under the laws of the State of Texas with full legal right, power and authority to amend or rescind its articles of incorporation or bylaws without approval or consent of the BGCT or any other party."

Creating 'safeguards'

But when the regents changed the requirement that all members of the board be Baptists, they put in place a couple of provisions university leaders described as "safeguards" to protect key aspects of Baylor's Baptist identity. One of those safeguards reflects the "religious qualifications of

regents.”

Any future change in the percentage of non-Baptists on the board will require the approval of 75 percent of the board’s Baptist regents, explained regent David Harper of Dallas, who drafted the bylaw amendment.

The new requirement parallels ongoing policies for “vetting the spiritual qualifications of all of our candidates,” Harper said. The regent-nomination process requires a letter of affirmation from each candidate’s pastor, as well as a statement of personal Christian testimony and a faith commitment, he noted.

Another safeguard applies exclusive voting rights to Baptist regents for issues related to Baylor’s George W. Truett Theological Seminary.

“It would be very unusual for the board to get involved in that kind of vote,” Harper said, noting regents leave operational issues to university and seminary administrators, but adding the provision is designed to guarantee the seminary’s Baptist identity.

“Truett Seminary is unique,” he noted. “Its clear Baptist mission is completely intact.”

David Garland, dean of Truett Theological Seminary, emphasized the importance of safeguarding distinctive Baptist influence at the seminary.

“George W. Truett Theological Seminary was founded by Baptists and funded by Baptists to train ministers who will serve in Baptist churches and agencies to help fulfill the Great Commission,” Garland said.

“The faculty members are all Baptists, members of BGCT churches, educated at some point in Baptist institutions, committed to Baptist principles, and dedicated to training ministers in a Baptist context. We expect to retain our Baptist heritage as decisions by the board of regents

related to the seminary will be made only by those members who are Baptist.”

A similar Baptists-only voting right does not apply to the university’s religion department, Harper said.

Technically, carving out special treatment of an academic department within the overall university—such as the religion department’s standing within the College of Arts and Sciences—would be difficult, Stone added.

Truett Seminary, however, stands as a solitary academic unit, he said, calling it, “the caretaker of theology and doctrine.”

Former BGCT presidents react

Baylor University’s communications office provided statements of support for the regents’ action from two former BGCT presidents — both related to Buckner International, a BGCT-affiliated ministry that allows non-Baptists a minority presence on its board of directors.

“In the complex world of today, we’re seeing increased cooperation beyond denominations and denominational labels. For Baylor to broaden its board of regents and include like-minded Christians is a natural step into the 21st century,” said Ken Hall, chief executive officer of [Buckner International](#) .

“Having other Christians on our board of trustees at Buckner International for the past few years has proved both enlightening and enabling for us as we’ve seen tremendous growth in our ministries. We’ve been encouraged to find fellow Christians who cherish our historic Baptists principles and practices.”

Albert Reyes, president of Buckner International, likewise praised the regents’ decision.

“Baylor’s efforts to reach out to fellow Christians, who would add value to

its governing structure and influence, positions Baylor as a leading citizen in the global village and a bright light in the Redeemer's kingdom," Reyes said.

"We have similar governance in place at Buckner International and have found that while our heart and soul remains theologically Baptist, having like-minded Christians on our board has given us a much broader view of ministry. It has also opened a window to extend the reach of Buckner and strengthened the overall composition of our board of trustees."

Baptist Studies Center

The Baptist Studies Center for Research will be a vital addition, not only to Baylor, but also to the Baptist denomination, Baylor President Ken Starr predicted.

"The center sits beautifully at the heart and soul of what Baylor is as the largest Baptist university in the world," Starr said. "This is an idea that has been discussed over a two-year period and came to fruition today. ...

"Baylor is the one place in the world where there should be a comprehensive center for Baptist studies. This augurs well for the vibrancy of Baptist studies, and Baylor is at the forefront of leadership."

PK & MK scholarships

The scholarships available to children of Baptist ministers and missionaries are expected to increase by 300 percent, to total more than \$500,000 annually. Financial awards will be tailored to the needs of each family, Starr said.

"We're being very intentional about responding to the needs of Baptist pastors' and missionaries' families," he noted. The amount each student receives "will all depend upon the specific student and family. Just because

of the response of the regents to this felt need—which is quite palpable—there will be much more scholarship aid available to these families.”

With additional reporting by Managing Editor Ken Camp