

# Conference focuses on leadership for the long haul

September 16, 2024

WACO—True leaders not only build trust, but also draw upon trust to bring about transformation, author Tod Bolsinger told church and nonprofit leaders during a conference at Baylor University.

“There is no transformation without trust,” Bolsinger told participants at the “Leadership for the Long Haul” conference, sponsored by the [Program for the Future Church](#) at Baylor’s Truett Theological Seminary.

However, if leaders want to produce transformation, they cannot just build a big “trust account” for the sake of securing their own positions, he emphasized.

“Leadership is engaging a community of people toward their own transformation so that they can accomplish a shared mission,” said Bolsinger, author of *Canoeing the Mountains: Christian Leadership in Uncharted Territory*. “Transformation requires us to take risks.”

## Invest trust in transformation

Adaptive leaders who guide their people through changing circumstances understand they must “invest trust in transformation,” he insisted.



“Pay attention to the pain points,” author Tod Bolsinger told church leaders during a conference at Baylor University. (Photo / Ken Camp)

Effective leaders build trust with an eye toward transformation, putting together teams who help identify the unique gifts of the organization and determine how those gifts can be used to meet the needs of the world beyond the organization, he stressed.

“Pay attention to the pain points,” Bolsinger urged.

Recently, Bolsinger worked with leaders at Baylor to develop the university’s new strategic plan, “[Baylor in Deeds](#),” focusing on the question: “What does the world need Baylor for?”

The strategic planning team led 93 listening sessions with 2,300 participants, received and tabulated 310 listening group surveys, received 114 white papers from 521 individuals who offered proposals, and conducted 71 external interviews.

Bolsinger echoed advice he learned from a conversation with venture capitalists in Silicon Valley: “Nobody cares if your institution survives. They only care if your institution cares about them.”

# Charting a leadership journey



Linda Livingstone began service as Baylor's 15th president in June 2017 during what she candidly described as "a dark time" in the school's history, after an "institutional failure" to respond appropriately to sexual assault and sexual misconduct by student athletes. (Photo / Ken Camp)

He pointed to the recent history of Baylor University as a case study in transformational leadership, building on President Linda Livingstone's presentation about her "leadership journey" at Baylor.

Livingstone began service as Baylor's 15th president in June 2017 during what she candidly described as "a dark time" in the school's history, after an "institutional failure" to respond appropriately to sexual assault and sexual misconduct by student athletes.

"Baylor lost a tremendous amount of trust," she said.

Pointing out there was "no honeymoon" period when she arrived, Livingstone immediately went to work to regain trust with alumni, students

and potential students, parents and donors.

She and the board of regents chair held listening sessions with the “Baylor family” to allow them to be heard.

“We learned from our mistakes and made significant changes,” she said.

Those efforts bore fruit. In 2022 and 2023, national surveys revealed Baylor was among the nation’s [Top 10 Most Trusted Universities](#), scoring the highest marks in Texas and in the Big 12 Conference.

“God’s love can redeem and heal broken trust,” Livingstone said. “God is working in ways we may not even realize.”

## Focus on a future anchored in hope



Baylor University President Linda Livingstone described her “leadership journey” to participants at the “Leading for the Long Haul” conference, sponsored by the Program for the Future Church at Baylor’s Truett Theological Seminary. (Photo / Ken Camp)

Rather than simply build a trust account for its own sake, Bolsinger noted, Livingstone invested trust in transformation by focusing on the future.

Under her leadership, the university developed its “[Illuminate](#)” strategic plan, set an ambitious fund-raising goal and cast a vision to see Baylor become “a preeminent Christian research university.”

“As a leader, you must anchor yourself in hope during challenging times,” Livingstone said.

Baylor [attained Research 1 status](#) in December 2021—three years earlier than expected—and surpassed the \$1.1 billion giving goal for its [Give Light](#) philanthropic campaign, raising a record \$1.5 billion.

At the same time Baylor was navigating the trust-rebuilding process following the sexual abuse scandal, the university also had to “pivot and change” due to the COVID-19 global pandemic, she noted.

Effective leaders and the teams they build must “be nimble and flexible,” communicate honestly and transparently, rely on experts for the best information available at a given time, and “signal hope for the future,” Livingstone said.

“Don’t shy away from difficult situations, even when you don’t feel prepared,” she urged. “Each experience prepares you for the next challenge. Recognize God has placed you in a position of leadership for such a time as this.”