

# **UMHB built on prayer throughout its history**

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BELTON—From the first board meeting in 1845 to the quiet corners of campus where students still kneel in solitude, prayer has been the foundation of the University of Mary Hardin-Baylor.

For more than 180 years, prayer has shaped not only the daily rhythm of student life, but also the university's culture and identity.

"Prayer was very much a part of UMHB from the very beginning," said Beth Norvell, associate director of museum and alumni engagement at UMHB. "If you're going to start a Christian school, it better be a part of your core beliefs."

Minutes from the 1893 board of trustees report recorded pleas for divine wisdom during a challenging time of debt and declining enrollment.

Just five years later, the campus newspaper carried a student's spiritual vision: "It is our prayer that this small wave may grow larger and larger until it reaches eternity's shore laden with the freight of precious souls."

## **Revivals, sacred spaces important to UMHB**

Evidence in the UMHB archives indicates revival has been an important event on campus almost as long as the school has existed.



University of Mary Hardin-Baylor students pray during the 2025 Revival. A revival is held each year on the UMHB campus. (Photo by Hannah Van Beusekom / University of Mary Hardin-Baylor)

One of the most notable revivals took place in 1901. Described as “set to go down as one of the greatest revivals ever held,” it featured a packed house and 90 new additions to the local Baptist church.

In 1909, another revival reportedly led to the salvation of every girl on campus.

Today, that revival tradition continues in a tent on the Quad, where students gather for three days of prayer and worship.

This emphasis on student involvement continues with prayer committees for revival, Easter pageant and Mission Emphasis Weekend.

The spiritual foundation also extends to physical spaces—formal and informal—where generations have turned to God in prayer. Some of these sacred spots include Walton Chapel, the Parker Prayer Garden and the tree by Burt Pond, which has served as a popular prayer spot since the 1920s.

There is also Luther Memorial—where students gather annually for the

Easter pageant, praying overnight the night before the show—and Vann Circle, the traditional site for the See You at the Pole prayer event each fall.

Even the original site of the Cottage Home System dormitories, where Remschel Hall stands today, is remembered for its spiritual significance.

“The Cottage Home girls were required to seek the Lord on certain things,” Norvell said. “It’s a special spot that’s just rich in history.”

## **Prayer walks connect alumni to students**

For alumni, prayer is a way to stay connected to the campus, and alumni-focused prayer walks are a special way they can uplift students from anywhere in the world.

“This year, based on feedback from alumni, we wanted to have a more focused effort on what is happening on this campus,” said Director of Alumni Engagement Jeff Sutton ‘07. “We put together a guided prayer, so that as a collective, alumni were praying for God to move.”

Prior to Welcome Week, alumni also gathered for a prayer walk around campus, returning to spots on campus that had affected them most deeply—residence halls, academic buildings and even a favorite tree or bench.

“We tracked it so that we made sure each corner of campus had someone praying on it that evening,” Sutton said.

“Our prayer walks give people a way to connect with the campus in a real, meaningful way. It’s an intentional time to pause in the midst of busyness to just have a focus time to pray for this place that impacted our lives. We

ask God to continue to do in the lives of students what he did in each of our lives.”

## **Prayer woven into campus life**

One of the first experiences students take part in when they arrive as incoming freshmen is the Dubbing Ceremony at Crusader Stadium, where students are dubbed “Crusaders Forever” and are prayed over.

But it’s the day-to-day encounters with administrators, advisers, faculty and staff who incorporate prayer into campus life to encourage an integration of faith with education that help students and faculty see their work and studies as part of a larger spiritual purpose.

“I pray for and with my students often,” said Christan Hammonds, assistant professor of nursing. “I pray for them before the semester even starts, as I’m looking at their names on the roster, and as I walk around the classroom on day one, before they start filling in the chairs.

“I pray with them before each class and before each exam. I pray with them in my office. I pray for them when I’m at home.

“There is nothing more powerful than prayer. Bare minimum, it brings peace. It can also bring clarity. And it always brings us closer to the Lord and in alignment with his heart and will.”

## **Generational legacy of prayer**



Graduate student Anna Hoecke says prayer has kept her joyful and motivated throughout her time at the University of Mary Hardin-Baylor. (Photo by Hannah Van Beusekom / University of Mary Hardin-Baylor)

Graduate student Anna Hoecke imagines praying in the same spots her great-grandmother, Olive Chaffee Boggs, did when she was a student on campus more than 100 years ago.

After hearing countless stories from her family, Anna is proud to be a student at a school where her “Mimi Olive was a prayer warrior.”

“She was strong in her convictions, and I imagine she often took the ordinary walks across campus as opportunities to intercede,” she said.

Anna said prayer is her direct connection with God.

“Prayer is how I include him in my experience of this world that is ever pushing away from its Creator. ... I do it because he wants a relationship with me and wants space in my life to speak.”

She said prayer has kept her joyful and motivated throughout her undergraduate years and now while she pursues a Master of Science in Occupational Therapy.

“The depth of my prayer has directly correlated to my success in school, and I’ve continued to learn the value, power and peace that prayer brings.”

## **‘From its beginning ... unapologetically Christian’**

Each Monday morning throughout the semester, as the campus stirs to life, staff, faculty and administrators quietly gather in the President’s suite. There, in a circle of shared purpose and faith, a different voice leads a time of prayer and reflection.

“UMHB has always, from its beginning, been unapologetically Christian,” said President Randy O’Rear.

“The beauty of the Christian life is that we go directly to God with our requests and petitions. While God’s answer may not always be what we want or when we want it, God is faithful, and God always provides.”

Throughout UMHB’s history, prayer has helped cultivate a sense of unity and continues to remind everyone of their shared faith and purpose, he noted.

“One thing that has been heartwarming and humbling during my time as president has been the number of people who tell me they are praying for our university,” O’Rear said. “This happens almost every week.

“I believe God answers those prayers because I have seen it happen, and I believe that he will continue to do so for the next 180 years and beyond.”

*An expanded version of this article first appeared in UMHB Life magazine.*