

# John Vassar: I serve ‘God’s deeply loved creation’

June 9, 2020

John Vassar has been at the [University of Mary Hardin-Baylor](#) since 2017, where he is the provost and vice president for academic affairs. He is a of First Baptist Church in Belton. From deep in the heart of one Texan, he shares his background and thoughts on Christian higher education. To suggest a Baptist General Convention of Texas-affiliated leader to be featured in this column, or to apply to be featured yourself, [click here](#).

## Background

On a university campus, the provost serves as the chief academic officer. In this role, I am privileged to work with the outstanding faculty at UMHB to ensure our academic offerings are of high quality and meet the needs of our students, as well as our business and church stakeholders.

## Where else have you served, and what were your positions there?

Karen and I moved back to Texas from Shreveport, La., where I served as provost at Louisiana State University in Shreveport and she taught nursing. I taught at LSU Shreveport for 17 years. I also have served as an intentional interim pastor at churches in Texas and Louisiana.

## Where did you grow up?

I lived in McKinney until I was 10 years old. Our family then moved to Shreveport, La., where I remained through college.

## **How did you come to faith in Christ?**

I was blessed to be born into a family where Christian faith and Christian practice were both modeled and expected. My parents remain my greatest example of what faith should be and do. After coming to an understanding of my own brokenness and need for salvation, I was blessed to be baptized by Mack Roark, pastor of First Baptist Church in McKinney, and then spent formative years under the pastorate of John Sullivan at Broadmoor Baptist Church in Shreveport, La.

## **Where were you educated, and what degrees did you receive?**

I earned a Bachelor of Arts in history at LSU Shreveport. Sensing a call to ministry, Karen and I moved to Fort Worth, where I earned a Master of Arts in theology at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary. While there, I fell deeply in love with the Old Testament and went to Baylor University, where I earned a Ph.D.

## **About education**

### **Why do you feel called into education?**

In my experience, I've seen two things truly transform a person: an encounter with Jesus Christ and deep engagement with education.

Christian higher education presents a combination of these two life-changing actions. Fundamentally, I see Christian higher education as a form of discipleship, teaching students about this world with which God has blessed us.

### **How does being a Christian influence your work in**

## **education?**

Whether I've worked in a state institution or a Christian one, my faith has formed my understanding of others. Fundamentally, I see all people I serve—both co-workers and students—as God's deeply loved creation, made in God's image. This perspective guides my interaction with them and provides a context in which to understand how best to serve them.

## **What is your favorite aspect of education? Why?**

My favorite aspect of education is watching students grow. I love the "Aha" moment when a student grasps a complicated concept for the first time. When those moments occur, students experience a profound wonder and take their learning far outside of the classroom.

## **What one aspect of education gives you the greatest joy?**

In the classroom, I get tremendous enjoyment from watching our students grow in life and faith. Playing a small role in this ongoing, four-year life cycle from freshman to senior is wonderful. Watching students grow and mature in life and faith is my greatest joy.

In my administrative role, I get the opportunity to interact with some of the smartest, most grace-filled people on the planet. I'm grateful for the opportunity to work with remarkable faculty and staff colleagues who are focused on the mission of making UMHB the institution of choice for Christian higher education in the Southwest.

## **What is your favorite class to teach? Why?**

My favorite classes to teach are freshman Old Testament classes. In freshman classes, I get the honor of introducing texts to students who in many cases have not read them. The Old Testament is the Bible Jesus used, and the survey classes provide a great opportunity for students to be

introduced to God's mission to redeem creation.

Freshmen also are just starting out on their lives apart from their mom and dad. I love the opportunity to teach them about life and faith.

## **What is the impact of education on your family?**

Both of my parents were first-generation college graduates who met at Baylor. With their decision to pursue college, they changed the trajectory of our family and instilled in me a love for God and a love of this world.

At UMHB, we are serving more and more first-generation students every year, and that is a responsibility we take seriously. Education is a gift that spans generations.

## **If you could get one “do over” in education, what would it be, and why?**

I would pay closer attention to my college Spanish classes. God is bringing millions of people to our state over the next several decades. Many of these new Texans will be from minority communities, and many will be Hispanic. As Texas Baptists, we must serve all of our neighbors well.

## **About John**

### **Why are you Baptist?**

I am a Baptist out of a profound sense of gratitude. My earliest memories are etched with experiences in the Baptist church. Baptists traditionally have held a high view of Scripture connected to a fierce commitment of all people standing individually before God.

I have benefitted greatly from the cloud of Baptist witnesses who have gone before me and express my gratitude in part by being a part of an institution

that has served Texas Baptists for 175 years.

## **What did you learn on the job you wish you learned elsewhere?**

I am working on learning the importance of listening well. As one of my mentors often has said, leadership is fundamentally an acoustical art. I want to be a better listener and a better leader. It's a lifelong course.

## **What is your favorite Bible verse or passage? Why?**

My favorite passage is 2 Corinthians 5:18-19. This text reminds the Baptist in me that all Christians have been given a ministry—not just the clergy—and our ministry is to engage in the reconciliation of this world to the kingdom of God.

## **Who is your favorite person in the Bible, other than Jesus? Why?**

I love Job. I wouldn't want to switch places with him for a million bucks, but his circumstances pushed him into a raw, personal and painful relationship with God few have experienced. I aspire to his boldness and tremendous faith.

## **What are your Top 5 Christian films?**

*Jesus* (1979)—Campus Crusade's film has been the most widely translated and most widely viewed film in history. I've seen it used for evangelistic purposes in places as exotic as Alaska, Brazil, Russia and Collin County. It is an amazing tool for missions around the globe.

*Miracle Maker* (2000)—This is a great film you've never seen. It is a Russian stop-motion film that captures the loving power of Christ in a way that engages both kids and adults.

*Of Gods and Men* (2010)—A French film that won awards at the Cannes Film Festival and tells the true story of faithful monks who suffered unto death in northern Africa in the 1990s. It explores the question, “What would Jesus do?”

*The Tree of Life* (2011)—A painful and hopeful retelling of Job centered around the death of a child and the powerful role of God’s grace in our lives. As a bonus, it is set and shot in central Texas.

*Silence* (2016)—Scorsese’s moving story about missionaries in Japan and what it means to follow Christ to the very end.