

Lanny Hall: A lifetime in leadership, government and academia

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Lanny Hall served 50 years in education and government—11 of those in government. He was the president of [Wayland Baptist University](#), [Howard Payne University](#) and [Hardin-Simmons University](#). He serves as chancellor and president emeritus of Hardin-Simmons University.

From deep in the heart of one Texan, Hall 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

Where did you grow up?

I was born in Fort Payne, Ala. When I was in the first grade, my family moved to Fort Worth. Most of my public school years were spent in Northeast Tarrant County.

How did you come to faith in Christ?

Conversations about faith and salvation were common in my wonderful Christian home. During my early years, my dad was a Baptist deacon and was a part-time song leader in two churches.

I still fondly recall flannel-board lessons in the primary department of the Second Baptist Church in Fort Payne, Ala. and in Parkdale Baptist Church

in Haltom City, Texas. The biblical account of Samuel's interaction with Eli spoke to me in a powerful way. Sermons and Sunday school lessons piqued my interest, stirred my heart and provoked my thinking.

As if it were yesterday, I remember a conversation with my sweet mother in my bedroom when I was 7 years old. I asked her about the steps to salvation. A short time later, I "walked the aisle" after our pastor Orvel Brantley preached a Sunday evening service at Parkdale Baptist Church. In another week or two, I was baptized. My decision was real, my young life was changed, and a new life in Jesus followed.

Why did you feel called into leadership?

I felt God's leading me to a path of leadership, and I remember struggling with what God would have me do in life.

I recall in my late teens responding during a time of invitation, requesting our pastor pray with me about whether I was being called to full-time Christian ministry. My pastor, mentor and special friend Dwaine Greene encouraged me and devoted serious prayer to such a decision.

Over time, I experienced the Lord leading me to become a teacher, and that I should eventually explore government service and administration in public secondary and higher education.

In addition to your most-noted position, where else did you serve in leadership?

In addition to being a political science teacher and professor and a university president, I served as an aide to Congressman Jim Wright in Washington and as special assistant to the U.S. House Majority Leader. I was elected to three terms in the Texas House of Representatives, followed by serving as a deputy executive director of the Teacher Retirement System of Texas.

When did you retire from full-time academic leadership?

I retired from full-time service at Hardin-Simmons University in 2016.

How have you occupied yourself since then?

In addition to holding the positions of HSU chancellor and president emeritus, I have assisted universities in fundraising and consulting. Carol and I have traveled and enjoyed much more time with family.

Where do you live now, and in what church do you participate?

We live in Abilene and are members of Berry Lane Baptist Church there.

About leadership

What was your favorite or most joyful aspect of leadership? Why?

Dreaming big dreams for universities and developing action plans to achieve them. It was also a joy to see students realize their goals and to observe students following the Lord's leadership in their lives.

What part of leadership delivered the greatest heartache or headache?

Fiscal and personnel challenges can be exceedingly stressful.

What would you tell the young you, just starting out in leadership?

1. Start out as you hope to finish up.
2. Pay attention to the little things, realizing what General Colin Powell

says, “There are no little things.”

3. Read the 139th Psalm on a regular basis.

What do you wish more people knew about leadership or, specifically, your leadership?

I wish more people knew of the dedication of the staff and faculty at the universities where I have served.

How do you expect leadership to change in the next 10 to 20 years?

Competition for resources will become more and more fierce. The ever-present assault on values will intensify. Polarization will continue at the local church and at denominational levels. Leaders will need to understand their core values and be committed to model and follow them.

What was the impact of leadership on your family?

On the positive side, my roles in leadership gave my family opportunity to meet very interesting and successful people. We hosted many wonderful Christian leaders in our home and enjoyed rich and meaningful conversations.

On the negative side, the demands of serving in leadership in the rough-and-tumble worlds of government and higher education take an inordinate amount of time. Much of that time would have been spent better with family.

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

I would avoid procrastination—doing the uncomfortable tasks first.

About Baptists

Why are you a Baptist?

I strongly believe in the priesthood of the believer, Baptists' devotion to missions and the Great Commission. I believe in Baptists' commitment to the words of Jesus in John 14:6—"I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me."

What were the key issues facing Baptists during the heart of your leadership?

Baptist higher education is filled with land mines. I was disheartened many times by "extremists" on the right and on the left. If those extremists on either side were unhappy with me at times, I felt I was doing my job correctly.

During my government service, I had the same feeling, relative to partisan extremists. One of my professors in my doctoral work at the University of Texas in Austin often said, "If you want to be effective as a college administrator, you must have a high tolerance for ambiguity." The same is true about Christian life and leadership.

The key is to maintain forward motion through the mine fields of ambiguity, without compromising one's principles.

What key issues do you see for Baptists going forward?

Extremists will continue to apply pressure. God's word will continue to be challenged. As has always been the case, Baptists must resist indoctrination and work to learn to develop spiritual discipline to think for themselves.

During new student orientation at Howard Payne University each year, a

wise friend and colleague Paul Butler asked and answered two key questions: “What is the best thing about university life?” After pausing, he answered, “It’s the freedom that you have.” He then asked, “What is the worst thing about university life?” Again, he paused and then answered, “It’s the freedom that you have.”

For 25 years that followed, I asked and answered those same two questions at each orientation at Wayland, Hardin-Simmons and Howard Payne.

Freedom must be exercised with responsibility by Baptist leaders and church members—by all of us who follow Christ.

What would you change about the Baptist denomination—state, nation or local?

I would want us all to spend less time fussing and splitting hairs, and spend more time on the Great Commission.

About Lanny

Tell us about your family.

The love of my life and my wife of 53 years is Carol Bardin Hall. She has been a rock in my life and is the most pleasant person I know. I am so blessed to have her with me. We discovered each other at youth camp at Camp Copass in 1962.

God blessed us with two children. Our talented daughter Lana Carol McCutchen lives in Abilene and is married to Johnathan McCutchen. They have two beautiful daughters Lilly and Ada who have brought great joy to our lives.

We lost our only son Chad Lanier Hall when he was 35. He blessed us with a third beautiful granddaughter Chloe Michelle, who lives in Amarillo.

Who were/are your mentors, and how did/do they influence you?

Dwaine Greene, longtime pastor of Birdville Baptist Church, was a hero, mentor and lifetime pastor. He became my pastor during my junior year in high school and was the greatest influence in my life—other than my parents—until his death. He encouraged me to respond to God’s leadership in my life to be a public servant. I continue to use the lessons he taught me.

The late Congressman Jim Wright gave me the opportunity to realize a significant goal of working on Capitol Hill in Washington, D.C. I still can hear him tell me, “Loyalty is a two-way street.” He also stressed helping those who cannot help themselves is a worthy endeavor.

Bill Pinson, former executive director of the Baptist General Convention of Texas, modeled leadership strength with humility in Christian service. He was masterful in leading the BGCT. I am so thankful for his ongoing influence on my life.

My former boss Don Newbury gave me an enormous gift when he invited me to become executive vice president and chief academic officer at Howard Payne University. I learned from him you can have fun while tackling very difficult challenges in the university presidency.

My parents Doyle and Rachel Hall wanted the best for me. While they could not afford to provide the resources I needed for my college education, they affirmed, encouraged and supported me in my life dreams.

My fifth-grade teacher Mary Sieber, a devout Nazarene, demonstrated grace and affirmation to me that lives on in my heart.

Other than the Bible, name some of your favorite

books or authors, and explain why.

Future Diary by Mark Victor Hansen helped me to structure my dreams.

A Goal is a Dream With a Deadline by Leo Helzel. I enjoy planning and reading books on goal setting and visioning.

What is your favorite Bible verse or passage? Why?

Proverbs 3:5-6 and Philippians 4:13. These were my mother's favorite Scriptures, and she often would remind me of them. These two Scriptures inspire me to persevere, to keep on and to try to follow God's leadership in my life.

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

From the first time I experienced the Samuel story in that flannel-board lesson, I have loved the story of God's leadership in the life of young Samuel. I pray I will continue to be able to say as Samuel said, "Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening."

The Apostle Paul is a hero. While I cannot relate to his dramatic conversion on the road to Damascus, I identify with his humanness and his struggles as a Christian. I often am reminded by his words, "I was not disobedient to that heavenly vision" (Acts 26:19). That inspires me to strive for obedience in my life.

Name something about you that would surprise people who know you well.

I enjoy singing and playing the guitar and ukulele, and would like to sing baritone or bass in a gospel quartet. I once was in a singing duo with my best high school friend Lee Feris. We sang many times in high school and college. One of our favorite songs was "I Believe."