

Baptist universities face watershed changes: New presidents at three large schools

by [Hannah Lodwick ABP](#) in the [January 10, 2006](#) issue

Three of the largest Baptist universities in the U.S. have each chosen a different strategy in selecting the president who will shape the school's future. Analysts wonder which model will emerge as the new face of Christian higher learning in southern states where the Southern Baptist Convention is influential.

Baylor University's election of John Lilley, 66, as president comes after a time of division among alumni, faculty and administrators over academic freedom and the nature of Christian education. Lilley's status as an "outsider" from the University of Nevada could help ease the strife.

Mercer University, recently cut loose by the Georgia Baptist Convention, elected a champion of academic freedom, Baylor's recent interim chief, Bill Underwood, as president—raising a flag for the Christian liberal arts tradition.

And Samford University seems to have chosen a safe route. Its presidential nominee, Andrew Westmoreland, is president of Ouachita Baptist University, which has preserved close ties with Arkansas Baptists and avoided the conflict that has divided so many other denominational schools.

While each school's vision of a Christian college is different, each could play a role in defining the future of Baptist universities in the South.

The presidential changes at three of the five largest Baptist schools—enrolling a total of 25,000 students—are only part of the picture. Baptist colleges from coast to coast are experiencing upheaval of one sort or another.

On the very day Mercer and Georgia Baptists parted ways—November 15—Georgetown College left the Kentucky Baptist fold and Tennessee Baptists acknowledged that Belmont University in Nashville is cutting ties as well.

These are only the latest in a string of defections dating back several decades, and including schools such as Averett, Furman, Stetson, Wake Forest and Richmond. While other schools retain Baptist links, the trend is well-established and accelerating: the largest and richest Baptist colleges are going it alone, and others who can will follow.

At Baylor, Lilley's arrival creates an opportunity for change at the world's largest Baptist university, located in Waco, Texas. Lilley, considered a consensus builder, comes in as a relative unknown untainted by unrest at the university. While he has been a Presbyterian in recent decades, many believe this son of a Baptist pastor still has the Baptist credentials to get the job done.

Donald Schmeltekopf, provost emeritus, supports Baylor's policy that its president be a practicing and active Baptist. "John Lilley passes this test in his willingness to join a local Baptist church in Waco just two days after he was named president-elect of Baylor," Schmeltekopf said. "I think this approach should also be used as needed in the hiring of members of our religion department."

Although Schmeltekopf affirms that Baylor is explicit about its Christian affiliation, he notes that no Baylor documents refer to an official confession of faith, as is the case at Samford.

"I believe Baylor and Samford are much closer in their commitment to the unity of knowledge as expressed through faith and reason than Mercer is," Schmeltekopf said. "While there is a great deal of divergence on this point at both Baylor and Samford, both tend to see faith not only as an expression of redemption, but also as a genuine source of understanding."

That concept of the "unity of knowledge"—that faith and learning not only cohabit the Christian college campus but confirm and nurture each other—is at the heart of the conflict at Baylor and other schools. Despite differing opinions about how to apply statements of faith, Schmeltekopf says, most large Baptist universities are still intentional about being Christian, if not explicitly Baptist.

Schmeltekopf said that conflicts in the Baptist denomination arise today partly because church members have permitted "tertiary issues to trump our common membership in the Christian family of faith, the community of all believers."