Bob Jones University questions 'fundamentalist' label

by David Gibson
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GREENVILLE, S.C. (RNS) When Bob Jones III recently questioned whether President Obama is a Christian, it was a reminder not only that the fundamentalist leader is controversial but also how little the political world has heard from the man and the rock-ribbed Christian school that bears his name.

The relative silence emanating from Bob Jones University is all the more remarkable given the intensity of the Republican primary in South Carolina, and the power that the religious right here holds.

In many ways, the school is still recovering from the 2000 campaign, when George W. Bush spoke without mentioning the school's ban on interracial dating. Bush got hammered for the lapse (as well as staying mum on the school's view of Catholicism as a "cult") and apologized.

The university has since dropped the interracial dating ban, but no candidates visited the campus during the 2008 primary -- a sea change for a university that has been a must-stop venue for every Republican since Ronald Reagan.

So far this year, the closest any candidate has come is Texas Gov. Rick Perry, whose wife Anita made a low-key lunchtime visit to nursing students in mid-October.

Since the 2000 controversy "a lot of candidates have shied away from us," university spokesman Brian Scoles said during a recent tour of the 210-acre campus. "It's just the perception that remains."

Bob Jones III acknowledged in a Nov. 12 interview with the National Journal that he hasn't endorsed any candidate, in part because it "might actually hurt" whomever Jones backed.

But there's another, perhaps more consequential reason for the school's muted political voice: a subtle but steady shift in its approach to the world.

It started in 2005, when the mantle of university president passed to Stephen Jones, Bob Jones III's son and the first person not named Bob Jones to lead school since its founding in 1927.

The youngest Jones quickly distanced himself from the political legacy of his predecessors. "There were things said back then that I wouldn't say today," Stephen Jones said in 2005.

In 2008, he told a local newspaper, "I don't think I have a political bone in my body." That same year, Stephen Jones had the university apologize for banning interracial dating.

"We conformed to the culture rather than providing a clear Christian counterpoint to it," the statement says of the "segregationist ethic" that had prevailed. "In so doing, we failed to accurately represent the Lord and to fulfill the commandment to love others as ourselves. For these failures we are profoundly sorry."

The transformation is evident in other ways, too.

Long gone are the towering hedges and chain link fences that once kept the world out and the students in. Now a modern-looking sign welcomes visitors to the tidy, well-groomed campus.

Most faculty now live off campus and the students look much like they do everywhere. More than a few male students sported hipster porkpie hats on a recent visit, and while knee-length dresses are still required of young women in class, they can now wear pants at other times.

"We're not this strange society in the northwest corner of Greenville County," says Andy Rouse, 21, a senior. "There will always be stereotypes. That's the way the world works. But you will be judged by your actions."

There is a campus-wide Wi-Fi access, though a filter keeps out pornography. Drinking is still banned, as is rock-and-roll (and contemporary Christian music). Male-female boundaries are enforced through a careful system of chaperoned dating, but men and women mingle easily in the student center and across campus.

"Human nature is what it is. We know stuff goes on," Scoles said. "But we have an agreement with parents that we're going to keep that stuff to a minimum. How would it be for a Christian college to send a girl home pregnant? Or a boy home who is hooked on drugs or alcohol?"

The university is also dipping a toe in the waters of intercollegiate athletics, something that founder Bob Jones Sr. considered a dangerous dalliance with modernity. The university is starting slowly, fielding teams at the high school it operates while its college students have an annual cross-town soccer match with Furman University.

BJU leaders are also weighing alternatives to the "fundamentalist" label that has proudly defined the school (and a wide swath of the Bible Belt) since the 1920s.

"Basically, we've decided that we can't use that term," said Carl Abrams, a BJU history professor and a longtime member of the faculty. "The term has been hijacked and it takes you 30 minutes to explain it. So you need something else."

There has been no resolution to the discussions, but just the prospect of a shift has been enough to make other fundamentalists spew all manner of criticism, with conservative bloggers blasting the "landslide of liberalism" at the school, among the more printable epithets.

BJU has always been something of an outlier in fundamentalist Christianity. -- a liberal arts university dedicated to sending well-rounded, Bible-believing graduates out into the world.

Today, 3,700 students from all 50 states and overseas study everything from economics to philosophy, business to nursing, and even science, though BJU's commitment to "young earth creationism" raises eyebrows outside the school.

The Fine Arts program remains a distinctive feature. Music and drama are the lifeblood of the curriculum as students perform Shakespeare and other theatrical productions, and the university puts on a major opera every year. An art museum on campus features Renaissance and Baroque religious paintings in a collection that is one of the best in the country.

Political dynamics have also changed. In South Carolina, where every past BJU president enjoyed playing a kingmaker role, the GOP establishment now

overshadows outspoken individuals like Bob Jones III.

"The relative importance of the BJU crowd in the GOP is declining," said James L. Guth, a political scientist at Furman. "And many of the early BJU Republican figures have died, left politics or moderated."

Guth said a number of BJU graduates still wind up in Republican politics, but like the rest of the religious right, that faction has not been able to coalesce around a single candidate in recent elections.

Many have just been turned off.

"Politics is a dirty game. Sometimes I don't know if I'm up to it," said Rouse, who is considering post-graduate studies in political theory Yale University or the University of North Carolina.

Gary M. Weier, executive vice president for academic affairs and the university official who is considered closest to Stephen Jones, also noted that George W. Bush's presidency was something of a disappointment to many of his conservative Christian backers.

"There had been a tendency among conservative Christians to think that the way to shape the culture was through political power," Weier said. "I think conservative Christians bought into some of that on the political level, blurring distinctions between Christians and the Republican Party. It was easy to do."

BJU recently announced that Weier and another school official would share responsibility for running the university as Stephen Jones suffers from complications from a severe ear infection that has left him nearly incapacitated.

The landscape of conservative Christianity has also shifted. There are more Christian colleges than ever, and schools like Patrick Henry College, the late Jerry Falwell's Liberty University, and Pat Robertson's Regent University are more focused on training future political operatives and placing them in positions of power than Bob Jones ever was.

School officials insist that BJU's beliefs and mission have not changed; it's just the focus is more than ever on a "biblically-based liberal arts education" for students, as Weier pus it, be they aspiring housewives or pastors.

Whether these changes will be broad enough to attract the GOP candidates in 2012 is an open question. But the larger question is whether BJU -- and the wider Christian fundamentalist movement_ can continue to transform while maintaining their identity.

"That is one of the main challenges," Weier said. "There can be a perception that if you can change one thing, you can change anything. That's not our approach."