

by Dr. Bruce McLarty

Men on a Mission:

The Four Presidents of Harding University

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On Nov. 1, 2012, Harding University's board of trustees announced that I had been selected to become the fifth president in the university's 89-year history. As I prepare to assume this role on June 1, I approach the presidency as a sacred mission and a divine trust. The four men who preceded me in this office are important members of my personal "great cloud of witnesses" (Hebrews 12:1) – men who have boldly led, willingly sacrificed, deeply loved the Lord, and steadfastly maintained the spiritual mission of Harding University.

Some might describe Harding's first four presidents as a Greek teacher (J.N. Armstrong), a missionary (George S. Benson), a history professor (Clifton L. Ganus Jr.), and a businessman (David B. Burks). However, their similarities have been much stronger than their differences. They have all been committed to Christ

and His church; they have all viewed Christian education as anchored in the mission of God; they have all loved students; and they have all had a passion for world evangelism.

J.N. Armstrong

People in the Harding community often say that our first president, J.N. Armstrong, gave the university its soul. Born in 1870, Armstrong attended



Nashville Bible School, where he was influenced by David Lipscomb and James A. Harding. At the Bible school, he fell in love with and married Harding's daughter, and he followed his father-in-law to Bowling Green, Ky., when Harding moved there to start Potter Bible College in 1901.

Later, in 1905, Armstrong and some of the young, evangelistic teachers at Potter decided to move west and start a new Christian school in Odessa, Mo., which they named Western Bible and Literary College. During the next 19 years, these pioneer Christian educators would move on to Cordell, Okla., and then to Harper, Kan.

In 1924, they moved to Morrilton, Ark., where they joined forces with Arkansas Christian College to form Harding College. With profound personal sacrifice and unshakable faith that the Lord would provide, they laid the foundations of this Bible college in the spiritually rich but economically poor soil of rural Arkansas.

One of the most cherished stories at Harding through the years has been how Armstrong would go to California and hold protracted gospel meetings during the summer break. Sometimes he would receive \$50 for his summer's work. Then, because the



teachers at Harding were paid very little and very irregularly in those days, Armstrong would give \$5 to each of his struggling professors so that their families could eat and the struggling school could continue for another year. I like to think that, to this day, deep in the DNA of Harding University is the generous, pioneering, gentle, steadfast, irenic and God-trusting spirit of Armstrong.

George S. Benson

When Armstrong announced to the board of trustees in 1936 his plans to retire, the board invited George Stuart Benson to become Harding's second president. Born in 1898 in a two-room log house, Benson was a native of



the Oklahoma prairie. He had studied under Armstrong at Harper and was a member of the first graduating class of Harding College in Morrilton.

On July 2, 1925, he married Sally Ellis Hockaday, a teacher for Harding Academy in Morrilton and the daughter of the former chairman of the board of Cordell Christian College. Within six weeks of their wedding, they were crossing the Pacific on a ship taking them to do mission work in China.

For the next 11 years, the Bensons worked as missionaries in the Far East. During their first years in China, they encountered intense opposition to their work from the communists. Forced to move their ministry to the Philippines for a short time, they returned to China when the country once again opened to missionaries. This personal exposure to communism proved to be a defining experience in Benson's life. For the rest of his days, he was a passionate and vocal opponent of communism.

When Benson returned from China to become the president of Harding, he was confronted with a deep financial crisis. The college owed \$75,000 in the middle of the Great Depression. However, Benson was a man of incredible gifts, of enormous energy, of relentless drive, and with an iron will

that seemed perfectly suited for the challenge. His first steps were to set in order the financial house of Harding College. He brought all the financial affairs of the school under his control, and for the first time in Harding's history, the employees of the college were regularly paid fully and on time.

The most iconic picture in Harding's 89-year history is one taken on Thanksgiving Day 1939 when the mortgage was burned on the front lawn. Thanks to the tireless efforts of Benson, the generous support of students, contributions from the Searcy business community, and a \$25,000 gift from George Pepperdine, the \$75,000 debt was paid. The campus was called together on Thanksgiving Day for the special announcement. After a bonfire was hastily built, Benson handed the mortgage to Armstrong, who threw it into the fire.

Benson served as president of Harding from 1936 until 1965 – 29 amazing years. During that time, the student body grew from 324 to 1,228, and the value of the campus increased from \$600,000 to \$25 million. He is remembered and appreciated for so many things, but perhaps his distinctive legacy is that he rescued the struggling school from the brink of fiscal ruin and put it on firm financial footing.

Clifton L. Ganus Jr.

When Benson retired from the presidency in 1965, Dr. Clifton L. Ganus Jr. became Harding College's third president. Born in Hillsboro, Texas, and raised in New Orleans, La., he came to



Harding in 1939 and majored in Bible and history. When he graduated, he and his wife, the former Louise Nicholas, headed to the Mississippi Delta, where

he began preaching for the Charleston Church of Christ.

After he earned his master's from Tulane University, he returned to Harding to teach in the areas of his two majors. Later, he became the chairman of the history department, and from 1956 until 1965, served as a vice

president for the college.

Always viewing himself primarily as a preacher, Ganus proved to be a visionary leader for Harding. His inaugural address was titled "Pursuit of Excellence," and during his 22 years, he saw the student body grow from 1,228 to 2,998, and the value of the campus climb from \$25 million to \$90 million.

An amazing variety of new programs were started during this time: the NASA research program, Mission Prepare, the social work program, the preaching school (Christian Communications Program), the nursing program, the Doctor of Ministry program at Harding School of Theology, the Walton Scholars program, and Harding's first international campus (Florence, Italy).

Because of all this growth in size and diversity, Harding College became Harding University in 1979. You might say that Ganus took a respected Christian college and led it to become a respected Christian university.

Ganus was the first of Harding's presidents I have had the opportunity to know personally. He was the president of Harding when I came as a student in the 1970s, and I remember how much we respected him back then. During the years that I preached for the College Church of Christ, I got to know him as one of my elders. I have sometimes wondered if I would find his picture beneath the entry on "leader" in the dictionary.

Having served for 22 years as Harding's president and now completing 26 additional years as our chancellor, Ganus is the "E.F. Hutton" of the Harding community: When he speaks, people listen. This large, gentle, confident, adventurous, faith-filled man wears his power and influence as lightly as anyone I have ever observed. I have never seen him bully or coerce people, although it would be an easy thing to do if he so desired.

In the last 20 years, I have seen him take a special interest in mission work in Uganda, East Africa. He still makes two trips there each year, sometimes by himself, to visit missionaries and a Christian school he helped establish.

David B. Burks

Ganus retired from the presidency in 1987 and was succeeded by Dr. David B. Burks, a native of Truth or Consequences, N.M. Burks met his wife, the former Leah Gentry, while they



were students at Harding, and he served as the student body president during the final year of Benson's presidency. He went on to earn his master of

business administration (MBA) from the University of Texas in Austin as well as become a certified public accountant (CPA).

Then, in 1967, the couple returned to Searcy for him to begin teaching business classes and directing the placement office. In 1974, Burks received his doctorate in higher education administration from Florida State University. At Harding, he went on to receive the Distinguished Teacher Award in 1975 and 1986 and to become the dean of the College of Business Administration.

During the Burks presidency, the growth in programs seen during the Ganus era continued, adding new international programs in Greece, Australia, England, Chile, France and Zambia; the MBA program; the educational specialist (Ed.S.) and doctor of education (Ed.D.) programs; marriage and family therapy; information technology; electrical, mechanical and computer engineering; the physician assistant program; the doctor of pharmacy program; and the physical therapy program.

Total enrollment has grown from 2,823 students to nearly 7,000, and the endowment has grown from \$19 million to \$115 million. Anyone who has been on campus in recent years knows that almost every building has been renovated and that Harding University is one of the most beautiful universities to be found anywhere in the nation.

I was aware of Burks when I was a student at Harding, but I did not really get to know him until I moved back to Searcy in 1991, four years after he became president. During

these past 22 years, I have known him as a friend, as one of my elders, as a leader I admire, as my boss, and as my mentor. He is widely respected in education circles and has served on the boards of a number of higher education organizations.

However, I am certain that he sees himself first and foremost as a Christian servant-leader. He views his role at Harding as an expression of his life as a disciple of Jesus. Although known primarily as a university president, he has probably preached more sermons in the past 26 years than many located ministers.

As I reflect on the 89-year history of Harding University, I am struck by how much has changed since 1924 and yet how little. Largely as a result of the service of my four predecessors as president and the small army of committed Christian educators who sacrificed alongside them, the heart and soul of Harding continue to be Christ-centered education. Admittedly, along the way have been many struggles, numerous bumps in the road, some failures, and more than a few controversies. Yet the Christian mission that brought us into existence remains at the center of who we are and why we exist.

A Greek teacher, a missionary, a history professor, and a businessman have all been valuable instruments in the hands of God for establishing, preserving, guiding and growing Harding University. Each man brought unique gifts that were needed to address the challenges of his particular time in history. As is often heard on the Harding campus, "God knew just what we needed at the time!"

Armstrong, Benson, Ganus and Burks are inspirational members of my personal "great cloud of witnesses," and I pray that someday, when my time as president is finished, people will be able to say of me what we all say of them: Above all else, they were faithful, and they kept Harding true to its founding Christian mission. □

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