FORMER PRESIDENT
NOONKESTER, 88, DIES

Noonkester’s 33-year presidency known for transformation of college into strong institution

BY JOSHUA WILSON
EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

Funeral services for former William Carey president Dr. J. Ralph Noonkester, 88, will be held at 11 a.m. Thursday, Oct. 4, at Main Street Baptist Church in Hattiesburg. Visitation will begin at 9 a.m. and continue until the time of the service.

Dr. Noonkester served as president of Carey for 33 years from 1956 until 1989. He arrived at Carey when it was still known as Mississippi Woman’s College in 1952, serving first as a professor of Bible and dean of the college. His wife, Naomi, was the college registrar and later served as an active first lady of the college.

He became college president in 1956 as the college became co-educational and became known as William Carey College. At the time, enrollment stood at only 374 students and only six buildings stood on the Hattiesburg campus. Three degree programs with 20 majors were offered at the time.

When he became president, Dr. Noonkester was only 32 years old and was the youngest college president in the United States at the time.

During his presidency, the college greatly expanded. By the time of his retirement, there were 18 buildings on the Hattiesburg campus and eight on the Gulfport campus, which was established during his presidency. He worked to restore the academic excellence that had been the standard at Mississippi Woman’s College and, by his retirement in 1989, enrollment stood at 1,700 and academic programs had expanded to 11 degrees and 30 majors.

His work was instrumental in achieving full accreditation for the college by the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools, a feat he accomplished at the end of his second year as president.

In addition to establishing the Gulfport campus, Dr. Noonkester also established the New Orleans campus with the absorption of the Mather School of Nursing at Southern Baptist Hospital in New Orleans. The purchase of the old Gulf Coast Military Academy property in Gulfport also prompted the establishment of the Gulfport campus, which was destroyed by Hurricane Katrina in 2005 but has since been relocated to property in Harrison County.

Dr. Noonkester was also responsible for the college’s integration, signing the Civil Rights Compliance Pledge and thus allowing Carey to become the first private college in Mississippi to admit African-American students.

Born in Flatridge, Va., on June 10, 1924, Dr. Noonkester received degrees from Marion College, Southern Baptist Theological Seminary and the University of Richmond. In addition, he had additional study at Harvard University. He served as minister of education at First Baptist Church in Charlottesville, Va., from 1950-1952 before his arrival at Carey.

He is survived by his wife, Naomi, and his children, Myron C. Noonkester and Lila D. Noonkester. He and Naomi married in 1947 and Myron arrived in 1957, followed by Lila in 1961. The Noonkester School of Arts and Letters, of which Myron Noonkester serves as dean, is named in the former president and his wife’s honor.

At the time of his death, Dr. Noonkester was still active at Carey, serving as an adjunct professor teaching New Testament and as president emeritus. He was often seen on campus visiting with faculty, staff, and students and was beloved by all he encountered.

“No two people have been more influential in the history of William Carey University,” wrote Professor Obra Quave about the Noonkesters in an address given at the 2007 dedication of the Noonkester School. “[Ralph Noonkester] shares some of [college namesake William] Carey’s qualities, such as the ability to persevere and to accept a challenge and see it to fruition.”

Dr. Ralph Noonkester took what was considered a big challenge, revitalizing a school that many thought would be shut down, and transforming it into a modern, viable institution.

He truly lived out William Carey’s most famous quote: “Expect great things from God, attempt great things for God.”