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Liberty University

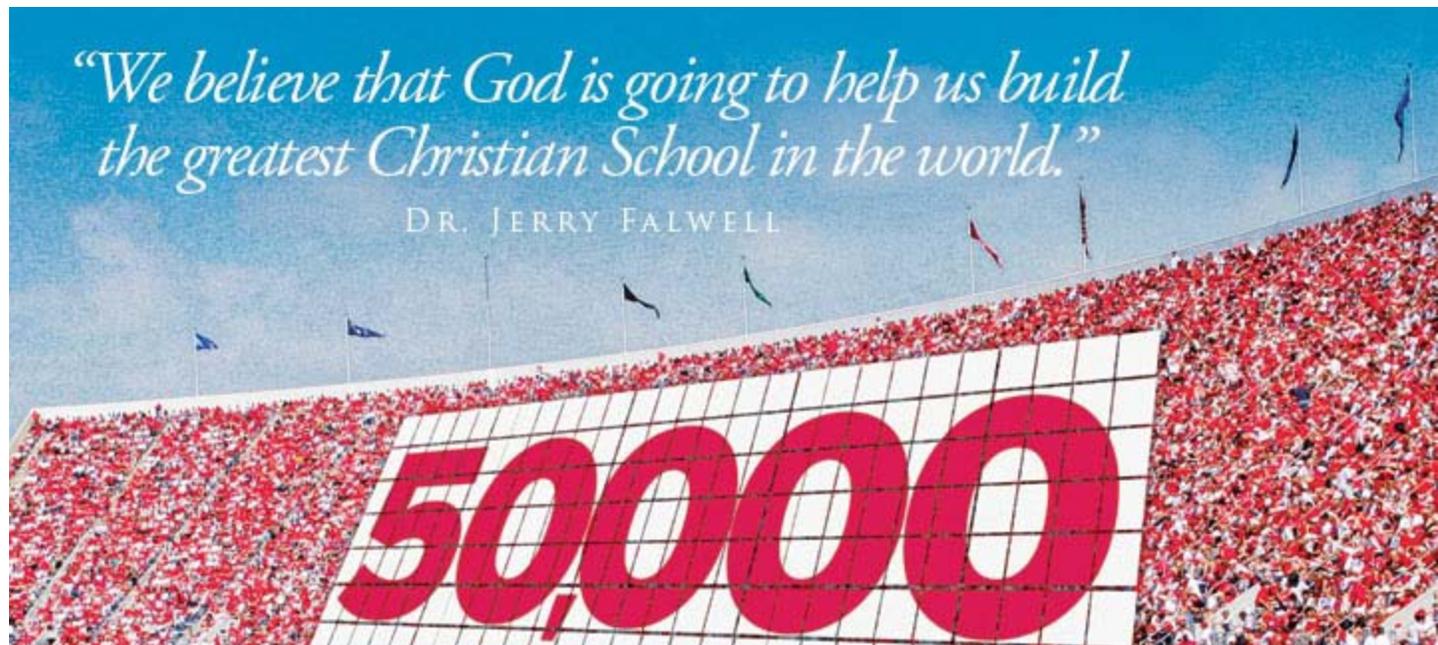
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Vision fulfilled: Dr. Falwell's dream of 50,000 students comes true

April 01, 2010 | David Hylton

The late Dr. Jerry Falwell, co-founder of Liberty University, once said, “We believe that God is going to help us build the greatest Christian school in the world.” Part of that vision was having 50,000 students taking classes through LU.

Today that vision has been realized. When the spring semester began in January, more than 50,000 students were taking classes on LU’s campus in Lynchburg, Va., and throughout the U.S. through Liberty University Online. There are currently nearly 12,000 residential students and more than 48,000 online students – through early March a total of 60,195 students were enrolled making LU the largest non-profit private school in the United States.



“Dad originally had a goal of 5,000 students,” said Chancellor and President Jerry Falwell, Jr. “Elmer Towns [Liberty co-founder and dean of the School of Religion] has often told the story about how that vision changed almost overnight when my father suddenly declared that Liberty would one day enroll 50,000 students.”

In a sermon in 1985 at the old Thomas Road Baptist Church, Falwell, Sr. told the congregation about his dreams for LU. He said that it was time for America to receive a new word from the Lord.

“I’m praying for the day after the turn of the century [when] we will have 50,000 students [at Liberty] ... students who will train to be preachers, missionaries, evangelists ... doctors, lawyers, journalists, politicians. ... We want to train 50,000 a year,” he said.

Chancellor Falwell said his father revised the vision slightly over the years due to technological advances in education.

“Over the last few years, we have seen online delivery methods become even more popular,” he said.

Falwell said that when his father died in May 2007, his vision for LU was to enroll 25,000 online students and 25,000 residential students.

Towns said that he and Dr. Falwell talked about building a big university, but “big” 40 years ago was a few thousand students. The original plan was to buy houses near the old Thomas Road Baptist Church and develop a university there.

But, Towns said, “All of a sudden one day he said, ‘We’re going to have 50,000 students.’ I laughed. I didn’t believe it. I thought it was unreachable. ... Dr. Falwell believed the impossible.”

“When you have faith in God,” Towns said, “you can change the world.”

Following the announcement of the 50,000-student milestone at a convocation in February, students around campus expressed their excitement about being a part of fulfilling one of Dr. Falwell’s goals, including painting the Spirit Rock near the Vines Center with the words “50,000 students” and uploading a photo to Facebook with a 50,000 students badge as their profile photos.

“I feel blessed to know I am being used by God to fulfill a goal set forth by the late Dr. Falwell,” said senior Shanna Kormanik. “I have such respect for his visions as I believe him to have been a man after God’s own heart.”

Senior Dana Chepulis had similar thoughts.

“It is such an overwhelming honor to be a part of something so big,” she said. “Clearly God is at work at Liberty University and Dr. Falwell’s dreams are living on in so many ways, this is just one of many. I feel so blessed to be a part of such a God-centered University with such amazing Christian leaders.”

Now that one of Dr. Falwell’s visions has been fulfilled, Falwell, Jr. continues to focus on the future.

“We’re now the world’s largest Christian university,” he said. “We’ve been blessed here with so much, and we’re excited about what the future holds.”

Founded in 1971 as Lynchburg Baptist College by Dr. Falwell and Towns, the school began with 154 students. Classes were originally held in the Thomas Road Baptist Church Sunday school classrooms.

LU has seen steady growth over the years with its student population, but has seen a boom in recent years both on campus and online. LU Online had about 27,000 students enrolled in May 2008 — that number has grown by nearly 20,000 in less than two years.

“If our entire student body tried to gather at the Vines Center, we would need a facility seven times that size. We’d have to rent out Dodgers Stadium,” said Chancellor Falwell.

In addition to being the largest nonprofit private school in the U.S. and the world’s largest Christian university, LU is the largest religious-based school in the U.S. and is one of the top 25 largest degree-granting schools.