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Championing the Vision: Jonathan Falwell leads TRBC into its second generation

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Already a booming church blessed beyond measure with a new facility on Liberty Mountain, the recent stories coming out of the 22,000-member Thomas Road Baptist Church still amaze its pastor.

“Lives are being changed, people are getting saved and churches are getting planted — all coming right out of Thomas Road Baptist Church. It’s still happening,” said the Rev. Jonathan Falwell. “That’s a huge statement: to think that the founder, the person who created all of that is gone, yet, ‘it’s still happening.’”

The Rev. Jonathan Falwell became senior pastor shortly following his father’s death on May 15, 2007, even preaching the Sunday following his death but prior to his funeral. When he’s not in the pulpit or in meetings at the office, he keeps a rigorous travelling schedule, speaking at conferences, ministry training centers and conventions all over the country and, most recently, Israel. He has published two books since he became senior pastor: “Innovate Church,” written with other TRBC leaders, and “One Great Truth: Finding Your Answers to Life.”

His commitment to the ongoing work at TRBC is obvious in the long list of projects accomplished there in just two years.

Outreach projects in and around Lynchburg have shown that he is intent on reaching the community outside the church doors.

“This past fall, we had over 2,700 of our members involved [in community service projects],” Falwell said. “We built numerous playgrounds for community centers and public schools. We rebuilt homes that were falling down for people who couldn’t afford to do so. We provided truckloads of food to families in the community.” Community group classes on Wednesday nights continue to reach out to the unchurched, as everyone from the NASCAR enthusiast to the fly fisherman to the knitter and scrapbooker have had a chance to hear the Gospel and many have been saved through that ministry.

But it’s not just the local community that members are reaching out to. TRBC has spearheaded outreach projects all over the country — and world. In the U.S., members are helping to rebuild a church in San Leon, Texas, that was destroyed in a hurricane by raising \$50,000 and sending out work crews. In Iraq, TRBC is working on planting four churches. When TBN began broadcasting services from TRBC last year, 2.3 billion more homes were being reached worldwide. Now, the church has taken on perhaps its largest mission project ever as it announced a merger this spring with Gleaning for the World, a humanitarian organization assisting millions of people in 57 nations around the world who suffer from poverty, hunger, sickness and natural disasters.

But for Falwell, a 1988 alumnus of Liberty University, none of this could have been accomplished without the strong foundation his father laid, with God’s supreme guidance.

And on a personal level, he credits Liberty University — built on his father’s vision to “train Champions for Christ” — for making him the Champion that he is in ministry today.

Training Champions for Christ



“Whenever he [Dr. Jerry Falwell] mentioned the words ‘Liberty University,’ somewhere in that conversation was ‘training young champions for Christ.’ It wasn’t a flippant phrase that he just happened to come up with — it’s something that was purposeful, intentional and it was often.”

— Rev. Jonathan Falwell

He recalls his Dad using the “Champion” phrase as far back as he can remember.

“It was a rare occasion that he didn’t mention those words to the student body; it’s rare that he didn’t

mention it every time he went out and spoke when I traveled with him all over America, as well as when he spoke at Thomas Road,” he said.

The phrase wraps up in a few words the original vision Dr. Jerry Falwell had for the university: he wanted every student to leave Liberty with a passion for reaching the world for Christ.

“That was something he purposefully talked about every occasion he could because he wanted to make sure people like me, people like our professors, people like our staff, and people like our students at the time and students who would show up in years to come would always understand ... that that is what Liberty University is all about,” Jonathan Falwell said. Jonathan Falwell is serving his alma mater by helping to ensure that vision never blurs. As Vice Chancellor for Spiritual Affairs, he serves as an advisor to his older brother, Chancellor Jerry Falwell, Jr., on matters of faith and practice.

“I rely on Jonathan and other elders at Thomas Road Baptist Church for advice on issues that impact the spiritual mission and doctrinal purity of Liberty University,” the chancellor said. “The university has a strong board of trustees and faculty that are committed to the university’s original mission but, if that ever changes, the church creates one more layer of protection to prevent Liberty from straying away from its Biblical roots as so many other universities have done.”

The chancellor often consults with his brother on what speakers or musical groups to bring to campus. Liberty’s campus pastors also look to Jonathan Falwell and TRBC as their ecclesiastical authority.

The partnership with the church and college is something that is quite unique — and lasting.

“You can go back and look at the model Dad had years ago, that the church gave birth to the university,” Jonathan Falwell said. “Dad saw Liberty University and the Liberty Christian school system, which includes LCA (Liberty Christian Academy) and LU, as nothing more than one more tier, one more offshoot of a local church.”

Before the university became self-supporting and grew much larger than its mother church both in facilities and in revenues, it was much like other ministries that the church supported — its children’s ministry, student ministry, men’s and women’s ministries, for example, he said.

Now fully supported on its own but still located at the church’s doorstep, the university continues to reap benefits — and vice versa — from the partnership.

“By having a local church tied to the university and being the spiritual water of the university, it’s something I think will benefit the university for years to come,” Jonathan Falwell said.

At Thomas Road, Liberty students have “an opportunity to see a successful local church and get involved in it,” he said. “It gives them one more opportunity for service and for worship.”

Having the students so nearby, even though they participate in separate services on campus every Wednesday and Sunday and convocation three times a week, “brings life, it brings energy, it brings excitement” to the church, Falwell said. “It still adds a significant level of energy to everything that we’re doing (at TRBC).”

He said Thomas Road can draw on the wisdom and knowledge of Liberty’s faculty, too, as many have remained faithful church members: “People like Elmer Towns (Liberty co-founder and Dean of Religion),” he said. “Elmer’s here because of Liberty, but you look at 38 years where he’s been a part of Thomas Road and added such incredible value to the church. Harold Willmington — for 37 years. ... You go to any pastor’s office in the world and you’ll find ‘Willmington’s Guide to the Bible;’ and he’s sitting in our services; he’s part of our services; he’s teaching in our classrooms; he’s somebody the world looks to for information.

“I’ve often said, ‘With Elmer Towns and Harold Willmington around, I’ll never have to get a Ph.D., all I’ll do is just read their stuff,’” he said, laughing.

It’s obvious the pastor is proud of his father’s legacy and will do all he can to see that the original mission is fulfilled at TRBC and in the lives of Liberty students every day.

“Look back to all of the movements and the churches and the schools and the ministries that have been started in the last 50 years around this country, and the ones still happening after the person who founded it is gone are only a handful,” he said. “But yet it’s still happening here every day. To me, that probably is the greatest testament to who my Dad was — he built something that transcended him. And that’s huge. Huge, huge, huge.”