

THE CAMPBELL YEARS
By Philip E. Jenks
The American Baptist, Sept/Oct 1987

One thing you can say about Robert Campbell. He looks important. This occurred to folks in 1978 when they saw him standing next to Jimmy Carter. A person from another planet might guess that the tall, tanned Californian was the leader of the free world, while the short man from Georgia was just another Baptist deacon.

The important office actually held by Campbell was that of General Secretary of The American Baptist Churches. He served as chief executive officer of the 1.6-million member denomination for fifteen years, longer than any other person. In this post he administered the policies of the 200-member General Board and coordinated the work of four national boards and 37 regional boards. This month he stepped down to become president of The Eastern Baptist Theological Seminary in Philadelphia.

For most American Baptists, Campbell's departure from the bureaucracy is a noteworthy event. He has presided over more denominational history than most leaders, and most of that history has been significant. When he entered office in 1972, his first task was to implement a major reorganization of the denomination's structure. This was no mean job, as anyone knows who is familiar with the amount of paper work that can be generated by a changing organization. Campbell's willingness to face the endless swirl of details created rumors that he enjoyed minutia. This was probably unfounded, and it was eventually clear that he was anxious to get the denomination reorganized so that it could get on with its most important task: the mission of Jesus Christ.

The denomination's mission efforts took great strides during the years Campbell was at the helm. Recently, American Baptist Churches President Walter Pulliam cited the advances as "among the most significant in our history."

"Exciting new ventures like Grow by Caring, the goal of planting 500 new churches, the Alive in Mission capital funds campaign, and many others will be monuments to his leadership," Pulliam said.

Campbell is also known in thousands of American Baptist congregations as a genial leader of great personal warmth. He is extremely popular as an inspirational speaker, and widely respected as a Biblical scholar. At the same time, as is the case with any chief executive of a diverse organization, a lot of complaints and heated criticisms have come to his desk or have been personally directed at him. "I've seen folks really dump on Campbell," recalls a regional executive, "but I've never seen him lose his temper. He really tries to give people complete answers, even if they're not the answers they want."

Years of Preparation

Robert Charles Campbell was born on March 9, 1924, on a farm near Chandler, Ariz., the son of Alexander and Florence Betzner Campbell. He grew up in Phoenix working at his

Scottish father's bakery and, when it went broke during the depression, he turned to pumping gas at this father's gas station.

A friendly neighbor convinced Alexander Campbell to allow his son to take a few hours off from work to attend church. Years later, Robert admitted with a grin, the resulting time off was a strong inducement to be a faithful church-goer. Before long, he made his personal decision for Christ, and was baptized. His decision to enter the ministry followed shortly afterward, when he was still in high school.

Very few persons have been better prepared than Campbell for the joys and stresses of denominational leadership. For one thing, there is probably no more adequate training ground for dealing with stress than appearing on national broadcast media, and he did that with a high measure of success. In 1963 he presented network television's first lecture series on the four Gospels on NBC's "Frontiers of Faith." In 1975 he addressed the nation with 13 Bible studies on NBC Radio's "Art of Living."

Campbell is also the best educated general secretary in the denomination's history. He has studied at a dozen institutions of higher learning and holds five earned degrees (including the B.D., Th.M. and Th.D. degrees from the institution he now heads, Eastern Seminary.) He is fluent in Greek, and his flawless Hebrew once attracted the attention of Israeli Prime Minister David Ben Gurion.

Following a ministry to youth and Temple University students at Baptist Temple, Campbell served as pastor of the 34th Street Baptist Church in Philadelphia from 1945 to 1949. He also has served as interim pastor at numerous congregations in Pennsylvania, New Jersey, and California.

Campbell married Lotus Graham in 1945. The Campbells are the parents of two children, Robin Carl, an attorney, and Cherry Colleen, a member of the faculty at the University of California at Los Angeles.

In 1953, Campbell was named assistant professor of New Testament at the California Baptist Theological Seminary (now American Baptist Seminary of the West). In 1954 he became dean of the seminary, a position he held for 18 years.

In 1972, he was elected general secretary of The American Baptist Churches by overwhelming vote of the delegates attending the annual meeting in Denver, Colo. As is fitting for a preacher who is trained to sense the ability of an audience to tolerate a long sermon, Campbell delivered the shortest acceptance speech on American Baptist record: "Thank you, I think."

Shortly after assuming office, Campbell told the Associated Press that he hoped to have a role in clarifying the American Baptist image. "(We are a) progressive, evangelical denomination...radically committed to our Biblical faith which drives us to strong social and this-world involvements," Campbell said. "We are one of the religious bodies with enough freedom and flexibility to meet adequately the needs of tomorrow's world."

In later years, Campbell addressed more directly the problem of denomination identity. “We call ourselves diverse,” he said. “Well, diversity is a lousy identity.”

He went on to cite four adjectives which will probably serve for years to come as the most widely quoted description of who American Baptists are. “We are,” Campbell said succinctly, “evangelical, ecumenical, interracial, and international.”

Indeed, Campbell’s ability to capture complex ideas in as few words as possible may be one of his most important contributions to American Baptist consciousness. Even so, he is not exactly a person of few words. He is the author of scores of magazine and journal articles (including a regular column in *The American Baptist*.) His books include *Great Words of the Faith*, *Evangelistic Emphases in Ephesians*, and *The Gospel of Paul*. His most recent book, *Jesus Still Has Something to Say*, was published this year by Judson Press.

After a decade and a half in office, Campbell retains a high level of energy and enthusiasm for administration and ministry. When he was elected president of Eastern Seminary last spring, he said, “More than any other school Eastern prepared me for ministry. I’m looking forward to contributing to Eastern’s evangelical mission, supporting the work of the local church, and taking the whole Gospel to the whole world.”

As Robert Campbell moves on to a new position, ABC President Pulliam said, with a modicum of understatement, “He has served faithfully and well, and he will be missed.”

In fact, a lot of American Baptists find it difficult to think of the office of general secretary apart from Campbell. Whether he was listening intently to the concerns of pastors in small Baptist churches in North Dakota, or smiling into television lights, or teaching the Bible in Biennial Meetings, or walking the streets of Calcutta with Mother Teresa, or struggling with his jet-lag at yet another executive committee meeting, Robert Campbell carried the office with skill and grace.