

“Churches of Christ and the Higher Education Landscape of Alabama, 1945-Present”

Churches associated with the Stone-Campbell Movement, or Restoration Movement, have long played important roles in education in the state of Alabama. Admittedly, many of the institutions opened and operated by these congregations are no longer functioning, such as the former Alabama Christian College in Berry (associated with the Churches of Christ)¹ and the ill-fated University of Alabama School of Religion (proposed by the Disciples of Christ).² One might also point to the groundbreaking Lum Graded School in Lowndes County (started by and for Black Disciples of Christ)³ or T.B. Larimore’s Mars Hill Academy (a forerunner of the current Mars Hill Bible School)⁴ as laudable yet long-gone programs. Still, several of Alabama’s universities, and many more of its primary and secondary schools, have close ties to the Stone-Campbell Movement.

In this presentation, I will overview the histories of the three present-day Alabama universities associated with the Churches of Christ—Amridge University, Faulkner University (as well as its attached Jones School of Law), and Heritage Christian University—before offering some broader observations about the past and present of the Stone-Campbell Movement-affiliated educational institutions in the state.

¹ Larry Whitehead, “Alabama Christian College of Berry,” *Alabama Restoration Journal* 1, no. 1 (November 2005): 2-3; Earl Kimbrough, “Alabama Christian College at Berry,” *Alabama Restoration Journal* 2, no. 1 (February 2007): 23-25.

² John Young, “Disciples of Christ and The University of Alabama School of Religion That Wasn’t,” *Alabama Review* 75, no. 3 (July 2022): 199-224.

³ Lawrence A.Q. Burnley, *The Cost of Unity: African-American Agency and Education in the Christian Church, 1865-1914* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2008), 218-223.

⁴ Nathan Guy, *The Mars Hill Story: 150 Years of Mercy, Love, Peace, and Truth* (Florence, AL: Mars Hill Press, 2020).

From Ann Street to Amridge

The stories of Amridge University and Faulkner University both began with the 1942 establishment of the Montgomery Bible School by Rex A. Turner, Sr., Leonard Johnson, and Joe Greer.⁵ This school, first located in a two-story house on Ann Street in Montgomery, originally offered high school and introductory collegiate courses and soon expanded into a full junior college. A contemporary account from Asa M. Plyler observed that “This school exist [sic] for the primary purpose of teaching the Bible and train and encourage [sic] young men to preach the Gospel of Christ.”⁶ Historian Earl Irvin West notes that it was primarily “through Turner’s hard work and persistence [that] the school grew” despite its dire financial circumstances.⁷ Bachelor’s degrees were added to the catalog in fairly short order, so in 1953, the name of the school was changed to Alabama Christian College (no connection to the aforementioned school in Berry) to better reflect its full range of programs.⁸

In order for this new Alabama Christian College to seek accreditation as a junior college, the school’s governing board decided to end its upper-level offerings, but rather than abandon them altogether, a new institution—the Alabama Christian School of Religion—was established in 1967 on the campus of the College Church of Christ in Montgomery.⁹ Seven years later, in 1974, ACSR moved to a new facility near the Landmark Church of Christ, which also hosted the

⁵ For more on these three men, see the brief biographies included in B. Raymond Elliott, *Ann Street Memories: The Early Years, Montgomery Bible School-Alabama Christian College, 1940s & 1950s* (B. Raymond Elliott, 2015), 28-51.

⁶ Asa M. Plyler, *Historical Sketches of the Churches of Christ in Alabama* (Henderson, TN: Hester Publications), 170.

⁷ Earl Irvin West, *The Search for the Ancient Order*, vol. 4 (Germantown, TN: Religious Book Service, 1987), 136.

⁸ E.R. Brannan, “The Early Years of the Montgomery Bible School,” in B. Raymond Elliott, *Ann Street Memories: The Early Years, Montgomery Bible School-Alabama Christian College, 1940s & 1950s* (B. Raymond Elliott, 2015), 22-23.

⁹ “History of the University,” in *Amridge University Academic Catalog 2023-2024 Academic Year*, 36.

school's inaugural lectureship program in 1976.¹⁰ Because of the school's continued expansion in enrollment and in programs (graduate-level coursework began in 1972, for instance), the school again moved in 1987 to its current site neighboring Auburn University at Montgomery.¹¹ This new structure, known as the Morgan W. Brown Building, was so named because of a donation provided by the estate of Lucille Brown in honor of her late husband.¹² ACSR also received accreditation in 1989, capping a decade of growth and maturation.¹³

In 1991, the name of the school was changed to Southern Christian University to more accurately convey the broader geographical and educational ranges it served.¹⁴ A mid-century revamping of SCU's distance education program, long a key driving force for the university,¹⁵ led to the institution's 1998 selection as one of only fifteen schools featured in the United States Department of Education's Distance Education Demonstration Program.¹⁶ Seeking to emphasize even more strongly its distance offerings, the school briefly took on the moniker of Regions University in 2006 and then its current name, Amridge University, shortly thereafter in 2008.¹⁷

Contra the frequent name changes, Amridge University has been led by only four presidents (three on a permanent basis, one in an interim capacity) since its founding,

¹⁰ *Lecture Outlines of Alabama Christian School of Religion 1976 Annual Lecture Program, November 8-11, 1976* (Montgomery, AL: Alabama Christian School of Religion, 1976).

¹¹ "History of the University," 37.

¹² Dabney Phillips, *A History of the Church of Christ in Alabama* (1990), 73.

¹³ "History of the University," 37-38.

¹⁴ "History of the University," 38.

¹⁵ Distance education has long played a key role in the school's success, even prior to its move to online learning. Roger Mac Adkins, in "The Differences in Students' Perceptions of Learning Between Extended Learning Program Students and On-Campus Students at Southern Christian University" (EdD dissertation, Auburn University, 1998), 10, notes that "From 1967 to 1993, Southern Christian University serviced 49 extension locations in 12 states."

¹⁶ Kay Gilcher and Cheryl Leibovitz, "Distance Education" (PowerPoint presentation, NASFAA National Conference, Minneapolis, MN, July 18-21, 2004), <https://fsapartners.ed.gov/sites/default/files/attachments/presentations/04NASFAADistanceEducation2.pdf>.

¹⁷ Jamie L. Howard, "A Phenomenological Study of the Online Doctoral Journey: A Look at the Lived Experience of Amridge University PhD Students and Their Spouses" (PhD diss., Amridge University, 2013), 51-52. See also Dana Chandler, "Churches of Christ in Alabama," *Encyclopedia of Alabama*, <https://encyclopediaofalabama.org/article/churches-of-christ-in-alabama/>.

demonstrating remarkable consistency during an era of constant administrative turnover throughout higher education writ large. Rex A. Turner, Sr., a cofounder of the Montgomery Bible School, served as the president of ACSR for its first twenty years; his son, Rex A. Turner, Jr., followed in the same role from 1987 until his untimely death in August 2008.¹⁸ Stanley Douglas Patterson served as interim president from that time until February 2009, at which point Michael C. Turner became president of the school, a post he continues to hold.¹⁹

Forging Faulkner

Of course, Amridge University was not the only university to grow out of the Montgomery Bible School. Faulkner University, also associated with the Churches of Christ, likewise experienced its own development as an independent institution throughout these same decades. After the mid-1960s spinoffs of the aforementioned Alabama Christian School of Religion and the present-day Alabama Christian Academy (a closely related K-12 school which nevertheless falls outside the purview of this paper), ACC continued operation as “an educational institution where each student is taught the Bible daily in conjunction with his study of the academic arts and sciences and the vocations.”²⁰ 1965 brought the main campus’s only relocation—to its current location on Atlanta Highway—though satellite campuses were added in the other notable Alabama cities of Birmingham, Huntsville, and Mobile in 1975.²¹

The early-to-mid-1980s brought two major developments to the school—in 1983, its purchase of the Jones School of Law, and in 1985, its renaming to Faulkner University. The

¹⁸ Phillips, *A History of the Church of Christ in Alabama*, 73.

¹⁹ “History of the University,” 39-40.

²⁰ John F. Wilson, “Faulkner University,” in *Encyclopedia of the Stone-Campbell Movement*, eds. Douglas A. Foster et al (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2004), 333.

²¹ Wilson, “Faulkner University,” 333; “Our History,” Faulkner University, <https://www.faulkner.edu/about-faulkner/>.

Thomas Goode Jones School of Law predates all of the present-day Churches of Christ-affiliated universities in Alabama by several decades, having been established in 1928 by a son of its namesake, a former Alabama governor.²² Ownership of the school passed to Charles Bennett in 1963 and then to the University of Alabama Board of Trustees in 1972. Despite its ties to UA, the Jones School of Law operated in a makeshift capacity on the Huntingdon College campus for several years. In fact, at the time of its acquisition by ACC, one account notes, “it had about 75 students, 5000 volumes in the library, and was operating in leased space.”²³ Today, however, Jones School of Law is one of only two law schools connected with Churches of Christ-affiliated universities; the other is the Caruso School of Law at Pepperdine University.²⁴

The purchase of Jones School of Law by ACC was made possible in large part through the financial support of James H. Faulkner, Sr., better known as Jimmy Faulkner, a significant Alabama businessman and politician. Biographer Elvin Stanton quotes Faulkner as recalling that “the University of Alabama, who owned the school, was not going to do anything with it. They had purchased it... so that no other public institution could have a law school in the capital city. I thought that perhaps the university would not mind a private Christian-oriented school owning it.”²⁵ Faulkner’s appraisal of the situation proved accurate, and for this bold move and his longstanding support of ACC in general, the school was renamed Faulkner University in 1985.²⁶

²² For much more on the governor and his place in late nineteenth-century Alabama political culture, see Brent J. Aucoin, *Thomas Goode Jones: Race, Politics, and Justice in the New South* (Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press, 2016).

²³ Ruth Ott, “Jones School of Law,” in *The Heritage of Montgomery County, Alabama* (Clanton, AL: Heritage Publishing Consultants, 2001), 63.

²⁴ Elvin Stanton, *Faith and Works: The Business, Politics, and Philanthropy of Alabama’s Jimmy Faulkner* (Montgomery, AL: NewSouth Books, 2002), 76.

²⁵ Stanton, *Faith and Works*, 74-75.

²⁶ Caroline Greer, “Faulkner University,” *Encyclopedia of Alabama*, <https://encyclopediaofalabama.org/article/faulkner-university/>.

(The former Faulkner State Community College, which was united along with several other schools into Coastal Alabama Community College, was likewise named in Faulkner's honor.)²⁷

Faulkner University has been led by several presidents; the school's website proclaims its current to be its ninth, though I have only been able to identify eight. Montgomery Bible School founders Leonard Johnson and Rex A. Turner, Sr., served as co-presidents from 1942 through 1948. Turner continued alone as president until 1973, holding that role at Alabama Christian College and Alabama Christian School of Religion simultaneously for a period. E.R. Brannan (1973-1981), J. Walker Whittle (1981-1982), and Ernest Clevenger Jr. (1982-1986) followed Turner's tenure, though none served anywhere near as long. However, Billy Hilyer, who was appointed executive vice president and then president in 1986, remained in that role for nearly thirty years. He was succeeded by Mike Williams, who served as Faulkner's president from 2015 through 2021, when he left for the same position at Harding University in Searcy, Arkansas. Mitch Henry, the school's current president, took office in 2022.

A New Generation of "Larimore's Boys"

The final of the three present-day Churches of Christ-affiliated universities in Alabama, Heritage Christian University, is located not in Montgomery but in the city of Florence. To an even greater degree than Montgomery, Florence is saturated with Churches of Christ, largely as a result of the nineteenth-century efforts of evangelist and educator T.B. Larimore. In honor of Larimore's legacy, which includes the first iteration of the school at Mars Hill, a group of leaders in Florence-area Churches of Christ established a short-lived "T.B. Larimore School of Evangelists" in January 1966 under the care of the Mars Hill Bible School Board of Directors.

²⁷ "Coastal Alabama Community College History," <https://www.coastalalabama.edu/about/history/>.

According to historian Brad McKinnon, “Supplementing the work of Mars Hill Bible School, the new T.B. Larimore School of Evangelists was seen as a restoration of the type of preacher training accomplished at Larimore’s academy in the late 19th century.”²⁸ Though the non-credit program, which opened with 70 students, only lasted for the 1966 calendar year, another, much more permanent institution for training ministers would soon materialize in the Shoals area.²⁹

The first decades of that school’s history are covered in much greater depth in Vernon Shuffett’s 2002 *As the Waters Cover the Sea*, the only full-length monograph on any of the three universities discussed here, but a quick recap is helpful nonetheless. In January 1969, classes began at a new Southern Institute (or College) of the Bible, led by preacher Malcolm Hill. The small, unaccredited school met at the Eastwood Church of Christ and offered a handful of three-year degrees related to Bible and ministry.³⁰ The following year, in a major shakeup, the entire Board of Directors was replaced, Hill resigned as president, and the school itself was reorganized as International Bible College under the leadership of Charles Coil. (Barry Anderson, a local church leader involved with the creation of the T.B. Larimore School of Evangelists, stepped in briefly as interim president prior to Coil’s selection.)³¹ Coil would serve as president until 1989; during his tenure, the school moved to a new campus on Helton Drive in 1978 and reached its goal of full accreditation by the Accrediting Association of Bible Colleges a decade later.³²

²⁸ Brad McKinnon, “‘A New College with a New Idea’: The Beginnings of Heritage Christian University,” in *Do All in the Name of the Lord: A Festschrift for Mechelle Thompson* (Florence, AL: Heritage Christian University Press, 2024), 78.

²⁹ McKinnon, “‘A New College,’” 78; “History,” <https://www.hcu.edu/about/history/>.

³⁰ Scott Harp, “Charles Coil: Our Beloved President,” in *Things Most Surely Believed: Festschrift for Charlie Wayne Kilpatrick* (Florence, AL: Heritage Christian University Press, 2021), 155; Vernon Shuffett, *As the Waters Cover the Sea: Heritage Christian University: The International Bible College Era* (Florence, AL: Heritage Christian University, 2002), 7.

³¹ McKinnon, “‘A New College,’” 80.

³² Phillips, *A History of the Church of Christ in Alabama*, 71; Harp, “Charles Coil,” 156-160; Shuffett, *As the Waters Cover the Sea*, 8. For a figurative snapshot of the student body during this era, see John Byron Poore, “Attitudes of Selected Bible College Students in Mississippi and Alabama Related to Death and Dying” (EdD diss., Mississippi State University, 1982).

Alumnus Dennis Jones followed Coil as president, likewise serving in the role for an extended period of time (1990 to 2017).³³ Graduate programs were added to the school's offerings in 2000, and in turn, the name of the institution was changed to Heritage Christian University the following year.³⁴ Most recently, following Jones's retirement, Freed-Hardeman University professor Kirk Brothers became the president of HCU in 2018 and remains in the position today.³⁵

The Three Universities, Today and Tomorrow

Today, Amridge University offers all of its programs through an online distance education format, but it does still maintain a small physical campus in Montgomery with offices, a library, and classrooms equipped for videoconferences. The university's mission statement, available on its website, describes the school as an "independent, coeducational institution dedicated to the spirit of its Christian ideals and heritage."³⁶ According to the NCES College Navigator website, for the fall 2022 semester, the school enrolled 228 undergraduate and 419 graduate students, with a 64% female to 36% male undergraduate ratio.³⁷ The US Department of Education's College Scorecard, as of its April 2023 update, adds that a reported 69% of the undergraduate student population was Black, second only to the historically Black Southwestern Christian College among the colleges and universities associated with Churches of Christ.³⁸

At present, Faulkner University is, by a significant margin, the largest and most traditional of the three universities associated with the Churches of Christ in Alabama. Its

³³ Shuffett, *As the Waters Cover the Sea*, 122; "History."

³⁴ Shuffett, *As the Waters Cover the Sea*, 196; "History."

³⁵ "History."

³⁶ "Mission and Purpose," <https://www.amridgeuniversity.edu/about/>.

³⁷ NCES College Navigator, <https://nces.ed.gov/collegenavigator/>.

³⁸ US Department of Education College Scorecard, <https://collegescorecard.ed.gov>.

mission “is to glorify God through education of the whole person, emphasizing integrity of character in a caring, Christian environment where every individual matters every day.”³⁹ The student body for the fall 2022 semester was composed of 1,792 undergraduate and 1,025 graduate students. Like Amridge, the undergraduate population skews female (56% to 44% male).⁴⁰ And although Black students do not comprise a majority per the College Scorecard, they do make up a significant percentage (41%) of the student body.⁴¹

The smallest and most narrowly focused of the three schools, Heritage Christian University, “exists for the advancement of churches of Christ by equipping servants through undergraduate and graduate programs and continuing education for real-world ministry with a focus on evangelism and a commitment to scripture.”⁴² Distance education is central to Heritage Christian’s programs, though unlike Amridge, there are in-person classes and a small number of on-campus dormitories. According to the College Navigator site, the school’s fall 2022 enrollment included 82 undergraduate and 61 graduate students. Unlike the Montgomery schools, male students constitute the lion’s share (85%) of the student body,⁴³ which also has a primarily white (89%) composition according to the College Scorecard.⁴⁴

In many ways, these three universities are all quintessentially Alabaman; they are, after all, associated with the Churches of Christ, congregations which have higher-than-average concentrations in both Montgomery and Florence. Like the other institutions across the nation with ties to Churches of Christ, these schools will have to reckon with changes in their

³⁹ “Our Mission: Your Success,” <https://www.faulkner.edu/our-mission-your-success/>.

⁴⁰ NCES College Navigator, <https://nces.ed.gov/collegenavigator/>.

⁴¹ US Department of Education College Scorecard, <https://collegescorecard.ed.gov>.

⁴² “Mission Statement,” <https://www.hcu.edu/about/mission-statement/>.

⁴³ NCES College Navigator, <https://nces.ed.gov/collegenavigator/>.

⁴⁴ US Department of Education College Scorecard, <https://collegescorecard.ed.gov>.

fellowship and on the higher education landscape. Colleges and universities associated with Churches of Christ nationwide are almost universally facing a decline in the percentage of their freshmen classes who hail from Churches of Christ. Yet, more optimistically, total enrollment at these same schools is on the rise, buoyed by a more denominationally diverse student body and new degree offerings at the graduate level. According to reporting by Calvin Cockrell in the *Christian Chronicle*, the paper of record for Churches of Christ, Faulkner's fall 2022 "total enrollment fell by 1 percent, but new undergraduate enrollment is up by more than 10 percent and new graduate enrollment by nearly 13 percent."⁴⁵

Hopefully these recent trends will continue and allow these schools, and similar private colleges and universities elsewhere in the state, to survive in an era which has already claimed the Baptist Judson College, the Lutheran Concordia College Alabama, and the nondenominational Southeastern Bible College and which has posed an existential threat to the Methodist Birmingham-Southern College. Though there has been at times, as Wayne Flynt has noted, a perception that "the small denominational colleges... that had dominated southern higher education throughout the 19th century were symbolic of impractical, elitist, isolated colleges,"⁴⁶ the truth today is that such schools continue to provide education and training necessary not only for the preservation of their constituent churches but for the well-being of the state as a whole.

⁴⁵ Calvin Cockrell, "Enrollment outlook: It's complicated," *Christian Chronicle*, November 8, 2022, <https://christianchronicle.org/christian-universities-enrollment/>.

⁴⁶ Wayne Flynt, *Alabama in the Twentieth Century* (Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press, 2004), 237.