Burnett takes reins as William Carey University president

HATTIESBURG, Miss. — Ben Burnett was inaugurated Oct. 10 as the tenth president of Baptist-affiliated William Carey University (WCU) in Hattiesburg. He replaces Tommy King, who retired after nearly six decades of service to the school.

"I have to admit that envisioning myself as a college president has been the most difficult task in my 37-year career as an educator," Burnett said. "It's more than evident to me that I would not be standing before you today unless God had blessed me with thousands of people who influenced me during my lifetime."

Burnett listed parents, grandparents, and siblings among his supporters, along with teachers when he was a student at the University of Southern Mississippi in Hattiesburg from which he holds both masters and doctoral degrees; colleagues and mentors during his years in K-12 public schools; and his wife Denice and son David Lane who made sacrifices to support his career, overcame medical obstacles, and through it all pursued careers in higher education.

A lifelong educator, Burnett served two terms as superintendent of the Lamar County School District in Purvis. He retired from public education in 2014 and became dean of the WCU School of Education.

He also served as WCU's executive vice president from April 2020 until Aug. 16 of this year, his first official day as president of the university.

Many of the inaugural's speakers hailed Burnett's influence on their lives, among them Hattiesburg Mayor Toby Barker.

"I have known Dr. Burnett since his days as Lamar County superintendent, when I was still a relatively new lawmaker on the House Education Committee. In those days, we were both elected officials, but he possessed a great deal of policy and life experience I had not yet accumulated.

"He always treated me as an equal and respected both of our roles. Then and now, he epitomized servant leadership," Barker said.

WCU trustee Odean Busby, executive chairman of PriorityOne Bank in Magee and chairman of the presidential search committee that brought Burnett forward, said, "After a seven-month search, we were very pleased to find our new president right here on campus. Dr. Burnett has an exciting vision for William Carey and a clear understanding of the challenges and opportunities facing higher education."

Jimmy Stewart, senior pastor of First Church, Gulfport, delivered the inaugural address. "As chairman of William Carey's board of trustees this year, I'm thankful that you are the one God so clearly pointed us toward, to lead us forward through whatever storms may come, and through whatever celebrations we experience.

"Dr. Burnett, God has prepared you, positioned you, protected you. Storms of testing will make you stronger. Storms have always made us Carey-strong when we remain Christ-strong," Stewart said.

Brett Golson, WCU vice president for spiritual development and church relations, presented a special plaque of appreciation to the new president's father, 96-year-old Marshall Burnett.

"On behalf of the Cooper School of Missions and Ministry Studies, we would like to recognize you for more than five decades of faithful service to our Lord as a campus minister, pastor, hospice chaplain, and World War II veteran.

"Thank you for the positive influence you've had on so many lives, especially your son, Dr. Ben Burnett. We are also excited to announce that 52 years of your sermons will be archived in the Cooper School library and WCU's main library where they will be available to ministry students for generations to come," Golson said.

In his inaugural address before an audience of 1300 assembled in the theater of the Thomas Fine Arts Center on the WCU campus, Burnett emphasized the importance of community.

"I want our students to know the power of influence as they take their educational journey. I encourage you to stop and say thank you to the people who have influenced you, but also pray that God will use you to influence others," he said.

For more information on William Carey University, click here.