

Rhonda Kelley – former first lady, professor at New Orleans Seminary – dies

Rhonda Kelley, who served at New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary, died Feb. 17 at the age of 72 after an ongoing battle with cancer. She was the wife of NOBTS president emeritus Chuck Kelley and known for her passion for women's ministry.

The seminary confirmed her death Saturday morning. She was the associate director of Innovative Evangelism and an adjunct professor of women's ministry at NOBTS, where her husband was elected as president in 1996 and served until 2019.

"Along with the entire NOBTS and Leavell College family, we mourn the loss of our eighth first lady," seminary president Jamie Dew said. "Dr. Rhonda Kelley served with grace, dignity and compassion for over 23 years at our wonderful school. Her love for her husband and her Savior were a source of encouragement to us all. This is indeed, a very sad day for all of us, but we rejoice in the full assurance that we have in our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, standing confident that we will see her again in glory."

Dew's wife, Tara – adjunct professor of ministry to women – added, "Rhonda loved God's Word and encouraged others to do the same. Her life and legacy continue to impact many women through the scholarships and endowments in her name and the books she authored."

Kelley held bachelor's and master's degrees in speech and language pathology at Baylor University in Waco, Texas, and basic and advanced certificates in women's ministry from NOBTS.

Women's ministry

Kelley was appointed by Southern Baptist Convention President Ed Young Sr. to a 1992 task force examining women's roles in the SBC. She was also involved in Lifeway's Women's Leadership Forum in 1996.

"My mission in life is to love the Lord who saved me and called me, to love and encourage my husband and to love others as myself," Kelley said. "My specific call is ministry to women ... leading them to faith in Jesus, discipling them in their faith and equipping them to use their spiritual gifts to serve the Lord."

Kelley served many years as First Baptist New Orleans' women's ministry director and filled various leadership roles for the Louisiana Baptist State Convention. At the denominational level, Kelley also served on the Council for Biblical Manhood and Womanhood, Women's Ministry Network, the Seminary Women's Network, Lifeway's Bible Study for Life advisory board and the Leadership Training Consultant Ministry Grid, president for a term of the Southern Baptist Convention Minister's Wives, and other roles.

Kelley authored or contributed to the 2014 "Holman Study Bible for Women," the Old Testament and New Testament volumes of the "Holman Women's Evangelical Commentary," "The Devotional for Women" and "Psalms and Proverbs Devotional for Women."

Her leadership produced the 1995 "Woman's Study Bible" by Thomas Nelson Publishers. She also published a Bible study series through New Hope and "Raising Moms: Daughters Caring for Mothers in Their Later Years."

The Kelleys are members of Fairhope First Baptist Church in Alabama.

She is survived by her husband, Chuck.

Kelley's funeral services will be held on Wednesday, Feb. 21, at First Baptist Church Fairhope, Alabama. Visitation will begin at 9:30 a.m., followed by the funeral service at 11 a.m. A memorial service will be held on Monday, Feb. 26, at 2 p.m. at New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary.

EDITOR'S NOTE – This story was written by The Baptist Paper and contributed to by New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary.