

An Interview with President William A. Griffin

Second President of Roanoke Bible College, 1986-2006

On April 17, 1986, Bill Griffin became the second president of Roanoke Bible College. This April—the twentieth anniversary—he is preparing to pass the responsibilities of the presidency to Dr. Clay Perkins, who will become the school's third president on July 1.

The achievements during President Griffin's time at the helm are numerous. The most visually obvious was the construction of the Blanton Center, which houses the school's library, gymnasium, and chapel. Perhaps the most far reaching accomplishment was regional accreditation by SACS (Southern Association of Colleges and Schools). Less obvious to the casual observer is the solid financial base that he has worked diligently to develop.

While most people will remember him for the twenty years he spent as president, he has served the school in a variety of roles during the past 43 years. President Griffin has served as the bursar, as a professor, as the manager of the bookstore, as the dean of men, and later as the dean of students.

Along with all these other responsibilities, he and Mrs. Griffin, formerly the director of the library and currently the reference librarian, have served as models of a Christian marriage.

Recently I had an opportunity to talk to President Griffin about past accomplishments and future plans.

- Don McKinney

Associate Professor of Counseling

You have served as president of RBC for twenty years, and before that you were a student, dean of men, dean of students, an assistant to the president, and a professor. Do you remember the first time you heard about RBC?

I don't know that I can go back that far. Mr. BonDurant preached revivals in our area, and I remember hearing him preach a revival in Swan Quarter . . . but I don't know how long that was after the school started.

My mother had a sister in Coinjock. When we went to visit her, we came through Elizabeth City and stopped at the school. That was my first visit to the campus. Mr. BonDurant was bringing beds down from the attic for the camp that used to be on campus. The next year I came to camp here. That was the second year camp was held here. . . 1954.

You heard Mr. BonDurant preach revivals when you were a teenager, so apparently you were reared in a Christian home. What impact has that had on who you are today?

Tremendous. I often speak of myself as being somewhat like Timothy. Paul said of him that his faith was first in his grandmother Lois and then in his mother Eunice and then in him. My maternal

grandmother, Julia Dunbar, was a staunch defender of the faith, and I feel that was passed down to my mother. My dad became a Christian when I was probably seven. Then I became a Christian when I was nine, so I was right behind him. From then on all of my family was very active in the church. It had a tremendous impact on me.



Moses was prepared to lead the Israelites by his 40 years in Pharaoh's palace and 40 years in Midian. What happened to prepare you to be the president of RBC?

When I came to Roanoke in 1958, every student worked on campus. The first year I was here, my roommate, Ted Davenport, did a lot of repair work on campus and I was teamed with him. But if you know much about me you know that was a mismatch. So I didn't do a lot of work that year.

The second year I started working for Mr. BonDurant in the office and did a lot of secretarial work. One of the main tasks was keeping up with the *Messenger* mailing list. So that was somewhat preparation for me. I couldn't tell you when I first yearned to come back here to work. But I think it couldn't have been much after my sophomore year.

I spoke to Mr. BonDurant about coming back following my graduation, and we sort of worked through that agreement. I liked Old Testament, and that's what I wanted to teach. So I was gone a year and came back to teach.

You were gone for one year. What did you do during that year?

I went to Milligan College. When I was at Roanoke we had no type of accreditation. So I knew that in order for me to get any type of advanced degree I had to get what in those

days we called a standardized degree. I went to Milligan for one year and got a second bachelors degree, but this time from an accredited institution, so I could go to school wherever I wanted to.

What other degrees do you have?

I later earned an M. A. from East Carolina in American history and an M. A. in church history from Cincinnati Christian Seminary and a certificate of advanced graduate study in education from William and Mary.

When most of us think about Mr. Griffin, we think of the tremendous contributions he has made to RBC. But when you talk to him, it is obvious that he sees himself as more than an educator. His love for preaching goes back a long way.

When you first came to RBC was it your intention to become a preacher, or were you uncertain about your career goals?

No! No! I wanted to be a preacher. I can't tell you how far back. . . I must have been eight or nine. . . I can remember preaching in my grandmother's hall . . . preaching and holding communion there.

But you came to the school and just fell in love with it?

Right. But most of the time before I became president I was preaching as well. Even since then I have done a lot of preaching.

Mr. Griffin has held ministries at West Park, Portsmouth, VA; Gap Creek, Elizabethton, TN; Lowland, NC; Wenona, Pantego, NC; and Fairfield, NC.

You have been on the RBC staff for 43 years. Besides president, what are some of the other positions you have held?

When I first came back to the school I was teaching a heavy load. I was bursar, which meant I had the responsibility for collecting student accounts—which is always a joy! I ran the bookstore, which was very small in those days, and was the dean of men at the very beginning and eventually dean of students. During all that time I continued as the bookstore manager until 1976. When I became the president, I gave up the position of dean of students as well.

While you were dean of students, how many hours were you teaching?

Probably 12 hours every semester. Sometimes more. It probably wasn't until the last eight to ten years that I cut back to just teaching Restoration History and Family.

What else have you taught?

Primarily history--Old Testament, American, Western Civ. Also Denominations and World Religions.

As someone who has been part of the college—as a student, a faculty member, and an administrator—President Griffin has a great deal of respect for the education RBC has offered over the years. He is proud of what the college is able to do today, but his pride in the quality of today's product doesn't diminish his appreciation for the past.

How would you compare the education you received at RBC with the quality of education we are able to provide today? I am sure that is not an easy question to answer.

You are right. It isn't easy. I honestly believe that Mr. BonDurant is one of the best teachers I have ever had. He was so thorough in what he taught. I believe, though, that overall the quality of education today is better than it was then.

But you know when I hear some of those guys preach, who went to school in those early days, they are outstanding preachers. So I don't want to do anything that sells the education of that period short. I don't think the education of that period would work today, but I believe for the time we were doing it, it was an excellent education.

When you became president 20 years ago, what were some of your goals?

I have said over and over again there are three major goals that have driven my presidency. I don't know how far back all of them go, but one of the goals I had from the beginning was to put our finances on more sure footing. That is a goal we have made tremendous strides with.

I had a goal from the very beginning that we pass the 200 mark in students. That has been the most elusive goal. The third goal I had, that I believe goes back to the beginning, is that we become more of a service to the churches. That is something I am not sure the churches take advantage of.

As time went on, regional accreditation became very important to me. I am sure I did not feel as strongly about accreditation 20 years ago as I felt ten years ago. Expanding the buildings also became important. On the financial side, it was very important to me to increase the salaries of our faculty.

As President Griffin spoke about serving the local churches, he mentioned the college library, noting that any member of our churches can borrow books from the library just as students and staff do.

So, except for the enrollment, you feel these goals have been met?

I would say, except for that elusive goal of 200

students, the other goals have been reached.

What do you believe is the most significant change that has occurred?

It is very easy for me to point out my one greatest disappointment (the failure to reach 200 students). It is much more difficult for me to point out my one greatest happiness. I am particularly pleased with the building of the Blanton center.

I am particularly pleased with the SACS accreditation, and I am particularly pleased with what I believe has been a greater interaction with the community of Elizabeth City, including the other two schools in town. This interaction includes the licensure in elementary education program we have in conjunction with ECSU.

I am also pleased with what I believe is a real growth in our trustees. Another thing I worked on was an increase in professors' salaries. For a professor, from the time I became president in 1986 until today, there has been a 176% increase, or, if you consider inflation, a 55% increase.

Down that same line [finances], when I became president, our creditors knew Roanoke would pay them some time. They just didn't know when. Now every bill is paid within a month's time. There were times when salaries weren't paid. Now that doesn't happen. I am so thankful for that change.

In every job there are things you enjoy and things you do just because you have to. What is the part of the job that you really enjoy doing?

Probably more than anything, I enjoy interacting with people. I enjoy going to the churches and interacting with the people there. The same is true of interacting with the students on campus. And that is something I don't have to give up when I am no longer president.

What is the thing you enjoy least?

In a Christian organization it is very difficult to let someone go. There is no joy in that. In looking back, I am not sure that we have ever done it particularly well. Close to that is the area of strategic planning. I am not good at that, and I avoid it when I can.

RBC has come a long way since 1948. It has come a long way in the past 20 years. As you look to the future, where do you see RBC in 10 years, and what will the school and its constituency have to do to get there?

First of all, as I have said before, I am the chief cheerleader for Clay Perkins. I believe that he has a forward-looking mind that I do not have. I think he has the capability of leading the school to be what she can be in the future.

There are three things we must have from the constituency. The first and most important is prayer—a real concern for what is happening

here and bathing that in prayer. A second thing is that recruitment would not have to be dependent on the college but would be dependent on the churches and parents. There are churches that do a good job of that. We just need more of them. The third thing is finances—which will always be an issue. As the student body grows, finances must grow. Students pay about half of what it takes to run a school. The other half must come from churches, individuals, and corporations that believe in what we are doing.

Is there anything I haven't asked about that you would like to mention?

The one thing I haven't said is—and I don't want it in any way to sound like a false sense of modesty—but it is very important to say that in no way has this been a one-man show.

My wife has played a very important role, but we have a faculty and staff that have made everything possible. I may get the credit because I am out there in front, but [the progress] only happens because of a tremendous faculty and staff

When people think of Bill Griffin and his time at RBC, how do you hope they will think of him?

I guess I would like for them to say Bill Griffin came in on a wonderful foundation that President BonDurant and others had laid, and he kept it moving in the right direction. He did this without ever having abandoned the original purpose of the school, to educate men and women for career and volunteer Christian service, and through all of that, he stayed true to the doctrinal stance the school had from the beginning. He passed on to his successors his blessings for it to be even greater.

Whatever happens in the future, no matter how great it may be, I will never be envious. As much as I would have loved to have seen us reach that 200 mark, if in the first year of Clay's presidency enrollment passes 200, I will be cheering. If in the second year it is 300 and the next year 500, I will still be cheering.

Mr. President, on behalf of the faculty and staff at RBC, I would like to thank you for your many contributions to the school so far and for your willingness to share these thoughts with us.

When Dr. Perkins becomes president in July, President and Mrs. Griffin will be given a six-month sabbatical. After the sabbatical, Mr. Griffin will continue to serve the school very much as he has in the past, taking on whatever responsibilities are passed his way. He will continue to teach and will be an assistant to the new president.