

How One Christian University Was Birthed—And Grew—by Faith

Bryce Jessup's father and university namesake, William Jessup, was so intent on establishing a Bible college in the 1930s that he didn't let the struggles of the Great Depression and a lack of money stop him, because he knew God had big plans.

After all, raising \$17,000 to fund a new college during the Depression was nothing short of a miracle. And miracles continue to happen today.

It was during the tail end of the Great Depression—Sept. 19, 1939, to be exact—when 35-year-old William L. Jessup officially started a modest Bible college in San Jose, Calif. Modest in the sense that only 14 students enrolled that first semester at what then was called San Jose Bible College.

The Jessup household was the center of the college, and the family truly sacrificed. That was evident some evenings at the dinner table. When money was tight and the kitchen cupboards were barren, fig pudding baby food often served as a meal for the entire family.

Although the fig pudding was “horrible” and he longed for something better, Bryce can look back at those humbling times and realize the family's faith in God helped them persevere.

“Thank God for those early days of faith and trust in Him. God blessed [us] abundantly,” recalls Bryce.

Bryce Jessup can peer through the rearview mirror and see many days and even years of trials and tribulations that the faith-based college endured. But the bottom line is that the college did endure.

It avoided shutting down on several occasions and this month

is blessed to be celebrating its 75th anniversary. This isn't just a story about a college surviving; it has become a story about a university that is thriving at a time when some private Christian colleges and universities are struggling.

The younger Jessup was a graduate, former instructor and eventually became the school's fifth president. Bryce Jessup served in that role for 26 years and was the driving force in moving the campus to its current 128-acre location in Rocklin, California.

Enrollment grew at the San Jose Christian College (that name change came in 1989), but the school was running out of room and needed more space to offer the breadth of courses that students wanted. When it took expansion plans to the city, San Jose officials complained about practically everything the school brought to the table.

The college was on the brink of closing numerous times while in San Jose for more than six decades. Bryce recalls numerous instances when God provided indications that closing was not part of His plan.

"I remember preparing to tell our faculty there would be pay cuts," Bryce said. "That very afternoon, as I opened the mail, we received a check from a woman who passed away years prior, but her estate settled just in time to meet our needs. Instead of delivering bad news, we had a service of celebration and no pay cuts were necessary."

Bryce Jessup, still a vibrant man at age 79, and now the university's President Emeritus, fondly recalls a "let's-find-a-new-campus" visit to the Sacramento region in 2002. Bryce assembled a "Dream Team" to help him pursue a vision he knew came from God and was bigger than himself.

Desperate for a new location, the group from San Jose Christian College took a wrong turn one afternoon on Highway

65 near Sacramento and wound up seeing a for-sale sign that ultimately led to putting down roots in Rocklin, where they established the newly renamed William Jessup University campus in August 2004.

"We may have experienced many detours in our 75-year history, but you have to remember that detours often lead to the Promised Land," Bryce said.

It certainly was a leap of faith for the Christian university, which transformed a vacant furniture factory into a new campus that opened with 400 students in 2004.

When this semester's classes began in August, WJU had tripled its enrollment from 10 years earlier to approximately 1,200 students; with roughly half of that growth coming in just the past three years. This is the sixth straight year of record enrollment at the growing university. Incoming students this fall are represented from across the United States and internationally, including students from Australia, Turkey, Thailand and Ukraine.

The university has increased the number of majors to 20, with a total of 50 programs ranging from degrees in ministry to physics to public policy. The university also offers a Masters degree in teaching.

In addition, Christian Universities Online last month listed William Jessup as one of the "50 Most Affordable Christian Colleges in the U.S."

"William Jessup University continues to be recognized for the excellent higher education value we are providing in Northern California," Dr. John Jackson, the school's sixth president said of its continuing walk of faith. "[A]n increasing number of students and family are seeing us as the provider of choice for affordable excellence in higher education. We are excited at the ongoing story of growth and expansion happening at the university. We are continuing the walk of faith that [our

forebears] have continued for 75 years.”