

Mark Labberton Named Fuller Theological Seminary President

With one foot in the church and the other in the academy, Mark Labberton says he's ready for his new role as president of Fuller Theological Seminary, the world's largest multidenominational seminary.

"It feels very exciting and daunting," said Labberton in an interview shortly after he was named March 12 as the next leader of the flagship evangelical seminary in Pasadena, Calif. He was the unanimous choice after trustees considered 250 nominees.

Labberton, who turns 60 on March 23, served for 16 years as pastor of First Presbyterian Church of Berkeley, Calif., a Presbyterian Church (USA) congregation near the University of California campus. From there, he returned to Fuller, where he earned his master's degree, in 2009 to serve as a Fuller preaching professor and director of its Lloyd John Ogilvie Institute of Preaching.

Labberton is a disciple of the late John Stott, considered by many as a kind of "evangelical pope" who fostered evangelical scholarship and crafted the 1974 Lausanne Covenant, a statement of belief that unified evangelicals worldwide.

"I know him to be a very gifted Christian leader who will be able to take Fuller into an exciting new future," said Fuller President Richard Mouw, who will retire June 30 after leading the seminary for 20 years.

Mouw has been known in recent years for cultivating evangelical-Mormon understanding; Labberton said he welcomes that kind of outreach. The incoming leader hopes Fuller's

global reach—with 4,400 students from 70 countries and 100 denominations—will expand under his leadership.

“Rather than being caught thinking only, or primarily even, about North American church issues, I hope that we’re also thinking about global issues,” said Labberton, the co-founder of ScholarLeaders International, a program to train a new generation of theologians and scholars in the developing world.

“The North American church has a great deal to learn from the courage and passion of the church around the world.”

Labberton also is open to a dialogue that has been started this academic year by OneTable. The Fuller student group supports gays and lesbians, provides “safe places” to discuss faith and sexuality, and held a weeklong film festival attended by more than 300 people earlier this month.

“Often the evangelical church, I think, has not been honest and compassionate in entering into that dialogue, so I’m grateful that there’s an opportunity for that to happen at Fuller,” he said.

Labberton said he’s prepared to grapple with the financial, technological and spiritual challenges facing theological education—and expects Fuller’s online education offerings to expand.

He also hopes to help Fuller students focus on both Scripture and service in hopes of overcoming the growing trend of “nones,” people who claim no religious affiliation.

“I would just want to lift up the need to keep nurturing a connection between faith and action, word and deed,” he said.