

R. Lamar Vest Moves to Next Phase of Ministry

One of the more prominent leaders of the modern Christian world is taking his personal ministry in a new direction.

R. Lamar Vest served the last four years as president and CEO of the American Bible Society, one of the oldest continuing ministries in the United States with headquarters in New York City. Effective Jan. 1, Vest left ABS after a two-decade relationship with the nearly 200-year-old organization.

Vest began his tenure with ABS in 1991 as a board member, and was elected chairman ten years later. He served for six years as chairman before being tapped to fill the post of executive vice president for Global Scripture Ministries in 2006. He served in that capacity until moving to the presidency in 2009.

Vest's four years as president of ABS were marked by significant advances in the ministry of the organization, which is one of America's oldest charities. He sought to maximize new opportunities for delivering Scripture where it is most needed, including through MP3, Web, print, email and mobile technologies. With a commitment to the organization's mission to, "make the Bible available to every person, in a language and format each can understand and afford," Vest worked to extend the reach of Scripture globally and encourage engagement with its life-changing message.

The effectiveness of Vest's tenure can be measured through advancement in three critical areas identified and tracked by ABS:

- **Lives touched:** people impacted with the good news of God's Word (through ABS ministries). The "life impact" of 5 million people in fiscal year 2009 increased nearly

tenfold, to more than 48 million in 2012.

- **Bible story told:** An earned media audience for ABS and its ministries of 545 million in 2009 was raised to 1.2 billion in 2012.
- **Deepened integrity:** 2013 was the third straight year ABS was recognized with a *Best Christian Workplace* award. The organization had never received the honor prior to 2009.

“As the American Bible Society approaches 200 years of Bible ministry, I find its mission and message more critical than ever for today’s complex world,” Vest stated. When asked about his departure, he said, “Working with an organization for 22 years in so many different capacities as I have with American Bible Society, you build lifetime friendships. God has given my wife Vickie and me such a grand opportunity to meet with church and government leaders and make friends in 146 National Bible Societies around the world. We will miss them.”

“I have also learned how important it is for all churches to work together in meeting the needs of people worldwide,” Vest continued. “We have more in common than issues that separate us. We can do so much more together than we could ever do alone.”

Noteworthy as Vest’s tenure at ABS is, it is just another in a series of leadership opportunities he has served in his lifetime. Many of the positions he has filled would be considered peaks in any given ministry career, but for Vest they served as preparation for the next stop in a remarkable ministry resume.

Called to preach at 15, Vest took his first pastorate at age 20 in his native South Carolina. He led two churches, in Clemson and Abbeville, before becoming a state evangelist for the Church of God (Cleveland, Tennessee). In 1968 he began a 16-year period of leading state and denomination-wide youth programs in such locations as Oklahoma, California, and

Maryland. He completed the period with a four-year stint as director of the International Youth and Christian Education Department for the Church of God.

In 1984, Vest was appointed to serve as president of Lee College (now Lee University), the Church of God's flagship college, also located in Cleveland, Tennessee. In two years, Vest reversed a downward trend of student enrollment and placed the Christian liberal arts college on a track to financial and academic stability. Vest also hired his successor, Paul Conn, the highly successful current president who has taken the school to its highest levels over a 26-year presidency.

"Even though Dr. Vest was here only two years, he was a key player in turning things around," Paul Conn stated. "He set the tone for the more open, creative path which we have followed for the last quarter century. Sometimes the importance of a presidency is measured not in years but in its impact, and I think that was true of President Vest's role in Lee history."

After just two years at Lee, Vest was elected by his ministerial peers in the Church of God to the highest body of leaders in the denomination, the Executive Committee. For the next eight years he would serve on the five-man team, advancing in 1990 to the top leadership post, general overseer, where he would serve until tenure limitations placed him out of the office in 1994. Just two years later he was re-elected to the committee, advancing again to general overseer in 2000 and serving until 2004. Vest is one of the few ministers in the 127-year history of the Church of God to serve twice as general overseer.

Alongside his leadership roles, Vest has volunteered to serve on committees and boards which have a global impact. He has been on the executive committee for United Bible Societies' Global Board and served as Chairman of the National

Association of Evangelicals, one of the most influential cross-denominational organizations.

Vest's departure from ABS came following prayer and consideration about the future of the organization and how it intersects with his personal ministry. Since announcing his resignation several months ago, Vest has and continues to entertain options for his future. Over the next year he will be working with the Pentecostal Theological Seminary in Cleveland, Tennessee as Adjunct Professor, where he will assist in establishing a Leadership Development Institute. In addition, Vest has agreed to work one week a month with the Times Square Church in New York City in a leadership development program that will involve several hundred pastors in the New York City area, along with thousands of others worldwide through a web based ministerial development program. Times Square Church, located on Broadway at Times Square, ministers to more than 8,000 people weekly, representing more than 100 different nationalities.

In speaking of Vest and his leadership through the years, current Church of God General Overseer Mark Williams said, "Lamar Vest holds the rare combination of leadership abilities which demonstrate servanthood, while at the same time garnering the respect and integrity needed to lead large organizations. He is a trans-generational leader whose legacy in Church of God history has been solidified, but his contributions go far beyond this movement to touch the entire Body of Christ."

When asked what has been the most impactful aspect of his time served with ABS, Vest responded by explaining what happens when people read the Scriptures for the first time in their native language.

"We (ABS) refer to this as their 'heart-language,'" Vest said. "When we hear them exclaim, 'God speaks my language!' it solidifies the mission of ABS. Our goal is that every mother

can tell her child the story of Jesus in the same language in which she says good night to that child."

Cameron M. Fisher is the coordinator of communications and Internet ministries for the Church of God International Offices in Cleveland, Tenn.