

Accrediting agencies asked to probe seminary's dismissal of female prof

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By Hannah Elliott

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FORT WORTH (ABP)—A supporter of a professor who lost her job at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary—allegedly due to gender discrimination— has filed complaints with the [Southern Association of Colleges and Schools](#) and [Association of Theological Schools](#), asking them to investigate “a serious breach” of accreditation guidelines.

Sheri Klouda
pictured at
Southwestern
Seminary's
convocation
August 29,
2002,
affirming her
adherence to
the 2000
Baptist Faith
and Message.
(The photo
appeared on
[Wade
Burleson's
blog](#)).

[Benjamin Cole](#), pastor of Parkview Baptist Church in Arlington, filed the complaints. He joined Oklahoma pastor [Wade Burleson](#) and prominent blogger [Marty Duren](#) in calling attention to Sheri Klouda's case. Burleson is the pastor of Emmanuel Baptist Church in Enid, Okla. Duren leads New Bethany Baptist Church in Buford, Ga.

Cole's letter of complaint outlined a timeline of events leading to Klouda's dismissal, beginning with an April 2002 seminary trustee meeting in which trustees approved her as a tenure-track professor to teach biblical languages in the theology school.

In 2003, [Paige Patterson](#), who recently had been hired as the school's president, personally assured her the change of administration would not jeopardize her position teaching Hebrew, Klouda said.

Since that time, however, the seminary has toughened its interpretation of the Southern Baptist Convention's [2000 Baptist Faith & Message](#) doctrinal statement, which says that "while both men and women are gifted for service in the church, the office of pastor is limited to men...."

Patterson and Southwestern now interpret that to mean only men can instruct future pastors, a seminary official explained.

After learning in 2004 she would not get tenure at the school, Klouda's contract was terminated in December of 2006. She since has received a teaching position at [Taylor University](#) in Upland, Ind.

"I was told this (dismissal) was a non-issue, and I couldn't say anything about it, and if I did say something about it, it would cause problems for my job," Klouda said. "Then it was, 'Well, take all the time you need' to find other employment to 'Well, we're going to terminate your contract on such-and-such a date.' It was disappointing to find out that the rules keep changing."

Van McClain, chair of the school's board of trustees, has refuted the claims of dismissal, explaining in a letter posted on Duren's blog "she did not have tenure and, like hundreds of professors around the U.S. every year, was told that she would not be awarded tenure."

Other school representatives did not return requests for comment.

Cole decided to take up the Klouda case because he thinks a "gross injustice" has been done to Klouda due to the "lax oversight of seminary trustees and the violations of seminary procedures and policies by the school's administration."

"Southern Baptists must hold to the highest standards of academic integrity if we are to retain our position as leaders in theological education and ministry training," he said in an e-mail. "Actions taken by the president

at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary have continued to jeopardize the seminary's good reputation, and it does not appear that the trustees are willing to address the matter."

Cole sent formal letters of complaint to the seminary's two accrediting agencies Jan. 24 and 25.

As support for the complaints, Cole's letters noted that the pronouns used in the seminary's policy manual reflect "the gender diversity of faculty status and the equity of tenure review for both male and female professors at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary."

The manual also "makes no gender distinction between the various schools of music, evangelism, theology and educational ministries relevant to the selection of tenure-track faculty," he added.

"Quite frankly, Southwestern trustees appear to regard the interests of the school's president over the interests of the school's reputation. I regret that an accreditation review could jeopardize the degrees of all Southwestern students, but it is the administration's actions rather than my exposing those actions that has brought the school to potential academic shame."

ATS officials were not available to say if Cole's complaint would trigger an investigation by the agency. Earlier, a spokeswoman said ATS would respond if a complaint was filed by Klouda, another faculty member, a staff member or student. Cole, who previously worked for Patterson, said he is a part-time student at the seminary.

Nancy Merrill of ATS said, if a complaint was filed, the agency would allow the seminary to respond before determining if ATS' membership criteria or accreditation standards, or the school's own faculty policies, had been violated.

ATS standards require that faculty hiring at member schools be "attentive

to the value of diversity in race, ethnicity and gender,” but they do not specifically prohibit hiring or firing based on gender. Procedures for faculty retention and dismissal must be stated and followed, the guidelines add, but ATS does not stipulate what those procedures should be.

Cole maintains Southwestern’s guidelines require men and women on faculty be treated equally. If ATS agrees, and Southwestern is determined to have violated those guidelines, punitive action is possible.

Klouda said she did not harbor resentment against the institution, but added: “I expected the best of Dr. Patterson and that he wouldn’t do something like this. I believed him when I talked to him when he said I didn’t have anything to worry about and that he was okay with what I was teaching. I was very disappointed later ... when he contradicted what he had said.”

Klouda said she didn’t know whether she will file her own complaints to the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission or accrediting bodies.