

Southwestern Seminary trustees uphold Patterson firing

October 17, 2018

FORT WORTH (BP)—Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary’s trustees voted to uphold the trustee executive committee’s decision in May to terminate former president Paige Patterson.

Trustees revisited Patterson’s termination at their Oct. 15-17 meeting based on a motion, referred to Southwestern by the Southern Baptist Convention in June, “that the whole board of trustees at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary consider revisiting their original decision concerning Dr. Paige Patterson.”

The board also heard a report from its presidential search committee and affirmed an administration decision to discipline a faculty member—although the faculty member was not named during the board’s one public session.

“I was deeply worried about this meeting,” said trustee Bart Barber, pastor of First Baptist Church in Farmersville, adding he “forbade” his wife and children from attending. “I should have brought them, not only because it wasn’t bad, but because it was good.”

Trustees convened for committee meetings and informal “working sessions” Oct. 16-17 that were closed to the public before holding one public, 45-minute general session Oct. 17, in which they voted without discussion on the matters considered in private sessions.

A 10-percent difference

New Mexico trustee Jonathan Richard moved that the full board ratify “the executive committee actions since the last full board meeting.” The executive committee’s actions included terminating Patterson May 30 after the full board had moved him to president emeritus status a week earlier.

The 34 trustees present at the Oct. 17 general session adopted Richard’s motion on a voice vote with no more than four negative votes.

Following the general session, Barber and South Carolina trustee Wayne Dickard discussed the vote in an interview approved by the board. Barber, a trustee executive committee member, voted for ratifying the committee’s actions. Dickard, not an executive committee member, voted against it.

Dickard said he was “sad” at Patterson’s departure, and Barber fought back tears as he discussed it.

“We’re all Christians, and we’re not angry with each other,” said Dickard, an evangelist and retired pastor. “We differ greatly. Bart and I voted in different directions on a number of different issues. That doesn’t make him my enemy.”

Dickard believes the “process” and the “result” of the executive committee’s dealings with Patterson were flawed, including the committee’s decision during a series of meetings in April and May to waive a requirement of Southwestern’s bylaws that 10-days’ notice be given for all executive committee meetings.

He also believes the executive committee violated a requirement of Robert’s Rules of Order that a committee not “pass motions that conflict with the full board.”

Barber said waiver of notice requirements for meetings is “common

practice” for boards and that Patterson skipped “numerous” meetings of the executive committee in April and May where “matters of great significance were discussed,” although he could have attended. Then Patterson declined a formal request that he attend an executive committee meeting, Barber said.

Ultimately the relationship between Patterson and the board became unworkable, in Barber’s view. However, Barber noted “people ought to listen” to Dickard’s concerns as they evaluate whether circumstances “were extenuating enough to justify” the executive committee’s departure from standard operating procedures.

One reason to move forward, Dickard said, is that Patterson “didn’t have the votes on the board to remain here. ... In May, I thought he had those votes, and the first vote that was taken in the May 22-23 meeting; he did have them. But today he doesn’t have the votes on the board to still be president.”

Barber said it’s difficult to state one main reason Patterson departed because “we have a 40-member board” and “there are at least 40 answers to the question of why.”

Trustees who vote differently “may agree on 90 percent of what we talked about, but there’s a 10-percent difference that nudges me onto one side of the line and nudges him onto the other,” Barber said.

Trustee chairman Kevin Ueckert said: “We had things to discuss that were difficult and challenging. Everybody experienced a great deal of encouragement because of our common belief that God is leading us forward as a seminary around our core mission.”

In other business

Before the board heard a report from its presidential search committee, trustees voted without opposition to “ratify and affirm” Ueckert’s appointment of the committee and “pledge support and prayer.”

Trustees laid hands on the search committee and spent nearly 10 minutes praying for them.

Danny Roberts, chair of the search committee, reported the committee received “dozens of recommendations” during its initial period for receiving public input. The committee is working through those recommendations and will reopen the opportunity for public input if “we go through the process and we sense God’s man” is not among the initial set of individuals recommended.

“We have made great progress,” Roberts said. “We feel very, very encouraged, and we are firmly convinced the Lord’s going to lead us directly to the man that he has already called. Please continue to pray for us.”

In the only other business matter on which the vote was divided, trustees adopted a motion “to sustain the action of the administration” on a “faculty disciplinary matter.” The faculty member in question was not named, and there seemed to be three or four negative votes on a voice vote.

Interim Southwestern President Jeffrey Bingham described the trustee meeting as “three days of renewal, three days of refreshment, three days of amazing, God-given unity.”

Response around campus

Outside the meeting, students and faculty said the seminary community has exhibited a range of emotions since Patterson's departure, with some feeling trustees made the right move, others experiencing deep grief and others somewhere in between.

"Overall, the school is still functioning very smoothly," said Kara Goff, a Bachelor of Music degree student. "I was expecting the transition to be a little more bumpy. I was expecting a little more tension between different groups on campus."

Despite "some areas of hurt," Jesus "has been kept the center of attention," Goff said, noting students and faculty have gathered to pray for the transition at least three or four times this semester.

Goff's sister Meredith, a Bachelor of Biblical Studies degree student, said students have expressed "minor anxiety as they're thinking through and praying about who the next leader needs to be."

Rickesh Patel, a Master of Theology degree graduate who has been accepted into the Ph.D. program, said the "few" changes on campus this fall have been mostly "small." Still, students by and large are not "100 percent" clear about why Patterson was terminated.

Song Lianmang, a Master of Divinity degree student, said the transition "has left more questions in one way or the other. The information we know usually comes from press releases the trustees have given out. People are ... shocked."

Amid the transition, Patel said, Bingham "is a humble leader who's helped the seminary through this new semester. The goal of Southwestern still remains the same: to train men and women in their calling."

The mood on campus, said theology professor Malcolm Yarnell, “is one of sorrow yet anticipation.”

“Nobody on this campus is pleased with how events transpired earlier this year, but every constituency—students, staff, faculty, alumni, trustees, donors, friends—has expressed excitement for the future,” Yarnell said. “We repent with mourning, but we rejoice with providence, for we sense God is guiding our community toward a future characterized by servanthood, humility, freedom, excellence and loyalty to Jesus.”