

Turmoil leaves stained glass artists picking up the pieces

May 16, 2019

FORT WORTH (RNS)—Stained glass is fragile. So, too, are the fortunes of a stained glass artist.

Don and Debora Young were reminded of that lesson last month with the abrupt cancellation of a lucrative, once-in-a-lifetime commission to produce a series of stained glass windows for the MacGorman Chapel and Performing Arts Center on the Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary campus.

The project, launched in 2013, was to take a dozen years or more and could have brought the Youngs, who run a small studio out of their Fort Worth home, as much as \$2 million in income. A job of that size and scope “just doesn’t happen” to somebody “in our line of work,” Young said in an interview.

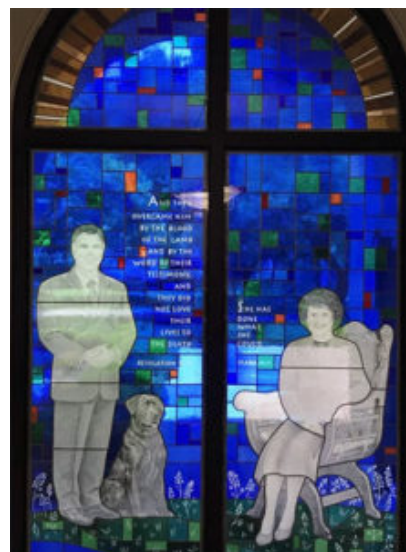
“It was like a dream. And then, just like that, we went from a dream job with a regular paycheck to nothing,” he said.

The windows, more than 60 in all, were to honor titans of the self-described “conservative resurgence” in the Southern Baptist Convention. That movement began in the late 1970s with the stated goal of reversing what its proponents perceived as a liberal drift away from an unbending, unambiguous adherence to biblical inerrancy.

In early April, the seminary’s board of trustees announced that it was removing the 32 windows that the Youngs had already completed, “in the best interest of the institution.”

Southwestern Baptist offered no further explanation for the decision. A seminary spokesman, after initially saying he would respond to a written request from RNS for comment, did not do so.

Allegations of impropriety



A stained glass window of Paige and Dorothy Patterson from Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary. (RNS Photo courtesy of Don Young Glass Studio)

One of the windows paid homage to Paige Patterson, former president of Southwestern Baptist who was fired last year.

A June 1, 2018, written statement from Kevin Ueckert, chairman of Southwestern's board of trustees, said the board unanimously concluded that Patterson ignored or mishandled female students' complaints of sexual assault, both at the Fort Worth seminary and at Southeastern Baptist

Theological Seminary in Wake Forest, N.C., where Patterson had previously served as president.

Patterson steadfastly has declined to comment on his firing or on the allegations that the trustees said compelled it.

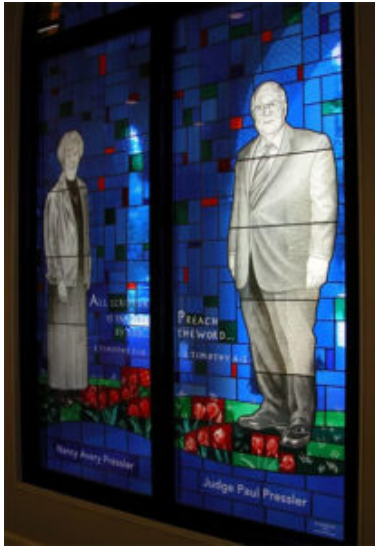
Another of the Youngs' windows depicted Paul Pressler, a Southern Baptist leader from Houston who became the subject of a 2017 lawsuit alleging decades of sexual abuse. Pressler denied the allegations of abuse in court filings. Those abuse claims against Pressler, a former Texas legislator and state appellate judge, were dismissed last November.

Frank Page, a former SBC leader depicted in a window, resigned last year after admitting to improper conduct.

Southwestern Baptist said it would "safely store" the windows until it figured out what to do with them.

Falwell decries 'new regime' in the SBC

On May 10, Jerry Falwell Jr., president of Liberty University in Lynchburg, Va., announced he'd brought two of the windows—one depicting his father, Liberty's founder, and the other depicting Jerry Vines, who delivered the school's baccalaureate address— to the university, where they'll be displayed in the Jerry Falwell Museum.



Paul Pressler (right) is depicted in a stained glass window that has been removed from Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary. (RNS Photo courtesy of Don Young Glass Studio)

Falwell rebuked what he called “a new regime” within the Southern Baptist Convention that’s turning away from “the high view of Scripture” advanced by his father and others.

“We will continue to honor the conservative leaders who reformed the Southern Baptist Convention,” Falwell told graduating students at Liberty. “And we place our hope in your generation to be the ones to step up and provide better leadership for the future.”

The stained glass project was conceived and organized six years ago by Dorothy Patterson, the wife of Paige Patterson. She led efforts to raise money to pay for the windows.

“My dream was to portray the 20-year history of the conservative resurgence of the Southern Baptist church,” she told the *Fort Worth Star-Telegram* in December 2013.

‘Dorothy’s pet’ project

But her dream was not shared by the seminary’s trustees, Debora Young said.

“It was Dorothy’s pet,” she said. “The trustees were never really in favor of it. But Dorothy wanted it done, so everyone just sort of went along with it.”

Paige and Dorothy Patterson—along with their black Labrador—were the subjects of one of the windows installed by the Youngs.

Other Baptist luminaries immortalized in etched and colored glass included Rick Warren, O.S. Hawkins, W.A. Criswell, Jimmy Draper and Richard Land.

Patterson, a former president of the Southern Baptist Convention and the Fort Worth seminary’s president for 15 years, was a leading architect of what critics called the “fundamentalist takeover” of the Southern Baptist Convention.

At a Southwestern chapel service in 2015, he said he recalled a time in the late 1970s when he asserted just 16 professors in Southern Baptist seminaries believed in biblical inerrancy.

“Now, just a few years later, you can go to any one of our six theological seminaries, and you will not find one single professor who does not believe in the inerrancy and the infallibility of God’s Word. That is a phenomenal act of God,” he said.

‘That was going to be our retirement’



Debora and Don Young (RNS photo / Bruce Tomaso)

Don Young, a Texas native, said he was raised as a Baptist but described himself and his wife as “spiritual” but “bohemian.”

The Youngs had planned to complete “about three dozen” windows before the project was cancelled. Don Young said no one from Southwestern told him or his wife that the windows were coming down. They learned about it after the fact from an online news story.

“We were taken totally by surprise. No one from there has contacted us about the removal—including Mrs. Patterson,” he said.

“When people ask me if I’m sorry about what happened, I tell them, ‘Honestly, I’m sorry about the money.’ We have no complaints. We did really well for these past few years. We made enough to pay off our house 10 years early.

“But we were counting on working on this for several years more. That was going to be our retirement.”