

# Falwell takes leave of absence from Liberty University

August 10, 2020

LYNCHBURG, Va. (RNS)—Jerry Falwell Jr. is taking an “indefinite leave of absence” from his role as president of Liberty University.

The move came Aug. 7 following a request from the executive committee of Liberty University’s board of trustees, according to a statement from the evangelical Christian university.

Falwell agreed to that request, effective immediately, according to the statement.

Dwight “Ike” Reighard, a Liberty board member, said in an email to Religion News Service he was “concerned” about “recent events” and that the statement addressed “the beginning steps the university board will more fully address in the days ahead.”

“We all would appreciate your prayers for the right things to happen in the days ahead for our wonderful university,” Reighard said.

On Aug. 10, the executive committee of the university’s trustee board named its chair, Jerry Prevo, as acting president of the university, effective immediately. Prevo spent 47 years as pastor of Anchorage Baptist Temple in Alaska.

## Falwell posts—then deletes—photo

Calls for Falwell’s resignation grew after the university president posted—and quickly deleted—a photograph of himself on Instagram with his arm around a woman who was not his wife.

Both had their pants unzipped, midriffs and underwear visible. Falwell held a glass of what he described as “black water” in the caption, noting it was not alcohol and “a prop only.”

Falwell has said the photo was meant to be “in good fun” and identified the woman as his wife’s assistant. Falwell said the assistant is pregnant and couldn’t get her pants to zip. He was wearing an older pair of pants that he couldn’t zip either, he said.

He also said the two were at a costume party while on vacation.

“I should never have put it up and embarrassed her. I’ve apologized to everybody. I promised my kids I’m going to try to be a good boy from here on out,” Falwell told a Lynchburg radio station Aug. 5.

## **‘A pattern of behavior that’s not becoming’**

The next day, U.S. Rep. Mark Walker, a music faculty advisory board member and former instructor at Liberty, tweeted that Falwell should step down.

In an appearance on CNN, the North Carolina Republican repeated that call.

“I just think that there is a code that leaders have to live by, especially when you are leading the largest Christian, evangelical university in the country,” he said.

“Now, Jerry Jr.—Jerry Falwell, Jr.—deserves a lot of credit for building Liberty University to what it is today, but there’s been a pattern of behavior that’s not becoming to what that school’s code of conduct is,” he continued.

Walker then called for Falwell to cease serving as president of Liberty—although he left open the possibility of taking a leave of absence instead of stepping down.

“This pattern of behavior has become troubling, and I believe whether it’s a leave of absence or stepping down, I believe his behavior, the pattern of it, has warranted this,” he said.

## Controversy over Falwell nothing new

Controversy over Falwell’s leadership dates back years.



Republican presidential candidate Donald Trump shakes hands with co-headliner Jerry Falwell Jr., leader of the nation’s largest Christian university, during a campaign event at the Orpheum Theatre in Sioux City, Iowa, on Jan. 31, 2016. (Photo courtesy of RNS)

Other evangelicals and even Liberty University students expressed frustration as far back as 2015, when Falwell stood before the student body and responded to news of a terrorist attack by reaching for a firearm he claimed to have holstered in his back pocket and suggesting students carry guns so “we could end those Muslims before they walk in.”

Falwell also has courted controversy for his longstanding support for Donald Trump, which sparked backlash. Some Liberty students created an online petition pushing back on his support for then-candidate Trump, and alumni began returning their diplomas in protest. Meanwhile, one of the school's board members resigned, and evangelical Christian commentator Erick Erickson called for Falwell to step down.

So stalwart was Falwell's support for the president that when Trump was criticized for blaming "both sides" for violence that erupted in Charlottesville, Va., in 2017 that left one counter-protester dead and many others wounded, Falwell referred to the president's rhetoric as "bold" and "truthful."

When ABC asked for a White House official to appear on a program to discuss the president's Charlottesville comments, the network reportedly was redirected by White House staff to speak with Falwell instead.

Discontent with his leadership grew so intense that Red Letter Christians, a group of "progressive" evangelicals, organized a Red Letter Revival in 2018 near Liberty's campus. Speakers at the event, which was equal parts tent revival and protest, railed against Falwell, but the school president personally stifled efforts by student journalists to report on the event.

## **Not the first social media dust-up**

Criticism of Falwell's leadership and his behavior online has intensified in recent months.

When Falwell tweeted out an image in June of a mask emblazoned with a picture of Virginia Gov. Ralph Northam in blackface, several African American faculty members resigned in protest, citing what they said were the school's longstanding issues with race and sexuality.

Falwell eventually apologized for the tweet—a rare move for the often brazenly unapologetic evangelical leader.

“I actually refreshed the trauma that image had caused and offended some by using the image to make a political point. Based on our long relationships, they uniformly understood this was not my intent, but because it was the result,” Falwell wrote on Twitter.

“I have deleted the tweet and apologize for any hurt my effort caused, especially within the African American community.”

*EDITOR’S NOTE: The sixth paragraph was added on Aug. 11, one day after the article originally was posted.*