

Association invites seminary to make offer to buy disputed property

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Editor's Note: This story has been updated and revised [here](#).

FORT WORTH—Tarrant Baptist Association's executive board met Jan. 24 and unanimously approved a motion asking Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary either to purchase a disputed piece property from the association at fair market value or submit the matter to a three-person arbitration panel.

Southwestern Seminary notified Tarrant Baptist Association before Christmas it had six months to vacate its offices on the edge of the seminary campus. The seminary asserted the association was in violation of its affiliation agreement—in part because of perceived toleration of homosexuality by some member church or churches.

☒ But while Tarrant Association Moderator Al Meredith contends the seminary lacks authority to take unilateral action, he expressed hope the situation can be resolved—either by the seminary purchasing the property from the association or by submitting the dispute to an arbitration panel.

Meredith, pastor of Wedgwood Baptist Church in Fort Worth, repeatedly underscored his desire that the association's longtime fraternal relationship with the seminary be maintained.

Southwestern Seminary officials did not respond to e-mail or phone calls requesting a response for this article.

The association office received a registered letter from Southwestern Seminary Dec. 10. The letter stated the association was in violation of its 1997 affiliation agreement, and it directed the association to vacate its property on James Avenue within six months. It also stated title on the property should revert back to the seminary.

In 1982, the seminary provided Tarrant Baptist Association land and the funds to build its office building, granting a 99-year lease on the property, Meredith explained. At that time, the seminary and association entered into an affiliation agreement stipulating the property would not be used for commercial activity, and the association and seminary would commit to remaining in theological harmony, he said.

In 1997, the property agreement was renegotiated, and Tarrant Baptist Association received the deed to the property, he said. "The affiliation agreement remained intact," Meredith added.

According to the agreement, if any disagreement should arise between the association and the seminary, the matter should be resolved a three-member arbitration panel with one seminary representative, one associational representative and one party mutually agreed upon by both parties, he noted.

On Dec. 20, three associational representatives—Moderator-elect Meredith, Moderator Bobby Bridges and Leadership Development Director Becky Biser—met with Seminary President Paige Patterson and some of his staff to discuss the situation.

"We had a lengthy and amicable discussion," Meredith said in an interview.

He noted during the discussion, Patterson commented that had learned information he did not have when the original Dec. 10 letter was delivered. He agreed to consider the matter further and discuss it with the seminary's attorneys.

However, a letter from Southwestern Seminary he received Jan. 18 indicated the seminary planned to pursue its claim on the property.

Tarrant Baptist Association's executive board subsequently met a few days later and unanimously approved a motion asking the seminary either to purchase the property from the association at fair market value or submit the matter to a three-person arbitration panel.

In a Dec. 21 letter to pastors in the association, Meredith noted specific areas in which the seminary claimed the association was not in compliance with its affiliation agreement:

- Toleration of homosexuality. While the 2000 Baptist Faith & Message takes a clear position against homosexual behavior, the seminary contends the association has a church or churches that do not comply with the statement of faith on that matter. "They feel this places them in a contradictory situation," Meredith's letter stated.

The Southern Baptist Convention cuts its historic ties with Broadway Baptist Church in Fort Worth in 2009 over its perceived acceptance of homosexual members. Last year, Broadway also withdrew its affiliation from the Baptist General Convention of Texas rather than face a challenge

- Placement. The seminary asserted it had asked for—and had not received—assistance from the association office in helping students and faculty gain access to empty pulpits in the association.

Meredith also noted the seminary expressed the need for additional office space or a welcome center that could be housed in the offices Tarrant Association occupies.

"We hold the deed. We believe the property to be ours," Meredith said in an interview. "If the seminary needs the building, ... we would be willing to talk about selling it to them for a fair market value."

Meredith acknowledged he was disappointed by the seminary's response. Even so, he insisted he and other associational leaders would continue praying for a win/win situation.

"If Tarrant Baptist Association wins and Southwestern Seminary loses, the kingdom of God loses. If Southwestern wins and the association loses, the kingdom loses. The matters of the kingdom are greater than either the seminary or the association. My prayer is that we do nothing to bring reproach on the name of Christ," he said.

"Tarrant Baptist Association has enjoyed a longstanding fraternal relationship with Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, and we want that to continue."