

Southern Baptist seminary clears president after dispute over Muslim student

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(RNS) The trustees of Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary have affirmed the school's president, Paige Patterson, after investigating his decision to admit a Muslim student into the school's Ph.D. program.

Patterson, one of the most revered Southern Baptist figures and an architect of the conservative resurgence of the Southern Baptist Convention a generation ago, faced heavy criticism from some Baptists who accused him of violating the standards of his school in Fort Worth, Texas.

"We join with our fellow Southern Baptists in appreciation for and admiration of the evangelistic heart of our president, Paige Patterson," the trustee board said in a statement October 22 as it concluded its fall meeting.

"Any violations of the seminary bylaws were done in a good-faith enthusiasm to pursue the seminary's purpose, as set forth in its articles of incorporation."

The trustees have closed their investigation, and Patterson told Religion News Service after the meeting that the Muslim student, Ghassan Nagagreh, is no longer enrolled at the seminary.

"He wrote me a letter declining to return," Patterson said. "He was not specific about his reasons, but he had previously indicated that he had no desire to be a problem to anyone. He is one of the kindest men I know and I was not surprised at his decision, even though I was disappointed."

Patterson suspects the negative publicity probably influenced Nagagreh to make the decision.

"For many reasons this is a great sorrow to me," he said.

Patterson gave an emotional apology at the June annual meeting of the Southern Baptist Convention for what was considered an unusual step at an evangelical seminary.

"I made an exception to a rule that I assumed, probably wrongly, the president has the right to make if he feels that it is that important," Patterson told convention delegates.

All six Southern Baptist seminaries require students to demonstrate their evangelical belief: a profession of faith, a testimony that gives evidence of that faith, a church endorsement, and three references that affirm their Christian character.

While some Southern Baptists were shocked at Patterson's actions, other prominent seminaries have students of various faiths studying side by side.

At the same June convention, the school's program within the maximum-security Darrington Unit in Texas was questioned. Patterson said that Muslim and atheist inmates were included: "Unfortunately, it is the case that you cannot discriminate and have a program in prison."

The trustees also addressed the prison program in the statement.

"While not compromising the missional purpose of Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, we are taking steps to amend the seminary's bylaws to improve accountability that will allow for flexibility in pursuing ministry opportunities such as the one at the Darrington Unit," they said.

In both cases—the Muslim student and the prison program—Patterson cited his goal of evangelizing non-Christians.

In June, he described the Sunni Muslim student as "very open, at this point, to the gospel of Jesus Christ" and said of the prisoner program participants: "We have to admit them to class but the wonderful thing, of course, as you would guess, is that as they are studying in class they are coming to know the Lord."