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Associated
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Editor: Bob Allen
Executive editor: Greg Warner

Phone: 800.340.6626
Fax: 904.262.7745
E-mail: bob@abpnews.com

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Seminary trustees dismiss president

By Bob Allen

KANSAS CITY, Mo. (ABP) - Trustees of Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary have fired President Mark Coppenger, saying misdirected anger has diminished his ability to lead the Southern Baptist school in Kansas City, Mo.

Michael Whitehead, the seminary's vice president for business affairs, has been named acting president.

Trustees voted Sept. 14 by secret ballot to immediately dismiss Coppenger, who has led the seminary four years. The vote came in a brief open session after about nine hours of executive sessions during a two-day trustee meeting called for the purpose of discussing leadership issues involving the 51-year-old president.

Gary Peek, a trustee from Pascagoula, Miss., made the motion to dismiss Coppenger. Trustee chairman Carl Weiser said the motion passed but declined to publicly disclose the vote count. Weiser later told reporters the vote was reported to trustees in executive session.

"A majority of the board concluded that the expression of anger admitted to by Dr. Coppenger had irreparably damaged his ability to lead the seminary," Weiser read from a prepared statement after the meeting.

Coppenger had confessed to "misappropriation of anger" before the board's executive committee in July and agreed to specific recommendations aimed at "repentance and restoration" toward individuals who have been stung by his temper.

A report on that session, the result of a two-month investigation by trustee leaders, was scheduled to be part of the agenda at the trustees' next scheduled full board meeting in October. However, an undisclosed number of trustees signed a petition demanding a special meeting to concentrate on issues related to the president.

Thirty-one of the seminary's 34 trustees were present for the called meeting, including five new trustees who were attending their first meeting since their election to the board at the Southern Baptist Convention annual meeting in June.

Coppenger, the 41-year-old seminary's third president, said through a spokesperson that he had no comment on the firing.

Weiser, pastor of Hyland Heights Baptist Church in Lynchburg, Va., admonished reporters that individual trustees were forbidden to discuss the action. "They are not available to comment at any time on this matter, period," he said.

"I alone will be the official spokesman of the board," Weiser said. "Any violation of that will be dealt with very seriously."

Later, in a press conference, Weiser said the gag order was imposed because the meeting was held in executive session and involved sensitive personnel issues. He also said it is time for the seminary to move on.

"We feel like that we need to begin to move forward and that we are committed as a whole as a board to move forward."

Despite the vote to fire Coppenger, the trustee statement praised him as a creative and dedicated president who had assembled a world-class faculty and modeled a passion for spiritual renewal. "We love Mark Coppenger and his family dearly," Weiser read from the prepared statement.

"I think the board and Midwestern family have suffered serious hurt as a result of this action," Weiser commented in response to a question. "It is a difficult, gut-wrenching time for each of us."

Still, he said, "The board acted in a way they felt was for the benefit and leadership of Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary."

Coppenger, a prominent conservative in Southern Baptist life, has drawn frequent praise from the conservative trustee board for ridding the school of moderate and liberal influences. That record reportedly became marred, however, by repeated complaints that Coppenger berated subordinates in anger.

Two of four top administrators hired as Coppenger's "dream team" shortly after his election left within two years. More recently, the seminary's dean and vice president for academic affairs, James Cogdill, reportedly confronted Coppenger and was summarily relieved of his duties. The trustee executive committee reportedly reinstated Cogdill the next day. In June the committee launched an investigation of Coppenger's leadership.

While the executive committee investigation reportedly surfaced other questions about spending and enrollment, it was Coppenger's temper that led trustees to conclude he was no longer an effective leader, according to the trustee statement.

Weiser said trustees would discuss a severance package for Coppenger at the board's October meeting. He also said the president and his family could remain in their seminary-owned home on campus as long as needed.

Cogdill said in an interview that he had "mixed emotions" about the decision. "I love Dr. Coppenger deeply," he said. "In spite of our differences, whenever you pray for somebody daily, it's hard to have bad feelings about them." However, he said he believed trustees had done the "right thing."

Cogdill said he believes God is able to make the best out of even a bad situation, however. "I would covet the prayers of not only every Southern Baptist but every Christian," Cogdill said. "We're going to need God's help more than ever before."

Whitehead said he is "very disappointed in the loss of a colleague" but pledged "to do everything I can to make the transition smooth and respectful."

"We've got some hurts to heal," Whitehead said. "There have been some things said about one another, to one another. The seminary board has to do business ... but God still has some heart business to do in individuals and relationships."

Whitehead said faculty was to be informed of Coppenger's firing Sept. 14 and that a chapel session for the entire seminary community would be held as soon as possible.

Jay Sparks, president of the seminary's Student Body Association, said he was "just in shock right now" moments after the vote. He said students had been praying for the president and that he believes students support both Coppenger and the entire staff.

During the called meeting, trustees interviewed Coppenger and his four vice presidents. The board's immediate past chairman, Bob Lilly of Catonsville, Md., also met briefly with trustees. Weiser said Lilly, who rotated off the board this summer, was not officially invited and that the seminary did not pay his expenses to attend the meeting.

Coppenger was the only candidate interviewed by a presidential search committee that nominated him to the post in 1995. He was the first president elected since conservatives gained control of the board of trustees in the early 1990s.

He previously was vice president for convention relations at the Southern Baptist Convention Executive Committee in Nashville, Tenn., and executive director of the State Convention of Baptists in Indiana.

He is a former pastor and taught philosophy six years at Wheaton College.

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