

Liberty University Announces Investigation Into Falwell's Tenure

Liberty University is opening an independent investigation into Jerry Falwell Jr.'s tenure as president, a wide-ranging inquiry that will include financial, real estate and legal matters, the evangelical school's board announced Monday.

In a statement, the board said it had retained an outside firm to investigate "all facets" of the school's operations under Falwell, and that it was "committed to learning the consequences that have flowed from a lack of spiritual stewardship by our former president."

Calls for such an investigation had been mounting since Falwell's departure last week from the post he had held since 2007.

He officially resigned on Tuesday, after a confusing day of back-and-forths about whether he would be leaving. His departure came after a news outlet published an interview with Giancarlo Granda, a much younger business partner of the Falwell family. Granda said that he had a years-long sexual relationship with Becki Falwell and that Jerry Falwell was involved.

Although the Falwells have acknowledged that Granda and Becki Falwell had an affair, Jerry Falwell has denied any participation. The couple allege that Granda sought to extort them by threatening to reveal the relationship unless he was paid substantial monies.

The couple said in a statement provided to The Associated Press late Sunday that they support Liberty's board and "welcome any inquiry as we have nothing to hide." A Falwell

representative declined further comment when reached on Monday.

Granda, 29, has denied trying to extort the Falwells, but told the AP that he currently has no plans to pursue legal action against them. He said he does want to see an independent investigation of the school, however. Based on what he saw of the school's management under Falwell, Granda described it as run "like a monarchy."

Falwell took over as the president of Liberty after the death of his famous evangelist father, the Rev. Jerry Falwell Sr. He oversaw a period of expansive growth and transformation: Liberty's online program exploded, as did its endowment; the campus underwent a massive transformation; and the athletics programs improved.

Falwell also stayed in the news for a series of divisive remarks as well as his vocal support of President Donald Trump, and was the subject of news stories that focused on his business dealings.

Liberty's statement acknowledged that Falwell's sharpest critics have long been calling for a departure.

"Some may say that all the signs were there for a long time before last week," the statement said. "It's certainly fair to say that there were questionable comments made, worrying behavior and inappropriate social media posts, but all the signs were not there until the start of last week."

That was not good enough for some of Falwell's most vocal opponents. Save71, a recently formed nonprofit aimed at mobilizing students, alumni and faculty to push for reform, said in a statement that the board "needs to disclose a lot more about this investigation for the Liberty community to trust its legitimacy."

The board's statement did not name the firm it has hired, and

a board spokesman did not return a request for comment on the company's identity.

Others were more encouraged.

Karen Swallow Prior, a recently departed English professor at Liberty who had been critical of Falwell, said the investigation announcement was good news.

"I hope that they adhere to the highest standards of not only investigation but also reporting the findings," added Prior, a prominent Christian academic who now teaches at Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary.

David Nasser, Liberty's senior vice president for spiritual development, quickly praised the board's actions, suggesting that other university leaders are eager to move beyond the Falwell era. Days earlier, Nasser publicly apologized to students for the "embarrassment" he said Falwell's scandals had caused the school.

In Monday's statement announcing the investigation, Liberty's board also said it is considering establishing a post aimed at offering spiritual guidance for university leaders to ensure they "live out the Christian walk expected of each and every one of us at Liberty."

The idea underscores the board's concern over the degree to which Falwell's alleged personal conduct would have violated the school's behavioral codes. Before his resignation, Falwell had already been on an indefinite leave of absence after an uproar over a photo he posted on social media of him and his wife's pregnant assistant, both with their pants unzipped.

Falwell said it was taken in good fun at a costume party during a vacation, but critics saw it as evidence of hypocrisy by the head of an institution that holds students to a strict moral code of conduct. For his part, Falwell told the AP last week that "I never broke a single rule that applies to staff

members at Liberty, which I was." {eo}

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