

Evangelical group protests firing of Bible society CEO

by [Sarah Pulliam Bailey](#) in the [December 11, 2013](#) issue

A group of leading evangelicals is expressing concern over the recent dismissal of the American Bible Society's new president after just six months on the job.

Nearly 200 years old, the Manhattan-based ABS is a nonprofit that aims to provide tools to people to read the Bible. In 2012, it reported nearly \$500 million in assets, receiving nearly \$40 million in donations.

Doug Birdsall became president and CEO of ABS in March after leading a global gathering of evangelicals for the Lausanne Movement's Cape Town 2010 meeting. Weeks before his scheduled November 8 inauguration at ABS, he was dismissed by the board, which cited significant differences over how to achieve the organization's goals.

"Obviously it was a deep blow," Birdsall said on November 6. "It's a bit of a mystery." He said he was "summoned to a law office," where he was told about his dismissal. Birdsall declined severance pay, saying that hiring a lawyer would be costly and "I didn't want to get involved in an ugly fight."

Birdsall had two surgeries for lung cancer in July. "There were concerns about my health and whether or not I had cancer when I was hired," he said. "I had communicated with them that the doctor anticipated normal life expectancy."

He declined to speculate on reasons for his dismissal, saying he was in the middle of planning several projects for ABS.

Birdsall said the projects included a \$500 million capital campaign, the organization's upcoming bicentennial and a project to read from the Bible to 125 million people under 28 years of age. The organization was in negotiations to tear down its 12-story headquarters and build a 30-story tower so that it could host like-minded organizations.

Under Birdsall, the organization was also designing a Bible museum to host what he believes is the second most valuable Bible collection outside the Vatican. The ABS is also home to the Museum of Biblical Art in midtown Manhattan.

A group of Birdsall's friends—including Tim Keller, pastor of New York's Redeemer Presbyterian Church, David Wills of Generous Giving, and Peter Ochs of First Fruit Inc.—released a letter November 5 criticizing the dismissal.

"As Christian leaders who have known Doug over the entire course of his ministry, we are perplexed and grieved by this action," the authors wrote. Author and speaker Eric Metaxas also expressed disappointment.

Pieter Dearolf, chairman of the board for ABS, said Birdsall declined severance offers "as well as other direct support."

"As in the Book of Acts, it is clear that even those with the best of intentions and faithfulness simply do not always agree," Dearolf wrote. "It has been and continues to be our hope that neither Doug and [his wife] Jeanie nor American Bible Society would be disrespected in this separation of service."

Steve King, the ABS's chief operating officer, has taken over the president's responsibilities. ABS spokesman Geoffrey Morin declined to weigh in further on the controversy.

"We don't believe it serves us as an organization, Doug and his family, or the cause of Christ to play out a personnel matter in the public square," he said in a statement.
—RNS

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