

Jerry Prevo named interim president of Liberty University

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(Bill Roth / Anchorage Daily News via AP)

Liberty University in Virginia announced on August 10 that its board had chosen an interim president to lead the school days after Jerry Falwell Jr. began an indefinite leave of absence after one of his posts on social media created an uproar.

Jerry Prevo, who has served as chairman of the school's board of trustees since 2003 and recently retired as the senior pastor of a Baptist church in Alaska, assumed the role of acting president immediately, Liberty said in a news release.

Prevo, who spent 47 years as the pastor of Anchorage Baptist Temple before stepping down last year, was known for his opposition to LGBTQ rights and his influence in Alaska politics.

The university announced in a one-sentence statement on August 7 that Falwell was taking a leave of absence. The statement didn't elaborate. But Falwell's departure came after he posted a photo showing him posing with his pants unbuttoned, stomach exposed, and his arm around a young woman who was not his wife.

Falwell apologized for the photo, which he said was taken during a costume party while he was on vacation.

He said in an interview with Lynchburg radio station WLNI that the woman, whom he identified as his wife's assistant, was pregnant and couldn't get her pants zipped, and that he was imitating her. He said it was all in "good fun."

"I've apologized to everybody, and I've promised my kids . . . I'm going to try to be a good boy from here on out," he told the interviewer.

Falwell was holding a glass filled with a dark liquid in the photo, which he said in the caption was "just black water . . . a prop only."

The photo, which was deleted but not before it spread widely online, sparked criticism from liberals and conservatives alike. Many said the behavior was unbecoming and possibly hypocritical from the leader of a university that requires its students to follow a strict code of conduct that includes no alcohol.

Liberty alumni who have been critical of Falwell and increasingly vocal about wanting new leadership stepped up their organizing in the days after his leave of absence was announced. Four alumni unveiled a new nonprofit called Save 71, a reference to the year of Liberty's founding, designed to mobilize alumni, students, and faculty behind reform at the university.

Liberty "needs to repent of its sins before seeking redemption," the group posted on its website, urging the board to name an independent committee to seek a longer-term replacement for Falwell. "The Board of Trustees must acknowledge the damage President Falwell has done to Liberty and the hypocrisy and corruption that has soaked into parts of its culture."

Among the alumni calling for a permanent change in leadership is Colby Garman, pastor at Virginia-based Pillar Church, who said the university would be “best served” by a president who is not trying to amass political power and is “able to thoughtfully convey the [school’s] mission from a deeply Christian perspective.”

Falwell has most recently faced pushback for the university’s decision to welcome students back to campus amid the coronavirus pandemic, as well as for a social media post invoking the blackface scandal that Virginia’s Democratic governor faced last year. —Associated Press