La Sierra University Resignation Saga: Stranger-than-Fiction

Educate Truth shares the following article from Adventist Today as a service to readers. Submitted Jul 1, 2011 By Atoday Editorial Team On June 10, 2011, three La Sierra University (LSU) faculty members and a board member resigned. News of their resignations set off a storm of rumor and...

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Submitted Jul 1, 2011
By Atoday Editorial Team

On June 10, 2011, three La Sierra University (LSU) faculty members and a board member resigned. News of their resignations set off a storm of rumor and speculation.

The stranger-than-fiction saga came to the attention of the general Adventist public with a short announcement by the LSU administration. Four individuals — Jeff Kaatz, Vice President for university advancement; Jim Beach, Dean of the College of Arts & Sciences; Gary Bradley part-time contract biology professor; and Lenny Darnell, member of the Board of Trustees — had been asked to resign. The announcement specifically stated the resignations were not connected to the on-going controversy over the teaching of evolutionary biology at LSU, a claim that was initially doubted by many.

Central to the resignations was a digital recording made by one of the four affected individuals. Within hours of the announcement, Adventist Today received a copy of the recording from an anonymous source.

The first part of the recording was of a meeting, held in a public hall on campus and called by North American Division leaders. This was to discuss the likelihood the church’s accrediting association would probably not re-certify the university for a maximum five-year term. There was a perception, reported the leaders, that LSU was ‘deviating’ from standards of instruction expected of Adventist universities. It was clear from the recording, the word ‘deviating’ was generally held to refer to LSU’s approaches to teaching biology.

Prominent speakers at the meeting were Dan Jackson, president of the North American Division (NAD), and Larry Blackmer, NAD vice president for education.

After the meeting, the digital recording device/telephone, operated on his person by one of the four men, was left running. This appeared unintentional while the four men went to a private home to discuss the meeting and watch a basketball playoff game between the Lakers and the Dallas Mavericks.

Apparently unaware the follow-up discussion was part of the recording, one of the men forwarded a copy of the recording to various individuals, so they could hear the meeting with the church officials. This digital file was forwarded by someone else to the General Conference. When Larry Blackmer listened to the recording he discovered it contained more that just the meeting at which he had been a principal presenter. After listening to the entire recording, including the conversation during the basketball game which contained some rather inflammatory rhetoric, he had the recording transcribed and sent a copy of this to the leadership of LSU. In light of that transcript, the four men were asked to resign, and they complied.

What was so inflammatory about the recording that the men agreed to resign?

The primary area of discussion at the private home was the apparent impasse between the academic accreditors and the university. The men believed this was less to do with LSU itself than with the need for the church to come to terms with scientific evidence that seems to contradict official Adventist doctrine.
This might be controversial, but would probably not have cost them their jobs. The men did not, however, limit themselves to a discussion of the issues. They made very unflattering personal references to Dan Jackson, the NAD president, calling him a ‘eunuch’ with little power in the church. They described the division office as, “the weakest unit in the whole church.” The recording includes disparaging remarks about those who fail to adequately plan ahead because of their earnest belief that Jesus will come very, very soon. One voice notes that General Conference President Ted Wilson is such a man. The men also criticized Randall Wisbey, LSU president, stating he is, “a pastor first and a church administrator second.”

While many an Adventist employee has voiced unflattering opinions about various church leaders in private, offering such baldly stated criticism to the world (albeit inadvertently), made strong disciplinary action unavoidable. Further, if these personal remarks were not enough to compel the resignations, there was additional incriminating content. The men casually referred to their drinks as ‘brew’ and profanity is heard occasionally.

Sources have told Adventist Today that each of the four men independently confirmed he had been drinking alcoholic beverages during the private-home discussion (Use of alcoholic beverages by faculty, staff, and students at LSU is prohibited and, according to the latest edition of the faculty handbook, may result in expulsion or termination). The resignations were asked for and given.

Adventist Today has also learned the gentlemen involved were offered an opportunity to avail themselves of the grievance process rather than resign. In addition, the LSU Board received and considered the Faculty Senate’s request for the resignations to be rejected. Following a robust discussion this was not accepted and the board ratified the requests for the resignations made on June 10.

The resignations of the two vice presidents apply only to their administrative duties, not to their tenured teaching status at the university. Dr. Bradley, a semi-retired contract teacher, had no tenure and Darnell’s resignation applies to his position on the Board of Trustees.

The specific and immediate causes of the resignations appear not to be directly related to the controversy over the teaching of evolutionary biology at LSU. However, as one commentator suggested, these events might be perceived as representing collateral damage caused by being caught in the crossfire over that issue.

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**Bob Pickle, 3 days ago**

If alcohol was a reason for the resignations, and if "Use of alcoholic beverages ... may result in expulsion or termination," why are Kaatz and Beach still employees at LSU? Seems a little contradictory.

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**Bill Cork, 3 days ago**

"What was so inflammatory about the recording that the men agreed to resign?"

I don't know. How about functioning as a news organization and publish the transcript so that we can judge for ourselves?
Elaine Nelson  
3 days ago  

The SDA administration should be trembling in their boots: anyone could "plant" a mike in one of their private conference rooms and record some most interesting conversations.

Thoughtful  
2 days ago  

Since I am not a lawyer my confusion simply manifests my ignorance, but the following questions immediately come into my mind:

Does California law apply outside of California? Can an individual living in Maryland and listening to the tapes or reading the transcripts in Maryland be sued for violating California law? As a non-lawyer that seems a bit strange, if it is true.

What makes a conversation with 4 people privileged? Is it the fact that it occurs in the home? How big a group does it take before this is a "public" meeting that is unprotected? Would 5 or 6 or 12 or 20 make it a public non-protected event? If the public meeting wasn't protected because there was no hint of privileged information on the tape, is a group of 4 protected even without hint of saying they were engaged in a private conversation?

When this conversation was sent to a journal, the journal (and I assume this would also be true of journalistic blog sites) has protections. Does the publication of it make it no longer privileged? Does sending it out make it no longer privileged—you addressed this but I have the sense that different lawyers would have other arguments.

If it is sent out to a number of people, does that make it no longer protected and the one who sent it the only one in danger of being found in violation of the law?

Can a tenured professor be terminated for any cause whatever? Would the tenured professor be able to teach even if convicted of robbery, embezzlement, rape? Would the use of alcohol, in obvious violation of the school principles and rules, be such that a tenured professor could be removed for this?

Elaine Nelson  
1 day ago  

The four accused should not have been so hasty in signing any statement. This would have caused better minds to contemplate the fallout. No contract or statement should ever be signed "on the spot." In this action, there was error all around.