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San Diego university responds to faculty's vote of no confidence

by Joshua J. McElwee

Administrators at the University of San Diego are "obviously disappointed" by a vote of their faculty expressing no confidence in their president and take the matter "very seriously," a senior university official said Wednesday.

"Certainly we consider this very serious and take the faculty sentiment very seriously," said Tim O'Malley, the university's vice president for university relations.

Almost 100 faculty members of the Catholic university declared a loss of confidence in president Mary Lyons' leadership Tuesday, saying her cancellation of a British theologian's visiting fellowship and her response to criticism of the move have shown her to be "ethically bankrupt."

The vote tally was 99 in support of the measure, 16 against and 19 abstaining.

The vote was made by faculty of the university's College of Arts and Sciences, one of its seven schools and colleges, and is the latest response to Lyons' rescission of a fellowship for Tina Beattie, a theologian known for her work in contemporary ethical issues.

Beattie had been scheduled to begin a fellowship at the university's Frances G. Harpst Center for Catholic Thought and Culture on Nov. 6. Lyons, who says the theologian publicly dissented from church teaching by suggesting Catholics could support civil same-sex marriage, canceled the appointment in an Oct. 27 letter.

Lyons' explanation of the cancellation, which has developed in statements over the last several weeks, have prompted sharp and wide-ranging criticisms from both USD faculty members and prominent

academics throughout the U.S. and the U.K.

O'Malley said Lyons plans to meet Thursday with the university's senate, a university-wide representative body of faculty, administrators and students, regarding the matter.

Lyons also discussed the issue with the university's board of trustees Tuesday morning, before the faculty vote, and expects to keep in contact with them on the matter, said O'Malley.

The administration, said O'Malley, "will continue to ? dialog about the issues surrounding this particular incident, because obviously it's gone far beyond the scope of a particular single incident or decision."

"We're well aware of the concerns of some of the faculty that this is something that obviously needs continued dialog and understanding," he said.

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In August, Beattie joined 27 other Catholic priests, theologians and activists in signing a letter that said it would be "perfectly proper" for Catholics to support civil marriage for same-sex couples. The letter appeared in *The Times* of London. Lyons said in a Nov. 5 statement Beattie's signature on that letter was "the heart of this matter."

While Lyons said that Beattie's cancellation was made "without regard to pressure groups or donor influence," the move came after an influential alumnus and a conservative watchdog group backed by a high-ranking Vatican official protested the appointment to the university's board of trustees.

The motion approved by the faculty Tuesday, made during a meeting of their academic assembly, read: "The president has shown herself to be ethically bankrupt, for which reason the motion is placed that this body declare a loss of confidence in her leadership,"

A week earlier the San Diego faculty had voted to ask Lyons to reinstate Beattie's appointment or face the no-confidence measure.

Following the initial Nov. 6 vote, several untenured faculty members at the university told *NCR* they had been questioned by their academic dean about the matter and they felt pressured not to support the no-confidence vote.

The faculty members asked not to be named for fear of reprisal.

O'Malley said he could not comment on those allegations as he was not aware "of any specific complaint or incident in that regard."

"Obviously, if that were to be the case that would be inconsistent with the expectations of any administrator," he said.

Lyons formally responded to the Nov. 6 vote just hours before Tuesday's move.

Writing in a letter to the chair of the academic assembly Tuesday morning, Lyons said she would allow Beattie to speak at the university, so long as the theologian was not given an "honorary affiliation" with the institution, a reference to Beattie's expected title of "visiting fellow" of the Harpst Center.

Gerard Mannion, the director of the center, said in an interview Tuesday that while the faculty considered Lyons' change of position before taking their no-confidence vote, the general feeling was that her response was "too little, too late."

Echoing concerns from academics throughout the U.S. and the U.K., faculty members at USD have said one of their primary concerns with Beattie's cancellation is its impact on academic freedom.

They have also expressed confusion over Lyons' description of the mission of the Harpst Center, an interdisciplinary institute inaugurated by the university in July 2008.

In a Nov. 8 statement to the university faculty, Lyons identified as one reason for the rescission of Beattie's invitation that she "was not invited to the university by one of our academic departments."

The purpose of the center, Lyons said, "from the beginning, was simply to be a resource for others, especially the faculty, inviting them to explore how a scholarly life pursued within the context of a Catholic university provides a vast landscape for their intellectual pursuits."

In his interview Wednesday, O'Malley defined the broad mission of the center as "to enlighten the faculty and the campus community on the teachings of the church and the Catholic intellectual tradition and the Catholic intellectual tradition of the church."

Mannion, an Irish citizen who became the Harpst center's director in 2009, has said in interviews that those descriptions of the center run "completely contrary" to what he was told about its mission before his hiring, specifically how academic freedom would be treated.

"I was given assurances that there was no question of interference, that academic freedom would be safeguarded," Mannion said in a Nov. 6 interview.

Regarding Mannion's assertion that the university's understanding of the mission of the center was never communicated to him, O'Malley said he couldn't explain the difference of opinion.

"I can't explain that difference of view or difference of opinion on that," said O'Malley. "I've heard him make the same claim?but I obviously don't have any knowledge of his understanding at the point of hire."

Beattie's signing of the August letter, said O'Malley, "is taking a public stance that is inconsistent with the mission of the Center for Catholic Thought and Culture when the purpose of the Center is to promote the intellectual tradition of the Catholic church and the teachings of the church."

"Certainly, Dr. Beattie is entitled to express her views or her perspectives as she sees fit," said O'Malley. "It's just simply that the institution is not obligated to give her an honorary fellowship or a visiting professorship."

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