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Salem ends Gordon College's use of town hall

Cites school's policy on gays

By **Matt Rocheleau** | GLOBE CORRESPONDENT JULY 10, 2014



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GLOBE FILE PHOTO

Gordon College has come under fire because of its opposition to expected federal hiring protection for gays and lesbians.

Salem officials declared Wednesday they will end a contract allowing Gordon College to use the city-owned Old Town Hall because of the Christian school's opposition to expected federal hiring protection for gays and lesbians.

Mayor Kimberley Driscoll, who also cited the college's longstanding policies prohibiting gay activities among students, said Gordon's policies violate a city ordinance prohibiting Salem from contracting with entities that discriminate.

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But she said it would be “even more troubling” to have the city do business with “an institution that enables, and now advocates for, discrimination against the [lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender] community.”

“As mayor, I most certainly cannot let that stand,” Driscoll wrote in a letter to D. Michael Lindsay, president of Gordon, located in nearby Wenham.

Last week, Lindsay was among 14 religious leaders who wrote to the White House requesting an exemption to an upcoming executive order prohibiting federal contractors from discriminating in their hiring based on sexual orientation or gender identity.

The letter upset dozens of students, faculty, and alumni of the college, including more than 100 who signed a letter to the White House in support of the rules banning discrimination. An online petition calling for Lindsay to reverse the college’s position had received 2,950 signatures by Wednesday afternoon.

Lindsay defended his position this week, saying his request for an exemption is about supporting religious freedom.

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In her letter, Driscoll wrote that Salem has had “a long and positive relationship with Gordon College over the years” and she was saddened to cut ties with the school.

But she told Lindsay, “I hope you realize how hurtful and offensive these ‘behavioral standards’ are to members of the greater Salem LGBT community, some of whom are Gordon alumni, staff and/or students.”

Driscoll said in a phone interview Wednesday that she had spoken to Lindsay before sending her letter. But the Gordon president failed to “adequately address the concerns we have.”

“We’re definitely very troubled by the recent actions by Gordon College,” she said. “Their current behavioral standards are discriminatory both on campus and off campus.”

The college’s website lists policies for students, faculty, and staff that ban them from engaging in “homosexual practice,” on or off campus. The standards also forbid sex outside marriage, drunkenness, blasphemy, profanity, theft, and dishonesty.

City officials said Salem has contracted with Gordon since 2008 to maintain, operate, rent out, and help preserve and improve the Old Town Hall, a two-century-old, two-story building in Derby Square that includes a museum and a large hall space.

Effective Tuesday, Salem will terminate the agreement. The city had planned to take over those duties Sept. 1 for unrelated reasons but will now assume the responsibility earlier than scheduled, Driscoll said.

A group affiliated with Gordon has also run the year-old Salem Museum, which is on the first floor of Old Town Hall, Driscoll said. Another college-affiliated group has been using space in the building since 1992 for seasonal performances of a popular play.

Driscoll said city officials hope they can find a way to keep the museum and the play in the building, but, in order to do so, will need to draft agreements that ensure they comply with the city’s ordinance banning discrimination.

Kristina Wacome Stevick, artistic director of History Alive!, which runs the play, said actors and other staff are welcome “regardless of race, gender, or sexual orientation.”

Gordon does not underwrite the production, nor does it own rights to the play, according to the group, which said it has been working to become independent, a process that has accelerated because of the recent controversy.

Stevick, who graduated from Gordon in 1997, said the group will do everything it can to keep its production running uninterrupted.

"I absolutely understand the city's situation," she said. "If I was Mayor Driscoll, I would have done the same thing."

The play, called "Cry Innocent," is a re-creation of the trial of Bridget Bishop during the Salem Witch Trials of the 1690s, which are commonly recalled to caution against religious extremism and unjust persecution.

Driscoll recalled those historic lessons in her letter.

"With our unique and infamous history, Salem has worked hard to not simply learn from our past, but to transform it into a call for action," she wrote.

"Most importantly, it informs our values and impels us to take a stand against actions that stigmatize, ostracize, or discriminate against any group of people in our community," Driscoll added.

Gordon College spokesman Rick Sweeney noted that the city had planned to take over management of Old Town Hall soon anyway.

"So we are not surprised by [the] mayor's decision, and we respect the reasons she has provided to the college for taking this action now," he said in an e-mail.

"We have had a great relationship with the city and with the mayor," he said. "Members of the Gordon community have always been respectful and welcoming to all individuals regardless of orientation."

Recent Gordon graduate Conor Krupke, who helped start and run a blog called "Student Inqueery" about sexual identity and Christianity, said he supported Driscoll's decision.

Still, he said, "I think it's unfortunate that it happened. The partnership between Salem and Gordon was really good for the institution, and it's unfortunate that the president's actions are influencing the opportunities available to students."

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