

Sherry K. Lewis, Ph.D. is a licensed clinical psychologist, organizational consultant and Shorter alumnae. With her permission, we are sharing an email that she wrote to Dr. Nelson Price in November 2011, in an attempt to help ameliorate what had become, in her view as well as ours, an untenable situation between faculty, staff, alumni and the public after the release of the [Personal Lifestyle Statement](#) and [Statement of Faith Integration](#).

Dr. Price,

I am writing this email as a means of introducing what I hope will be a part of a conversation. Dr. Price, I have personally found you to be accessible through email and hope you will be open to discussion with me as an individual. I have attempted to maintain civility in our correspondences (as have you, thank you - very much) and am interested in Shorter's past and future successes, again as are you.

Let me describe my rationale for the attachments that accompany this message and the attachments themselves.

I am a psychologist with many years of international organizational consulting experience working with leaders as they strive to be effective in transition, communication, conflict resolution and goal achievement. I am also a person who values scholarly pursuit, Christian values and Shorter University (*née* College). I am an alumnae and have been an active volunteer in the past and a small financial donor. I have drafted responses to the current conflicts as if I were called in to consult on the matter. Certainly you are under no obligation to even review them. But, in the spirit of caring about Shorter and a desire to improve on her current circumstances, I hope that you will. I really do. Caring about Shorter and desiring an improvement on current circumstances is my only motivation.

First, I am no theologian and am vastly unprepared to discuss on a philosophical level the Bible or any of its fine points with an educated person like yourself, a man who has dedicated his life to the study, understanding and sharing of The Word. I would not want to seem arrogant.

In the documents related to faith I have been intentionally taken a "50,000 ft. level" approach. This is not about "wobble room." It is about meeting the requirements that you have for commitment and definition and continuing Shorter's ability to retain its very qualified current faculty and attracting high quality academic faculty in the future. As you may know, working with academics can call to mind the reference, "herding cats." These are people who have made their lives about thought and very much enjoy thinking for themselves. While the personal faith of these fine professionals has been an inspiration to many students, I believe emphasizing their continued roles as educators will resonate more strongly with them than taking a "100 ft. level" view of their beliefs as they fulfill a central role in a Christ-centered institution. I have affirmed the affiliation of Shorter with the GBC without requiring faculty members to endorse its specific beliefs verbatim. Many reasonable people have varied beliefs about the tenets of the Statement of Faith as it is currently detailed - many of them are "good Baptists" and many more are "good Christians." I have intentionally chosen to focus on what I consider to be the necessary and sufficient agreements. I do not see this as a compromise (wherein all parties typically "lose"

some things of importance to them) but rather a beginning of collaboration (wherein all parties have their critical ideas represented.)

In some of these documents I have referred to Shorter's objective to educate and her strong reputation in the Fine Arts. My guiding assumption is that as leaders you want to continue pursuing education primarily and leverage the strengths of the liberal arts focus. This also presumes that your vision for Shorter is not for it to be a Bible University. (I believe Shorter's constituents want her to be good liberal arts college with growing academic programs where biblical principles are lived and taught.) If I am wrong and the vision is for Shorter to be a Bible University, please tell me. That would clear up quite a bit for me.

You will no doubt notice that I've referred mostly to principles and behaviors - principles being well defined and agreed upon Christian teachings and behaviors being observable and measurable. For me, this is an improvement over the word "faith" because it takes the administration out of the position of judging what is in someone's heart and instead focuses on the impact of positive acts (and the consequences for negative acts.) Please understand, this is no attempt to remove faith from our lives and relationship with God - it is an attempt to clarify the expectations between an employer and employee and address the concerns that some have stated in having any employer judge an individual's beliefs.

Finally, I've drafted what I would recommend as a letter to address the responses (positive and negative) to the recent policies and explain the rationale for revisiting them. Again, understand I am not suggesting the existing policies are wrong (though I would personally hate to see them enforced at Shorter), but that they can be improved upon in meaningful ways and that as effective leaders, the administration of Shorter is open to improving upon ideas. In organizations I have often heard leaders use the adage, "you can be right or you can be happy." I believe this is a good example of that wisdom. I am not suggesting that these changes will make everyone happy - I do not believe that making people happy, or cowing to the loudest voices is effective, value-based leadership. But my experience has shown me that value-based leadership is concerned about the welfare of others and is open to improvement.

I have spent many prayerful, focused hours on this topic and hope you will give my ideas your consideration.

As I have reviewed the documents before I email them to you I can see how they may be perceived as intrusive or unwelcome. My intentions are not to overstep, but to provide examples of what might be final products should the Board of Trustees agree to revisit their recent policy decisions.

Respectfully,
skr

And what was Nelson Price's response? Did he begin by thanking Dr. Richards for caring enough about Shorter that she would have taken the time to craft a potential plan for ameliorating the situation? Was she thanked for submitting what was, in essence, a change management plan for which a consultant of her caliber might have been highly paid?

He began his email by writing, “Dr. Richards I was there when the person knowing it was a lie said we wanted to make Shorter a Bible college. There is NO desire to diminish the academic standard of the school. We have many individuals with prestigious degrees from Division I schools who have recently expressed a desire to come to Shorter. If we lose any faculty they will be replaced with highly qualified professors with considerable experience.”

The third sentence is confusing, in that the categorization of Division I only applies to a ranking for athletics. According to the U.S. News 2011-2012 college rankings, Shorter is an [unranked Tier 2 school](#). Does Price believe that we can get “highly qualified professors with considerable experience” from other schools that have an athletics department or does he believe that Tier 1 professors are clamoring to come to a Tier 2 school? This is the same kind of stonewalling that has been the hallmark of the Fundamentalist movement – obfuscate the facts, ignore the offers for help, deflect the question. We won’t post the entire email response here, but here are the facts, as Price sees them.

After citing a number of Tier 1 schools with denominational ties, Price compares the Lifestyle Statement with the standards set by the likes of Emory and Notre Dame. Shorter is, according to Price “simply ask[ing] our faculty to respect the fact it is a Baptist school”. He then mentions the incident at Penn State and alludes to the fact that by mandating the Personal Lifestyle Statement, the Board is reducing the liability of the institution.

So why hasn't Price, Dowless or the Board met with alumni or concerned citizens to explain the above position? Why do they refuse to entertain any discussion? According to Price, “With people saying change the policy or thousands of us will stop at nothing to destroy the school, issuing death threats, threatening the burn buildings, and consigning me to hell I am not about to meet with any group.”

We find it odd that, like the reported bomb threat that coincided with a planned protest of the policies, there have been no reports by the local newspaper of any arrests for terroristic threats.

Price closes the email with mentions of those with whom the administration met, prior to the complete shut-out of any further communication, writing that the individuals had totally misrepresented what had been said in the meetings.

Such is the posturing of the then Chairman of the Board of Trustees of Shorter University. After calling an individual a liar in his first sentence and excoriating those who would question the decision of Dowless and the Board, after calling Dr. Richards a well-intended professional, (Honorary Dr.) Nelson Price ends with a call for harmony. Harmony, which will only be achieved if all of those lying, threatening, damning heathens come to Nelson’s version of the light.