

A Conversation with President Lindsay

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Nearly three months have passed since a letter to the White House, signed by Gordon's President D. Michael Lindsay and a number of other religious leaders, was leaked in *The Atlantic*. Gordon was thrust into the spotlight within hours of the letter going public, and has scarcely escaped it since.

The Tartan sat down with President Lindsay for a conversation about the ensuing events. This version is the full transcript.

Tartan: To begin, could you explain your initial reasons for signing the letter?

DML: I was approached in the spring by a number of different organizations that were putting together letters to the White House, largely in support of the religious exemption that the U.S. Senate legislation called ENDA had outlined, but also an affirmation of the 2002 executive order that President Bush had issued.

You never know what the content of an executive order will be until it comes out, but there was lots of discussion that it was likely going to affect federal contractors.

Gordon is not a federal contractor. Most of higher education is not federal contractors, and to the best of my knowledge there is not a Christian college or university that's a federal contractor. Instead, we had from time-to-time been a federal grantee where a faculty member had a National Science Foundation grant or National Endowment for Humanities grant, but more commonly we provide services for students who receive federal student financial aid, like the Pell grant.

My signing the letter was to really try and to show support for those faith-based organizations that are faith-based federal contractors—organizations like Catholic charities and the Salvation Army, which do have hiring and workplace expectations informed by their faith. I think it's incredibly important for those kind of organizations to be able to hire for mission, as the technical language refers to it—for them to be able to bring their theological and religious convictions to bear in personnel decisions.

Without some kind of religious exemption, that would not be possible, and I wanted to make sure that I personally went on record with the president saying I think it's important for all faith-based organizations.

Tartan: This turned into a multifaceted matter with pushback from various sources. What action is the college taking to confront these issues, especially the immediate community health at Gordon?

DML: I would say this has been a dynamic, fluid situation that has morphed over time. There is no amount of preparation that could have readied us for the many different strains of criticism, challenge, reaction, and then also sources of support which have come from surprising quarters.

What we have tried to do over the last, going on three months, is to focus primarily on our campus community, to have frequent communication with faculty, staff and students, to have ongoing channels for feedback, like the community.gordon.edu email address and also making myself and leadership available to the college. So, members of the board attending town hall meetings with faculty, staff and a variety of other things that have happened. The community relations dimension and the wider public relations dimension have been secondary to the internal community, but we have been focused on trying to help clarify and get the right information out to the right people.

Tartan: During some of the hall forums, you mentioned possibly introducing a working group over the next months involving members of the faculty, administration and students. What do you foresee the students' role being in the institutional response?

DML: The working group is somewhat modeled on something Gordon did about 10 years ago. We have 20 individuals—four faculty, four staff, four students, four administrators, four trustees—we have an outside facilitator who will help these conversations that will take place over the next six months, to provide an opportunity for all the people around the table to share their perspective, and to also be sounding boards as we try to think through what adjustments Gordon should make, in light of these issues. Students will be equal players in the conversations. I am not facilitating the conversation. So, truthfully, around that table a student's voice will be as powerful as my voice, and vice versa. We are really wanting to hear from different perspectives, and to think about it in as a deliberate and disciplined way as we can.

This topic has brought to the surface, emotions that for some people have been bottled up for years, and for others had been on the surface and this provided a catalyst where they could make public their convictions. I understand that and appreciate it. At the same time, institutional policies and practices have to be made with sober judgment, not with spirited emotion. So what we're trying to do is to provide venues where that spirited emotion can be expressed; we're not trying to squelch it. And at the same time, the working group is really about the hard labor that is required to think through all the angles in an institution's response, and to be as responsible as possible.

Tartan: What will come of the information and the consensus that is collected?

DML: The working group will, a couple of times, report out to the community how their deliberations have gone. At the moment I don't know what that will look like because I'm not setting the agenda, but we will come to a consensus as a group, of how we'll share that. They will not be issuing any formal report or set of recommendations, but it will inform conversations that the college's leadership will have over the course of the coming semester, and probably the summer as well, as we think about, "How do we respond to the various issues that have emerged?"

Tartan: So it won't turn into a report that just sits on a shelf?

DML: Nope, not a report at all. If I had to say what's the primary purpose of the working group, I'd say it's for there to be a set of institutional stakeholders to sit

around the same table, to be exposed to the same information and reflect as a group and as individuals, on how this should shape Gordon's future.

Tartan: A common consideration in higher education is the nature of the Church's relationship with academics, like Tertullian's question, "What does Athens have to do with Jerusalem?" But it seems like we need to also put the State in that picture and, instead, ask something along the lines of, "What does the Church have to do with the University, have to do with the State?" Any thoughts on this dynamic in its relevance to Gordon?

DML: It's been interesting because one of the refrains that I've heard from some news sources is, there's no problem if Gordon wants to set its institutional policies so long as it doesn't take taxpayer dollars. And the challenge with that is that there is no context in which we as a society have established a litmus test for taxpayer dollars on a variety of issues. Pacifists have to pay taxes, and some of that money is used for the military. Republicans have to pay taxes that end up benefitting liberal causes, and vice versa. Part of what it means to be in civil society is to recognize that there is a pluralism of perspectives and that tax dollars are used to support those various initiatives.

I was literally last week talking with a leader of the LGBT community, someone who has been incredibly successful in leading the LGBT convictions within the Democratic Party. This individual has been the strategist around getting the LGBT agenda more centrally part of the Democratic Party I asked him, would you want the tax code or tax dollars to be used to bring about social policy? And he said, absolutely not because it's impossible to anticipate the unintended consequences of using the tax code or tax dollars in that way. The idea that any kind of government institution would use a litmus test around our code of conduct could have a ripple effect that there's no way we could anticipate the full impact of it.

As a small step in this, faith-based institutions like Gordon do a better job of recruiting, educating, retaining and then graduating students from under-represented populations, and frankly, from poor backgrounds than most other institutions. So if suddenly the federal government were to say that an institution like Gordon couldn't receive federal student financial aid, it would have a harmful effect, not just for our students, but could have a pernicious effect for access opportunities.

Gordon has done a better job of recruiting students and helping to support financially the education of students from less privileged backgrounds, and the idea that any kind of government institution would use a litmus test around our code of conduct could have a ripple effect that there's no way we could anticipate the full impact of it.

Tartan: What is the College trustees' priority in decision-making?

DML: At the end of the day, the trustees are the ones who are responsible for the institution's vitality. They are the individuals who are holding it in trust from previous generations. They are the ones who are the fiduciary parties who are responsible for the financial health of the institution and they are also the ones who set all institutional policies.

Now, we have an amazing, talented group of trustees who love Gordon College deeply. Alumni who have given their souls to support our college. Parents of current and former students, as well as friends of the College who have made Gordon their primary allegiance over and above their own alma maters. The fact that we have such a committed group of trustees who care deeply about the institution is a tremendous gift to Gordon.

The trustees have no desire to set policies that are not supported by the institution. At the same time it is ultimately their decision—not even my decision—of formal policies, and I think the ways in which the trustees have initiated conversations and have supported the desire for their to be input from lots of different constituents, I think, reflects the trustees' deep commitment to the care for this institution and for those who love and care for Gordon. All of our trustees are people of deep and vibrant Christian faith. They pray for the college and I have never been part of a trustee meeting where there isn't prayer. They really want to be guided by the Lord in how they approach decision-making.

They are also smart, savvy professionals who recognize that in a pluralistic context there will be a variety of perspectives, and they are trying to adjudicate among those perspectives. It would be completely out of character to make decisions purely out of political considerations. I think that they are much more likely to make decisions out of a place of real spiritual discernment, which is also why most decisions that are made by trustees take a long time. Most institutional policies are shaped, not in a day or a single meeting, but over years. There's a long period of consideration because it can have long-term significant effects. The trustees have communicated to me a desire for these conversations that are taking place over the next six months to be intentional and reflective.

But I think it would be shortsighted for us as a community to expect, come February, the board is going to make some master pronouncement, and that will be the end-all-be-all. Based on my conversations, I think that the board is currently quite satisfied with our current policy around homosexual behavior.

At the same time, this episode has brought to the surface a variety of perspectives and some real hurt within our community, and our trustees are people who love our students. We want to think carefully about how do we respond in a loving, graceful, truthful way to that hurt, while at the same time remaining true to the evangelical convictions at the core of our institution.

Tartan: To students, higher-ups might seem distant. In a situation at a time like this it might be hard for students to get a gage on what is going on. What would you say to those who question the authenticity of the College's responsive public relations?

DML: Let me take a step back and say that one of the challenges for a leader of an institution is, if you have not been part of another institution is you do not have another frame of reference and so I think it's really helpful to ask their friends at other

colleges questions about the college's leadership—how much interaction they have with that college's leadership, how much voice do they have in issues.

When I was an undergrad at Baylor, I bet I did not see the college president no more than four times over the course of my four years there, and I was certainly within the top five percent of engaged undergraduates at the institution. At Rice where I used to teach, it would be very rare for Rice's president to have interaction with students or for there to be conversation. Even at Gordon things that I would hope folks would say about my administration is that I have been more available, accessible and engaged with students than has been the case in the past.

It's my understanding that the visits I made to residence halls was unprecedented in Gordon's history and it's been a long time since there had been administration regularly teaching classes with students. I taught a class last semester, Rick Sweeney is teaching a class this semester, Janel Curry is teaching a class this semester, Michael Ahearn has taught a class. So we're pretty invested and engaged, and I think it's important for our students to understand just how remarkable that is. For students to somehow feel as if there is a distance between them and the college's leadership is just not in touch with reality, and certainly not comparatively.

That said, students always want to have a bigger voice. They always feel that they ought to be driving into a conversation and one of the things that I think is really important is that GCSA function as the voice of students and is the conduit of student expression. One of the challenges that GCSA faces is the challenge of any of us in leadership, which is that sometimes you can be a conduit of what you are hearing from those constituencies, but those constituencies may not be reflective of the whole body. So it might be that Russian speakers suddenly organize among the student body at Gordon, and they are pushing forward much more focused on Russia and Russian engagement. Now that may represent only 12 Gordon students but they're really pushing that agenda, and so GCSA may be tempted because they're hearing from that, to make that sort of a centerpiece when, in fact, that doesn't even represent one percent of our student body.

GCSA's job is to focus not on the one percent, but the hundred percent. One of the encouragements I give to our student government leaders is for them to make sure that they are in touch with the whole and using their platform as the voice of students to reflect the perspectives of the whole, not of vocal minorities.

Tartan: It seems like the media has not been receptive to Gordon's responses and attempts to explain the situation. Does the administration have any new strategies to defend its hard-earned reputation in the area so that the media might better understand our position?

DML: One of the most frustrating experiences of the month of July was the inability of the local media to understand and appreciate Gordon's highly nuanced and, I think, pastorally responsible way of caring for members of the LGBT community who are part of the Gordon family. And I am very grateful that the month of August reflected a widening understanding. There was an article in the Boston Globe in mid-August,

another article in the Boston Business Journal and a variety of other messages that began to take root. And I will say that we feel gratified that finally there is more understanding, and who Gordon is has been presented to the Boston community. At the same time I would say that I have become convinced it is difficult to hold this theological position without that being misunderstood, and there may be a note of incommensurability that we have to recognize that in a pluralistic context our core convictions may not always be understood, and that does not change the fact that those are our core convictions.

Tartan: We understand that, over the summer it was a particularly difficult time dealing with the media, and they were especially busy in that first month. How has this affected you and your family?

DML: I cannot talk about this without getting emotional. You would think after however many times I've shared my story, I'd be able to do it and I can't. It has been incredibly painful for me and my family. It is my great hope that God will redeem this experience in my life in such a way for the greater good for both my greater good and the greater good of the Gordon community. And that is also my prayer for Gordon, that God would use this in a way that somehow makes us more Christ-like.

Tartan: Absolutely. Thank you for sharing. So on the Gordon campus, what would you say in response to concerns that students may have encountered anti-gay attitudes? Is there anything that Gordon can do to combat any existence of these attitudes?

DML: One of the reasons we have a life and conduct statement is for there to be recognition that, to become part of our community is to willingly place your actions and behaviors into a system of personal accountability. Both the spirit and the substance of the life and conduct statement is designed to create a more loving, intentionally Christian community, and I find it troubling and upsetting to think that gay students have been bullied or have been ostracized because of their identity. At the same time, I think it's also important for us to recognize that we are still a community in process, and there is not unanimity in understanding around LGBT issues. Part of living in community is recognizing that we are still in formation spiritually.

Tartan: Now during chapel and convocation, a group of students remain outside in protest. To what extent does their action result in what they want to see accomplished?

DML: I think that there are lots of different ways in which students can make their concerns and voices known. I disagree with the premise that I've heard some folks who have protested have said, "We're going to stay here until our voices are heard," because I really can't imagine a scenario where the perspective of LGBT students has been more heard than over the last two months, in the history of Gordon College. So I'm not sure what they're trying to communicate in saying that, but I have been in conversation with gay students and look forward to continue being in conversation with gay students. I have oftentimes found it's more helpful to have face-to-face conversation than it is to organize around protest. I respect our students' concerns and

want to create avenues where our students can share their concerns. My research as a sociologist who studies organization and change is that substantive change occurs through face-to-face conversation.

Tartan: And you mentioned earlier that you did make a point of visiting residence halls in order to have those conversations. What exactly made you decide to take this particular route of communication with the students?

DML: I asked a group of students for their perspective of what would be helpful, and what would be the best way for me to share what was on my heart, and to also hear what's on their hearts. I realized that a campus-wide meeting of 1,500 people would not create the intimacy that is required; at the same time there is only so much of me that can go around, so we thought that the residence halls would be an appropriate level of groupings of students. I'm very glad I had the chance to talk with our students and to hear from students in that kind of setting. All in all it was a very effective way of continuing some of the conversations that started this summer.

Tartan: Was it a productive time for you to hear things that, perhaps you hadn't heard before?

DML: To be honest, there wasn't necessarily anything that was *new* to me over the course of the conversations, but it was helpful to me to get a sense of relative importance hearing from different groups of students over the course of two nights. As many students spoke to me before and after the session as actually spoke in the session so over the course of that time I probably had a chance to speak directly with, I don't know, 100 students.

Tartan: People have responded to your signing the letter by making requests like rescinding your signature. What is your response to this sort of demand?

DML: I don't know how one removes their signature from a letter that's already been sent, so that just seems like a silly request. At the same time, I think that the substance of what I was being asked to do was to renounce what I supported, and I can't do that and still respect myself. I don't sign my name lightly and I don't make these decisions out of political considerations. I do what I think is best and try to live responsibly day in and day out. I never gave serious consideration to the idea of removing my signature because it seemed to me that would be an irresponsible way to lead.

At the same time I think it is important to actually have read the letter I signed, not just read about it. As is quite clear, I actually signed the letter as an individual, not on the behalf of Gordon College. That was important to me in the very decision to sign onto the letter. The number of students who have presumed to understand my personal motivation or how my signing the letter somehow reflects my leadership of the college seems questionable because it's really hard for folks to judge motives. To the extent that people can take me at my word, I can honestly say I did not sign that letter in an effort to somehow initiate change at the institution.

I very much saw the spirit of that letter as being in alignment of the college's long-term institutional position, and the reason I know that is because the content of that letter was almost verbatim the content of the religious exemption that every

Democratic senator voted in favor of six months ago. So to say that Gordon would not be in alignment with what was just the broad political consensus just six months ago is to misunderstand how Gordon views itself within a pluralistic context.

Tartan: One major point of concern is the City of Lynn ending ties with the college, thus taking a toll on students' work in outreach there.

DML: We love Lynn. We have invested millions of dollars in that community out of our deep heart for the community and our desire to serve. We don't force ourselves to serve in any place and if, in the end, Lynn decides that they really do not want Gordon to be there, then we will accept that decision. Even today there was a front-page article in the Lynn newspaper saying how shortsighted the Lynn School Committee's decision was. For the moment we are allowing the City of Lynn to sort out this matter internally and for them to reach a consensus.

Not only are our students hurt by the lack of opportunities to learn and grow in that community, but all of the people that we served are hurt by this decision. I can't in my mind understand how the leaders of that community could see in the end that this really serves their purposes.

There are some who have a false understanding that Gordon discriminates on the basis of sexual orientation. We do not. We have not. We tried very hard to be in face-to-face conversation with the leadership of the community. The superintendent would not meet with me.

The school committee's vote was approaching and one of the things that I wanted to talk to the superintendent about what the possible legal implications were. Because I love my wife I would never want for her to knowingly make a mistake that could have a pernicious effect on her. So we approached our relationship with Lynn in the same way. We received legal counsel that suggested that what the school committee was doing was not only unconstitutional, it was illegal. In that context the Attorney General of the State of Massachusetts could take action against Lynn.

We would never want that to happen so we sought, multiple times, conversations with their leaders, and were not able to have that conversation. In the end I wrote an email to the superintendent and said, "I think it would be prudent for your legal council to do research on the case law on this issue so that they could be informed, or to meet with our legal council so that they could be briefed on it." She said that she would like a chance for their attorney to meet with our attorney, and their attorney immediately called to make that meeting. I demurred and said no, I would prefer for the conversation to happen between me and the superintendent. I would rather not get our attorneys involved. She felt strongly that there should be a conversation between the attorneys and so I allowed that conversation to take place.

At the end of that conversation their attorney asked our attorney if he would be willing to provide a summary of our analysis of the case law. Typically we would not do that. If we were going to take legal action we would not provide the legal argumentation of why think we have a strong case. But because we had no desire to take legal action, we had no problem sharing what our research had uncovered. We provided that,

however we make clear in both emailed the communication and the letter we provided, Gordon is providing this for educational purposes only—there is no desire to take legal action.

There are some members of the school community that wanted to posture politically and suggest that somehow we were using this as a guise to take legal threat. To suggest that is outright untrue, and is deliberately misleading for political reasons. We have made clear all along we have no desire to do that.

At the same time we continue to leave open the possibility for ongoing conversation in Lynn, and it is my great hope that the school committee's decision could be adjusted so that there can continue can be a fruitful partnership in the months and years ahead. We are not pushing for that decision on a certain time frame; instead we want that to occur out of the relationship we have in the long haul. Not only are our students hurt by the lack of opportunities, but all of the people that we served are hurt by this decision. I can't in my mind understand how the leaders of that community could see in the end that this really serves their purposes.

Tartan: There has been a petition going around the Internet asking Gordon to formally commit to not suing Lynn. Do you see, at any point of time in the future a lawsuit being plausible? Is Gordon responding to that petition?

DML: First off, I think that petition is incredibly misguided because no institution would ever put in writing a commitment to take any course of action. We have no idea what the long term implications could be five years from now, so why would we put an obligation around the institution that is not needed, is not appropriate?

I so much wish our community could move to a place of positive, constructive collaboration and move beyond the protesting and petitioning because all the protesting and petitioning do is exacerbate division when I'm really working hard for unity, here. Certainly anyone can do whatever they want, but I don't think it's terribly productive for additional petitioning to continue.

Tartan: Until or if Lynn comes to a decision on the matter in reestablishing ties with the College, how is Gordon planning to replace the lost opportunities for students who would serve in Lynn?

DML: What we have done is voluntarily taken the students who were assigned in Lynn, and place them elsewhere. We had school districts call us immediately and say, "We love Gordon students, we'd love to have them." There are still principals in Lynn who want our students. We're putting a pause on the placements that we have in Lynn for the fall semester. There are still some community partnerships that are continuing and we're really grateful for those, and my sense is that there will be more things that will come around in time, but we're not forcing ourselves.

Tartan: Do all students who were formerly placed in Lynn now have placements? Are there any who have no place to go?

DML: No student teachers. We decided that we would not have student learning sections of TGC this semester, which involve a lot of students, mainly because we wanted to be thoughtful and deliberate, and this whole proceeding happened after the

fall semester began, and we decided that we didn't want to put pressure on that decision or on our students and we didn't want to create awkward situations. So we have voluntarily backed away as a way of trying to help our students and our community, and the relationship with Lynn.

Tartan: What is the root problem in this entire situation? And in light of that, what do you foresee or hope for Gordon in the coming months and years?

DML: The root problem is that we are all fallen, and we miss the mark in our individual lives and our institutional life every day. So this issue has brought to the surface great pain and hurt, misunderstanding, misinformation, strong convictions and conflicting institutional priorities. Part of my job is to try and help our community process through all of those things, and to get to a place of health and vitality.

My sense is that Gordon is a stronger, better place than it was three months ago having gone through this, but we still have not experienced the full effect of the pain or the full effect of the healing. We're very much still in the moment. But it's my hope that we will be able to come to a place of deeper love for one another, deeper commitment to the truth of the Gospel and a deeper commitment to the evangelical identity of Gordon College.