

[< Back](#) | [Home](#)

# Reasons for Christian group's suspension unclear, leader says

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The University suspended the Christian student group Reformed University Fellowship earlier this semester, though the group's president said the reasons for suspension remain unclear and have not been communicated adequately to him.

The group, which is led by Ethan Wingfield '07, is one of 110 RUF chapters across the country and, Wingfield believes, the first to be suspended or "kicked off campus" by a university. RUF's parent organization, which is affiliated with the Presbyterian Church, encourages its members to "uniquely engage (their) community in the gospel" and "grow as ambassadors of God's grace," according to its Web site.

The Office of the Chaplains and Religious Life formally suspended Brown's chapter of RUF for the 2006-07 academic year on Sept. 13. In an e-mail sent that day from Chaplain of the University Janet Cooper Nelson to Wingfield, Cooper Nelson said the suspension came after Trinity Presbyterian Church had revoked sponsorship of RUF and that the Brown student group had demonstrated "non-compliance with University policy and procedure."

Cooper Nelson also wrote that OCRL and Trinity Presbyterian had agreed to discuss the group's re-establishment in the 2007-08 academic year.

But Trinity Presbyterian Church Pastor Rev. David Sherwood immediately informed Cooper Nelson that the church had not withdrawn its sponsorship as RUF's Religious Life Affiliate.

While the Undergraduate Council of Students is responsible for oversight of most student groups, religious student groups are required to have a Religious Life Affiliate, an outside organization, sponsor and oversee their activities.

Associate Protestant University Chaplain Allen Callahan wrote in another Sept. 13 e-mail that RUF had not been a fully recognized student group since Fall 2005 due to its sponsor's failure to submit the required application for renewed Religious Life Affiliate status on time.

RUF's status was revoked on account of "irresponsibility," its "leadership's repeated and willful failure to be respectful and transparent in its dealings with OCRL" and "a leadership culture of contempt and dishonesty that has rendered all collegial (sic) relations with (OCRL) impossible," Callahan wrote.

Wingfield requested further explanation of the group's suspension in a Sept. 15 e-mail to Callahan. Though Wingfield wrote that Callahan's concerns were not entirely "inaccurate," he said his attempts to rectify the situation in the past had been met with little response from OCRL. Wingfield acknowledged late paperwork, personal insults to Callahan for which he had apologized and an unintentional lack of transparency in dealings with OCRL that Wingfield wrote he had since attempted to correct.

Wingfield told The Herald that difficulties with OCRL began in spring 2005, or "exactly when I was elected president." He cited the Student Activities Office's "weird unwillingness" to help RUF find on-campus meeting space in 2005 as an early example of difficulty with the University.

Hugh Livengood '07, chair of the UCS Student Activities Committee, said SAO Director Ricky Gresh made a particular effort to find on-campus meeting space for RUF.

Wingfield said Callahan notified him "out of the blue" in January that RUF's status as a Religious Life Affiliate was revoked due to late paperwork.

After OCRL formally revoked the group's RLA status, RUF continued to be recognized as a student group. Wingfield said he questions whether it is appropriate that religious groups be required to submit to oversight by OCRL rather than the UCS.

Livengood said he believes the spring semester may have been intended as a trial period during which the group could have pursued improved relations with OCRL.

Wingfield said he began correspondence and a series of meetings with OCRL and the Office of Campus Life days after RUF's status was revoked, requesting explanation for the group's revoked status and suggestions for its re-establishment.

"They would never suggest any real solutions that were any new ideas," he said of meetings with Cooper Nelson, Callahan and other administrators.

When he attempted to restore relations with Callahan and pursue renewing RUF's status this fall, Wingfield said Callahan told him that RUF had no relationship with the OCRL and made no suggestions for repairing the situation. Eight days later, the group was suspended. Two days after the suspension, Wingfield met with Cooper Nelson and Interim Vice President for Campus Life Russell Carey '91 MA'06.

Wingfield said he received no direct explanation for the group's suspension at that meeting, either. He said Carey expressed support for Cooper Nelson's decision to suspend the group. Wingfield also said Carey and Cooper Nelson responded to his request for further details of the policy violations by saying, "It's not really anything that you've done, it's just that sense we get that we can't work with your organization."

After the meeting, Wingfield said he sent a letter to Cooper Nelson and received no response.

"It was disappointing to me that a student group of our size would mail a letter to these administrators and not receive any acknowledgement whatsoever, much less a substantive response," he said.

After waiting a few weeks for a response, Wingfield said he approached the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education, whose members decided to "apply some public pressure."

The group seeks to "defend and sustain individual rights at America's increasingly repressive and partisan colleges and universities," according to its Web site. FIRE reviews situations, or "cases," submitted by college students and, though it provides no legal representation or advice, contacts university administrators and seeks public exposure for situations brought to its attention.

The group sent a letter to President Ruth Simmons on Oct. 27 charging that "OCRL's explanations for suspending RUF are questionable at best" and requesting a response by Nov. 10. Carey responded with an

Oct. 27 letter that expressed support for Cooper Nelson's decision to revoke RUF's status.

In a Nov. 16 press release, FIRE alleged the University has "inexplicably suspended" the group and offered only "shifting and unclear reasons for its decision."

Livengood said OCRL has notified Wingfield repeatedly of specific reasons for RUF's suspension.

"Ethan doesn't think that those reasons are explicit enough," Livengood said. He added that he believes the suspension comes after "years" of tense relations between RUF and OCRL and that the one-year suspension is intended to be time for RUF to "cool off."

Asked to respond to Livengood's suggestion, Wingfield said: "My reaction to that is basically, cool off from what? Because no one in RUF is really clear on the basis of suspension."

"In order to come back they have to recognize that it is important to work with (OCRL) and that they need to have better relations and abide by their policies," Livengood said. "If RUF is willing to do that now, then I don't see any reason why they shouldn't be reinstated."

But the group's previous approach may have suggested they had little patience for OCRL policies, Livengood said. "They see recognition by (OCRL) as a bit of a burden, that they have to jump through a few hoops to be able to meet on campus, but they basically want to be autonomous," Livengood said.

Livengood said he doubts that prejudice or ideological motives are behind the suspension. "There are other criteria for a religious group that RUF has not followed," he said.

Though Callahan, Cooper Nelson and Carey evaluated RUF's suspension and Livengood has not been involved in discussions about the specifics of the suspension, he said the group's communication of its activities to OCRL and contribution to campus life may have been deemed insufficient and could have contributed to the suspension.

"There are reasons in these e-mails (between administrators and Wingfield)," he said. "They may not be the best, but they're reasons."

Though he is not alleging any discrimination or intolerance on the University's part, Wingfield said he remains uncertain of the reasons for his group's suspension. "I think Brown is a fundamentally tolerant and open place," he said.

Still, he added, "I'm sure you could come up with a conspiracy theory about a coordinated effort from administrators to boot us off campus, but I don't know if that's what's going on."

Cooper Nelson, Callahan and Carey all declined to comment.

Michael Chapman, vice president for public affairs and University relations, released a statement on Friday afternoon explaining that the group was suspended "due to its failure to abide by guidelines established for all religious groups on campus."

Chapman's statement continued: "The University welcomes the contributions that RUF has made to the spiritual life of the campus and has offered to assist RUF in taking the necessary steps to have its affiliation restored. With further assistance from the Vice President for Campus Life and Student Services and OCRL, the University hopes that RUF will regain its affiliation."

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