

Ex-Muslim to lead at Liberty U.

By Bob Lowry

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LYNCHBURG, Va. -- The new dean of the Rev. Jerry Falwell's Liberty University theological seminary is a former Sunni Muslim who plans to turn out a hipper generation of graduates by relating to them with lyrics from rapper 50 Cent, TV's "Queer Eye for the Straight Guy" and the latest movies and film stars.

Ergun Mehmet Caner cracks one-liners as easily as he quotes a Bible verse. Lecturing to a packed auditorium of 450 students, Mr. Caner mixed religion with jokes to keep his students on their toes in a late afternoon theology class.

He asked his students which popular actors they would marry "if she or he was a Christian." Their answers brought howls of laughter from the classroom.

"In a given lecture, I'll talk about 'Queer Eye for the Straight Guy,' C.S. Lewis, 'Plato's Cave' and some lyrics by 50 Cent," Mr. Caner said of some subjects one normally wouldn't associate with Mr. Falwell's university.

Mr. Caner sees it as a way to connect with his young audiences.

"Most college students lose attention every seven minutes and with that, it's important to have that humor to bring us back in and teach us more," said Travis Bush, a junior from Rocky Mount, N.C., in Mr. Caner's class. "He's the best professor here. With the humor, it keeps us interested."

Mr. Caner, 39, said he wants a different approach for a new generation of Liberty students, whom he dubs "tecumenicals."

"I call them techies because, on one hand, they were raised with e-mail" he says. "And yet they are so ecumenical. This generation is different. They've been there, seen it and done it. They're looking for some authentic passion that's got a pulse and that sweats."

"The point is I'll use anything at my disposal. I'm not hiding from culture and I don't boycott culture. If I'm turning out students who say 'What's that dot on your head for?' That's ignorance. Or, 'Why'd you wear your laundry on the top of your head?' That's ignorance."

Mr. Caner takes over as dean of the seminary in July after only two years at the 8,000-student school.

The shaven-headed, goateed Mr. Caner, whose family emigrated from Turkey to Toledo, Ohio, when he was a teenager, converted to Christianity in 1982 after a persistent teenage friend kept taking him to the Stelser Road Baptist Church.

"That little church loved me to Christianity," Mr. Caner said.

His father, an architect who built the mosque in Columbus, Ohio, never forgave him and died as a Muslim, though most of the rest of Mr. Caner's family later converted to Christianity.

Mr. Caner, who is married and has two children, taught theology and church history at Criswell College in Dallas before coming to Liberty.

His appointment to head Liberty's 2,000-student seminary has struck a nerve with some U.S. Muslim and Arab groups, who say his frequent speeches across the country could damage fragile relations between Muslims and Christian Americans. Some view him as hostile to Islam, Palestinian rights and the Arab world.

"He's been around a long time and has a very strong conservative view that is more hostile to Islam than understanding of it," said Ray Hanania of Chicago, managing editor of TheArabStreet.com. "If Falwell wanted to send a strong message to Muslims, he might have done it by reaching out to mainstream Muslims, rather than extremists."

Mr. Caner has been accused, as a scholar, of advancing some controversial assertions, such as the prophet Muhammad was a pedophile possessed by demons. He denies saying that, asserting that his comments were misquoted by a preacher.

"What I did say was that Muhammad at age 50 did marry a 6-year-old and the marriage was consummated when she was 9 years old," Mr. Caner said. "Muslims are not hateful people."

Boyd Rist, Liberty's vice president for academic affairs, said Mr. Caner was the clear choice for the job after the former dean left for the presidency of another school.

As for Mr. Caner's Muslim background, Mr. Rist said Mr. Falwell doesn't mind doing the unexpected at the school he founded in his hometown in 1971.

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