TOWARD THE ELIMINATION OF RACISM
IN VANDERBILT DIVINITY SCHOOL
AND THE GRADUATE DEPARTMENT OF RELIGION

The Vanderbilt Divinity School and the Graduate Department of Religion have taken stands against various forms of racial prejudice within the University and within the city of Nashville. In its catalogue, the Divinity School has stated its convictions:

The School affirms its commitment to combat the idolatry of racism and ethnocentrism that remains widespread in our society. Positively, this entails a commitment to take full account of the contributions of African-Americans, Hispanic Americans, Asian Americans, and Native Americans. It requires the appointment of faculty members, and the recruitment of students from these groups and adequate provision for their support.

Because racism continues to mutate and take on a variety of forms, the School and Department have also been actively attempting to create a racially diverse group of faculty members, administrators, and students of color. Courses have been added which address and explore the existence and functions of other religious traditions; however we must continue our work in fully acknowledging the contributions by other faith traditions and people of minority backgrounds already in our community.

Meanwhile, the population trends of America’s racial minorities continue to change. Today, minorities, the majority of whom are of African-American or Latino/a descent, comprise more than one third of the American population. Inevitably, graduates of the Divinity School and Graduate Department of Religion will pursue their ministries or teaching careers in multi-racial/ethnic contexts. Therefore, the VDS/GDR community must continue to address the problem of racism because we cannot continue to call ourselves academically respectable unless we prepare each other for a diverse world.

This statement is intended to be both reflective and prescriptive of how we, the community, view the problem of racism and our commitment to reduce the effect that racist attitudes have on our personal, pastoral, and professional relationships. Therefore, this document is meant to evolve along with our reactions to, participation in, and understanding about racism in our world.

1. THEOLOGY

The Jewish and the Christian understandings of God affirm that we are made in the image of God in order to relate to one another in love. Further, those values announce that we are one family under one divine Parent. God loves us and calls us to work towards a New Order in which evil is overcome - in which there is "Shalom" among humankind, reflecting the liberating love of God. A vision of God’s New Order, in which contending human loyalties will be gathered into peace and justice and joy, has animated our traditions throughout the centuries. It sings in spirituals and hymns, and it speaks in our prayers: “Your Kingdom come,” we proclaim.”

Our tradition is, however, open-eyed; it confesses the brokenness of the human world and the stubborn reality of sin. For Christians, the violence of the cross is a witness to sin’s power to disrupt and destroy not only human community but to act against God’s will for the world. In sin, human beings will seek to preserve themselves and their social structures, resisting God’s redemptive purposes. Nevertheless, we can celebrate God’s saving power in the world through our work to abolish racism. Sin will be overcome.
We regard racism as rebellion against God—against God’s creation, purposes, and promised salvation. For racism denies our common parentage under God, stands against the reconciliation God wills, and denies the sure promises of God’s word. Racism is not merely a thoughtless social aberration; it is a profoundly sinful and open rebellion against God.

Our traditions acknowledge God’s special concern for the oppressed. God called enslaved people out of Egypt. In the law, God demanded concern for the bereft, the orphaned, and those who were foreign to the culture or place. Moreover, the ministry of Jesus Christ testifies to God’s own identification with those who are classified as social and religious outcasts, with the poor and the rejected.

The Christian church, addressed by the risen Christ and animated by the Holy Spirit, announces God’s New Order and calls people everywhere into a new humanity. Because the church is baptized into God’s new humanity, it should be a sign of God’s promises, a “new creation,” a fellowship that transcends loyalties of race, sexuality, sex or class, an inclusive holy people. Thus the church, though broken, must strive in the power of the Spirit to be free from racism in its common life, its public worship, and its institutions.

2. RACISM

Prejudice is a prejudgment of and disdain toward others whose characteristics are regarded as different. Racism is prejudice plus social privilege. Racism is applying ill-informed universal or absolute expectations to one’s assumptions of another’s individuality based on his or her biological history, cultural preference, and/or physical characteristics. When employing racism, groups use power to isolate and exploit other groups. Racist power seeks to preserve the privileges of a socially dominant group through the oppression of others. Racism is enforced by legal, cultural, religious, economic, and political influence. Racism often lurks within established laws, policies, and senses of what is fair. So racism is not merely an attitude to be converted by religion or a pathology requiring therapy; it is an institutionalized systemic evil that often acts in alliance with religion and is maintained through appeal to the religious. As an institutionalized evil, racism is present even among and between persons of good intention. Removing racism requires a willingness to embrace fundamental structural change and is not just a matter of good will.

Racism is a form of social oppression; it increases its damage exponentially when in alliance with other forms of injustice. Racism interlocks with class domination, sexual domination, and political domination. As such, racism is characteristic of social institutions and fiercely resistant to change. Social oppressors seek self-preservation, particularly in light of the diversity realized through globalization, and, therefore, embrace racism rather than lose their ‘power’.

Racism hurts our community. It affects each one of us as either participators or victims of racial discrimination. Racism erodes the soul of those who oppress and it creates in oppressors a false sense of superiority. In victims it can create an equally false sense of inferiority. Racism is profoundly painful for those it demeans; it enlarges the rage of those it denies.

The Particularities of American Racism

Racism has disfigured American life for centuries. The European colonists who came to America tended to be exclusive, ignoring and mistreating all non-white, non-Protestant,
non-male people. They soon institutionalized racism in America by creating cultural and economic systems that condoned the oppression of other human beings, not limiting their hatred to just black people. Asians, Latino/as, Native Americans, Jews, and African-Americans as descendants of enslaved Africans have thus suffered repressive violence as well as economic, political, and religious oppression. Though our founders proclaimed that “all men are created equal,” in fact America has accorded special privilege to those who are white, male, Protestant, heterosexually identifying, and English-speaking. Historically, racist white Protestants have controlled financial resources, political power, and most social institutions, and their racist attitudes have thrived in those same institutions. Racism in America has been primarily “white racism.”

Racism has continued to be woven into the fabric of American national life and foreign policy. As American national power ebbs, its resistance to social change seems to heighten. Racism exists now as an ever more virulent social disease, and its manifestations vary from region to region. For example, in the South, racism has its own peculiar style and violent history. The same is true for the various faith communities and their particular traditions all over this nation.

Many Jewish, Christian, Muslim, Buddhist, and other faith communities have generated prophetic figures that have spoken the truth against American racism. In every age, there have been religious peoples who have stood in solidarity with the victims of international, national, and ecclesial racism. Competitive denominationalism in America encourages churches to be socially viable; thus, churches seek cultural endorsements. As a result, churches often seek out and assume predominant cultural values - and become less than prophetic in American life. Therefore, the ideals, ethics, and theologies of these subsequent institutions, even when judged by their own truths, have often found themselves supporting racist attitudes.

Ecclesial racism cannot be cured merely by converting individual attitudes, for it lives in patterns of church polity, worship, and proclamation; therefore, it must also be dealt with systematically by altering institutional priorities, power structures, and practices -- by a recasting of church tradition.

Racism within the churches is perpetuated in no small way through the training of church leadership. Theological seminaries in America maintain and sustain the position of white clergy with little regard to racial or ethnic traditions. For example, there have been black schools of theology, but for the most part, they have been separate and unequal. Moreover, within major seminaries, the contribution of black churches and black church thinkers has been generally ignored or, if not ignored, depreciated. In this way, theological education has participated in oppression; it has been designed to provide white clergy for white parishes, trained in a tradition that endorses a white-only Christianity.

3. THE DIVINITY SCHOOL

The Divinity School is part of Vanderbilt University, an institution established after the Civil War to contribute, in the words of its founder, “to strengthening the ties which should exist between all sections of our common country.” The new university quickly succumbed, however, to the segregation and racism that became defining characteristics of post-Reconstruction Southern culture. The ties that should exist between all peoples of our common country were not a part of the vision of Vanderbilt’s mission. African-Americans and other ethnic minorities were, in the words of Paul Conkin, author of the definitive history of Vanderbilt, “the unwanted.”
The Divinity School (including the Graduate Department of Religion) shared in this heritage. It was not until 1953 that the Divinity School admitted its first black student, and it was the first school of the university to do so. A crisis occurred in 1960 when James M. Lawson, a B.D. candidate in the Divinity School, was expelled by the Chancellor, at the request of the Board of Trust, because of his leadership of and participation in the Nashville sit-ins. Subsequently, most of the Divinity faculty submitted their resignations, and the crisis was not resolved until Lawson was reinstated, but only after he had decided to complete his degree at another institution. Recently, Dr. Lawson was confirmed as a 2005 Distinguished Alumnus of Vanderbilt University, a resolution meant to address our university’s participation in racist attitudes.

In response to Dr. Lawson’s struggle with institutional racism, the Divinity School became committed to the struggle for racial justice and adopted as part of its mission the education of black clergy. Many faculty and students participated in the civil rights struggles of the 1960s. In 1969, Kelly Miller Smith became Assistant Dean on a part-time basis. But it was not until 1972 that the first full-time black appointment was made to the faculty - Peter Paris in ethics. Under the leadership of Smith and Paris, the Divinity School attracted a larger number of minority students than ever before. Kelly Smith’s tragic death in June 1984 and Peter Paris’s resignation at the end of the 1984-85 academic year served as a reminder that the School could not become complacent about its commitment to combat racism, appoint additional black faculty, and actively recruit black students.

Sustained searches over a two-year period led to the appointments of Walter Fluker in ethics and Renita Weems in Hebrew Bible in the fall of 1987. In the same year, Wallace Charles Smith joined the faculty as Professor of the Practice of Ministry, and in 1988 Forrest Harris became Assistant Dean of Student Life and Director of the Kelly Miller Smith Institute on the Black Church. Together with the contribution of Lewis Baldwin and Dennis Dickerson in the Department of Religious Studies, the Divinity School had found itself with more adequate resources in African-American studies than ever before. The faculty determined, at its long-range planning retreat in May 1988, that development of the Kelly Miller Smith Institute should become a major priority of the School; it was recommended that an endowment be sought that would provide additional scholarship support for students, research funds for the study of the black church, and ultimately an additional faculty appointment. As a consequence of these actions, minority enrollment has increased to over 20% of the Divinity student body.

During the academic year of 1988-89, the Divinity School sponsored a series of workshops on “Racial Awareness in a Pluralistic Community.” The workshops helped to identify some very common ways in which members of our community at that time (faculty, staff, and students alike) had manifested a lack of recognition of, or had made insensitive remarks to, those who were different from themselves. The workshops compiled a list of various manifestations of racism often experienced in the community. This list served as a tool through which one could become more aware of the problem. As the operating racist methods became more subversive, the list proved to be outdated and misleading, implying that if you could not see or hear racism outright, it did not exist. Yet, the School and Department persists on the quest for a more diverse community, offering lectures and roundtables on the topic as well as further diversifying the faculty.

Dr. Victor Anderson was hired as an ethics professor in 1992, as well as Eugene Sutton, who taught in the field of homiletics and liturgics from 1992-95. Dr. Brad Braxton in homiletics and Dr. Herbert Marbury in Hebrew Bible are the most recent
additions to our full-time faculty. The Divinity School has also employed Mr. Robert Phillips as our newest Director of Admissions, Ms. Sha’tika Brown as our Student Activities Coordinator, and Ms. Angela Denise Davis returns as our Coordinator of Community Outreach. We welcome them and ask them to join us in our quest towards true and viable racial inclusion and religious pluralism in education.

Yet, our community is not yet complete. Dr. Weems’ resignation in 2003 left a fissure in the community in light of her vast experience and participation in black female religiosity. In the Maymester of 2004, Dr. Linda E. Thomas, a professor at Lutheran Theological Seminary at Chicago, became a visiting professor in the Divinity School, introducing classes such as Womanist theology, Black and Womanist theology, and Theologies of Women of Color into the Divinity School curriculum. The void left by Dr. Weems remains partially unfulfilled, due to the occasional nature of a visiting professor position.

The racial scope of our full time faculty remains insufficient. Dr. Segovia is the only Latino faculty member, there is no black female faculty member, there is no Native American faculty member, and there is no Taiwanese faculty member, just to name a few. These labels don’t only describe a need to encounter people of varied physical and cultural characteristics; it speaks also to a desire for a professor in that area of expertise. We do not assume that filling these holes will be simple; yet our actions should not embody unproductiveness.

Despite the significant progress that has been made in recent years, racist attitudes are still present in the Divinity School, and much remains to be accomplished. An adequate support structure for our minority students is not yet in place. Resources need to be enhanced in areas such as black, womanist, African, Hispanic, Latino/a, and Asian theologies. The curriculum, while having become far more diverse in recent years, does not yet sufficiently reflect the heritage, themes, and agendas of non-white, non-male, and non-Protestant cultures and traditions.

4. RACIAL AWARENESS IN A PLURALISTIC COMMUNITY

Racism is still present in the Divinity School, but it has assumed more subtle and less conscious forms than in the past. Our objective is to eliminate it. We recognize that the entrenched nature of racism and our tendencies to preserve present privileges and power structures make this a difficult task. Awareness and sensitivity about these issues will not be enough to remove the hurt and injustice that racism introduces into our conversations, classrooms, social spaces, and writings. Neither does the presence of minority faculty, staff, and students ensure that racism will not “happen.” There can easily be diversity in a racist community as racism exists in the person, not the situation. Multiculturalism is not an antidote of white privilege. Combating racism is an ongoing, daily task, requiring continual vigilance.

CONCLUSION

This statement reflects the commitment of Vanderbilt Divinity School and the Graduate Department of Religion to strive to deal seriously and honestly with the fact of racism. Even though we cannot cure racism by personal decision or by group action, we must not despair in our resolve lest the prejudiced remain blind to prejudice and the hurt have their hurt enlarged. Therefore, in the freedom that the Spirit gives, we are pledged to seek to overcome racism within our community and the wider communities in which we live and serve.

THE FOLLOWING STATEMENT WAS APPENDED TO THIS DOCUMENT,
We propose that VDS shall strive to embody free dialogue in which cultural, racial, and religious diversity will be honored and embraced. For dialogue to be free, the Divinity School must encourage mutual respect and Christian affection among all members of the community. Moreover, the School must seek to represent cultural diversity in its administration, staff, student body and faculty. The following positions seem necessary to the preservation of a diverse community in the Spirit:

(1) The Divinity School shall deliberately seek to fill vacancies in faculty, administration, and staff with minority persons. To do so, the school must deliberately adopt and publish search policies beyond usual University procedures so as to assure a full consideration of minority candidates.

(2) The Divinity School shall seek to create special scholarship funds and/or financial aid so that the School community may display diversity beyond University or national averages. In addition, the School shall provide such staff support as may be necessary to ensure the recruiting, retaining, and academic achievement of minority students.

(3) Faculty members will be required to be familiar with literature within their disciplines that reflects a concern for those groups within the nation and world who are oppressed by racism and other forms of social domination or neglect. A tri-annual review of course content and bibliography will be conducted by an appropriate faculty committee so as to assist the faculty in fulfilling their responsibility to the concerns of a diverse community.

(4) The curriculum of the Divinity School while remaining true to its theological orientation shall seek to represent, study, and reflect on patterns of Christian life that may be different from the ethos of white Southern Protestantism so that students may be prepared to minister in a diverse society.

Student Addendum, Feb 7, 2006

We call VDS and GDR to pursue respectful dialogue and an end to the white male Protestant hegemonic hold on the curricula which must include a greater diversity of theological voices to supplement a curriculum that at present attends largely to the voices and perspectives of white male Protestants. Without such inclusion, the implicit pedagogy of the VDS curriculum suggests that one particular strand of the church’s global heritage is absolute, normative, and universally valid. We do not wish to undercut the importance and contributions of the white male Protestant tradition and history of its participants, theologies, and rituals. What must be reconsidered is the way that these ideals have been imposed on students as if they were absolute and universal instead of in conversation with other religious participants (e.g., womanist pedagogy and Asian biblical hermeneutics). Such curricular change must go hand in hand with our current commitment to numerical inclusion of minority individuals. Although we have been moving in the right direction in good faith, our journey is far from over. The following suggestions represent the next steps in combating the perpetuation of racism in our institution:

(1) Endowed chairs must be added that will focus on education for and about minority thought, participation, and contributions in, through, and for our religious and spiritual world.
(2) The Divinity School must remain committed to diversity in its community so that as a community we might become an example for wider university, state, national, and global circles of community-building.

(3) Our faculty members and Teaching Fellows should be not just familiar with, but competent in, minority discourse in their fields to ensure a deeper and more inclusive conversation, instruction, and preparation for our students.

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