

LIVING THE COMMITMENTS

THE VANDERBILT DIVINITY SCHOOL'S ETHICAL STATEMENTS

The Commitments of the Divinity School are written to indicate the kind of just and hospitable world the faculty and students seek to promote through education, proclamation, and service. These convictions do not emerge from a single religious community; rather, they emerge from several religious and humanistic traditions. The Commitments constitute an invitation to students and faculty to engage in an ongoing conversation about faith and human relations, in the world and in the Divinity School itself.

The commitments of an institution that seeks justice, inclusion, and respect for diverse kinds of human beings must be lived if they are not to stand in judgment of the people who affirm them. In order to effect these Commitments, therefore, students and faculty alike are asked to practice the following convictions and virtues:

Generosity--to give freely, based upon the trust that the value of education and wisdom is not diminished through sharing.

Hospitality--to welcome all at the table of learning, making a special effort to enlarge that table for people unlike ourselves and for those who are excluded from other tables.

Humility--to accept that others may know more about a given situation, to realize that one may know more through others, and to accept that no one is right about everything.

Imagination--to envision a world that is better than the one we have and to engage in learning so as to make that new world more manageable to others.

Patience--to pursue understanding with hope, even in the face of misunderstanding and disappointment.

Reflexivity--to cultivate awareness of one's individual and institutional history, so as to overcome inherited practices.

Respect--to dignify the selfhood and tradition represented by each other member of the community, irrespective of the historical, theological, and embodied differences that person may represent to oneself.

From time to time it is appropriate for various parts of the Divinity School community, and for all parts of the larger community, to examine the practices and aims of the School with respect to its stated purposes and commitments. At every such juncture, it is vital to remember that Commitments become real not by their invocation or revision, but by the manner in which they are lived. The policy statements that follow are the result of careful deliberation between students and faculty and are provided as guides to ethical action within the Divinity School

community as its members seek to live the commitments. They belong to a long-standing tradition of the school, some portions having been initiated in the 1960s and other portions having been added more recently. Like all human institutions, the Divinity School remains imperfect; yet it hopes that these Commitments will motivate students and faculty toward a mutual fulfillment of their premises.

POVERTY AND ECONOMIC INJUSTICE

In 1875, Bishop McTyeire proclaimed Vanderbilt’s Biblical Department, the predecessor of today’s Divinity School, to be a “School of the Prophets.” Striving to embody the spirit of that proclamation, the Divinity School has historically engaged issues of poverty and economic (in)justice. The various faith traditions represented at the School recognize the multidimensional reality of poverty and uphold commitments to foster human flourishing and care for those who are in need.

To this end, the Divinity School is committed to designing curricular programs—in both academic research and field education—that critically interrogate the institutionalization of economic injustice, the persistence of poverty, and the intersection of class oppression with other structures of marginalization such as gender, race, sexuality, and ability. It will train future ministers, teachers, activists, and other graduates to engage thoughtfully and pastorally in cross-class congregations, classrooms, and anti-poverty organizations. It will develop new programs, institutes, and scholarships that make admission and access to the resources of the Divinity School available to economically poor students and members of the Nashville community. It will cultivate the value of the experiential knowledge of the poor by giving particular attention to student, faculty, and outside community voices of poverty.

The Divinity School will also support a work environment, in its premises particularly and at the University generally, that offers wages and benefits that ensure that no employees—including those who maintain the grounds, service the buildings, and serve food in the cafeterias—are kept in poverty by their employment. And it will continue to include among the faculty cohort those whose scholarship and teaching brings a focus to issues of poverty, class, and economic injustice, and it will encourage student organizations whose focus is on issues of poverty, class, and economic injustice.

RACISM AND ETHNOCENTRISM

As generally understood, racism designates forms of prejudice, bias, discrimination, violence, and terror directed at persons or groups, based on differences in traits, characteristics, manners, customs, or other cultural markers such as language, dress, or skin color. Ethnocentrism involves evaluating other cultures and ethnic groups in light of one’s own cultural or ethnic standards, and it promotes putative superiority over these other groups, leading to manifestations of chauvinism and racism that are directed against distinct populations

perceived as inferior, often within the same geographical region.

The history of the United States has been especially marked by racism and ethnocentrism. This condition has resulted in prejudice, discrimination, and violence – physical, psychological, and institutional – against persons of (among others) African, Asian, Native American, Latino, Muslim, and Jewish descent. Racism and ethnocentrism not only manifest themselves in individual attitudes or personal prejudice, but they also operate through systemic social structures, permeating the life-worlds of groups, communities, nations, and societies. At the same time, racism and ethnocentrism often manifest and reinforce themselves through demeaning language or characterization as well as through notions of American exceptionalism. These problems call for us to remain vigilant and to resist their influence in the classroom, community, and society.

Combating racism and ethnocentrism is an ongoing task. Personal or group intervention alone will not cure these prejudices. Sensitivity is not enough to remove the injury and injustice that racism and ethnocentrism introduce into our conversations, classrooms, social spaces, and writings. Nor do a diverse faculty, staff, and student body ensure that racism and ethnocentrism will not persist. To combat such prejudice, Vanderbilt Divinity School is resolved to continue to diversify at all levels of its administration, faculty, staff, and student body, to improve financial aid to racially and ethnically underrepresented groups, to promote a safe environment and respect for all, and to stimulate the creation of courses and public presentations that enhance racial and ethnic understanding.

RELIGIOUS DIVERSITY

Vanderbilt Divinity School commits to a program of theological education that is open to and takes account of the religious pluralism in our world. It seeks to familiarize students with the diverse manifestations of faith throughout the world and to acquaint them with the language of interfaith encounter. It recognizes that in the past failure to respect diversity of religions – both doctrine and practices – has been a source of conflict. It affirms that a multiplicity of religious traditions enriches our community. When founded in 1875, the Divinity School primarily prepared candidates for the Christian ministry. While the majority of its students and faculty still stem from the Christian tradition, the School now seeks to embrace a wide spectrum of religious faiths, both in Christian denominations and in other religious traditions. Its students prepare for a variety of leadership positions, both inside and outside of formal religious institutions.

The Divinity School is one of a handful of university-based interdenominational institutions. It believes that preparation for religious leadership today happens best in a religiously plural pedagogic environment. It therefore expects to appoint scholars from diverse branches of Christian and other religious traditions. It commits to create core courses as well as electives that will introduce different traditions, that explain how misrepresentations and

misconceptions about the other develop, and that expound on how distortions might be prevented. It pledges to seek resources to sustain study in a global context.

The Divinity School also strives to avoid insensitivity toward religious concerns. Personal expression of faith and practice must be allowed free articulation, but also encouraged to be considerate of other forms of worship in a broad community. Prayers, ceremonies, speeches, and liturgies at events involving the whole community must respect as well as nurture diversity. Given the character of worship and the voluntary nature of Divinity School services, weekly chapel may differ in character; but over the course of a year, such services need to reflect the multiplicity of communal life.

To fulfill its goals of religious diversity, the School must not be parochial, either in its curriculum or in its student and faculty composition. It must resist and confront caricatures of the faiths, practices, and traits of others. The Divinity School will continue to support student investment in their own particular traditions, will seek to stimulate recruitment of a diverse body of students and faculty, and will sponsor named lectureships (e.g., Cole Lectures, Antoinette Brown Lectures, Harrod Lectures) that sustain the spectrum of religious expression.

SEXISM

Sexism is an interlocking system of advantage based on gender. Sexism is an act, an attitude, an opinion, or a feeling that has prejudicial effect. In a patriarchal society or institution, sexism is manifested through male privilege. Male privilege refers to the many implicit and explicit ways by which one sex receives concrete benefits of access to resources and rewards that are denied the other sex. This privilege has allowed one sex to institutionalize norms and values to the detriment of another. Despite efforts to protect the equal rights of women, institutionalized sexism remains both prevalent and systemic, embedded in every institution in society.

Women, as a marginalized group, represent diverse particularities that include (but are not limited to) race, class, sexual orientation, religious background, and physical ability. Women are significant participants in religions; in America, they have constituted the majority of most denominations. However, women's religious lives have often been relegated to spheres separate from the "normative" activities. Further, until the development of women's studies in the 1970s and 1980s, little critical analysis of religious sexism existed, and most of the history of women in religion remained largely hidden. Increasingly, scholars and others attentive to the concerns of women have recovered and are documenting women's leadership of, participation in, and contributions to religious life. Moreover, educators and researchers are continuing to critically engage how religions speak about women and whether they provide options to them.

The Vanderbilt Divinity School commits continuously and explicitly to include gender as an analyzed category and to mitigate sexism in the Divinity School's curricula. It will deliberately seek to fill faculty and administrative vacancies with women of underrepresented

racial, ethnic, theological and religious backgrounds and sexual identities. All faculty members, especially those who teach courses in the core curriculum, are committed to work toward course outlines in which both the experiences of, and the scholarship by, women—especially those of other underrepresented identities—are integrated. They will encourage students to create a positive classroom and cultural climate in which women's self-confidence as scholars and professionals can be nurtured and strengthened. This includes consistent attention to the use of inclusive language, especially in relation to the Divine. Faculty, students, and administration will strive to reinforce these values in extra-curricular events and programs.

SEXUAL AND GENDER IDENTITY

Controversies in religious communities over sexual and gender identity continue worldwide. Religiously based homophobia is often mobilized for political purposes. It threatens family and community unity and contributes significantly to the high suicide rates among gay and lesbian teens. While homosexuality is the primary lightning rod, the controversy is broadening as public awareness of the variety of sexual and/or gender identities expands. The now common acronym LGBTQI includes not only gays, lesbians, and bisexuals, but transgendered, transsexual, and intersexed persons, as well as those who identify as “queer.” These vectors of identity are also inseparable from others, including race, ethnicity, class, nationality, and religion. Discrimination and misunderstanding, therefore, take many forms. The sheer variety of these terms indicates an ever-shifting and growing understanding of the complexity of the relationship among identity, embodiment, self-expression, and cultural expectations. Thus, we cannot assume that our interpretation of how people look or act is a reliable window into their self-understanding.

The Divinity School’s commitment to social justice on these issues is grounded in an affirmation of the goodness of a diverse human community as God’s creative intention. Given the autonomy of religious communities, the School’s primary contribution to the resolution of conflicts around sexual and gender identity will occur through the education of our students. The School embodies this commitment in the Carpenter Program in Gender, Sexuality, and Religion, the Carpenter Scholarships, GABLE (the Office of Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgender Concerns), and in our course requirements. Many of our faculty, alumnae/i and current students (both divinity and graduate) are engaged in scholarship and activism in these areas.

We recognize, however, that fully realizing this commitment to the eradication of unjust treatment of people on the basis of (actual or perceived) gender and/or sexual identity is a work in progress. To that end, the Divinity School’s faculty and administration commit to assess regularly the curriculum’s success in teaching students about LGBTQI issues in ways that are both intellectually sound and practically relevant, to signal concretely our welcoming intent (for example, providing safe space on campus for those who are transitioning from one

gender to another), and to review constantly official policies and procedures for unintended discriminatory effects, making changes as needed.