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The Church & The College:
Making Sense of the Shadow

The blue steeple of Davidson College Presbyterian Church (DCPC) stands tall, its small cross seemingly visible across the entire campus. The red brick building with stone pillars sits nestled right between the cozy and clean-cut Chambers lawn and the bustling Main Street. As the sun sets behind it in the evening, the church casts a shadow over the campus. For many, this shadow envelopes and protects our college at its core. For others, it symbolizes a painful past that contributes to a discomfiting present.

Thoughtful conversation about the college's affiliation with the Reformed Tradition and the Presbyterian Church (USA) has circulated around campus this year through the wake of the school's bylaw changes and the anticipation of a forthcoming report from the trustee-appointed Working Group on the Reformed Tradition, expected by late spring 2021. The charge of this Working Group is to "report on how a pluralistic institution of higher education embodies and communicates its essential values so that diverse constituencies can always draw strength from its originating tradition," according to College Chaplain, Reverend Rob Spach '84. With these conversations comes a desire to learn about Davidson's historical connection with the Tradition, clarify its current role on campus, and ponder what its future might be.

Our Affiliation

Davidson has a longstanding voluntary relationship with DCPC, the Presbyterian Church (USA) denomination, and the broad Reformed Tradition. Dr. Doug Ottati, Craig Family Distinguished Professor of Reformed Theology and Justice, revealed that the Reformed Tradition developed during the 16th century Protestant Reformation, when John Calvin, who was "trained as a humanistic lawyer and scholar," reinvented the College of Geneva to embody his concept of the higher education ideal: a liberal arts and sciences education.

Presbyterianism adjusted to the specific cultural context in the United States, which includes a complicated history of the fracture(s) of the Presbyterian Church that originated during the Civil War. Davidson is affiliated with the PC(USA), which tends to lean more liberally than its counterpart, the Presbyterian Church in America, on topics such as theology, questions of political and civil rights, and ordaining women. Still, according to Ottati, DCPC is "pretty much about middle of the road to center left of PC(USA)," given its cultural placement in a Southeastern suburb.

Today, more than 50 colleges throughout the country continue to affiliate with the PC(USA), in a group known as the Association of Presbyterian Colleges and Universities (APCU). Even within the Southeast region, APCU member institutions differ greatly in their commitments to their "Presbyterian-relatedness." Rhodes College in Memphis, Tennessee, according to current junior Ellie McIntyre, is not "in your face" about its Presbyterian roots. She shares that the college requires its students to take courses about the Bible from an "academic perspective" as opposed to an evangelical one, and that they also currently have a Jewish president. Meanwhile, Stillman College in Tuscaloosa, Alabama has much more structured policies that embrace Presbyterianism: students must take four Religious Education courses prior to graduation, leadership and staff must be members of the clergy, and Thursdays are reserved for religious-themed guest speakers.

The overlap of liberal arts education and the Reformed Tradition was evident early on in the Tradition's beginnings. According to Rev. Spach, the Tradition operated, and continues to operate, under a "constellation of values" that include a broad education in liberal arts, development of humane instincts and the whole person, an emphasis on

relationships between students and their professors and other mentors, an “openness to and a respect for one another's religious traditions and views,” and a reliance on reforming to “positively engage current realities.”

Rev. Spach comments that “most individual values found at Davidson are not unique to the Reformed Tradition. Moreover, people in the Reformed Tradition do not believe that their tradition’s set of values is necessarily better than any other set. His claim, rather, is that Davidson’s ethos and common life has been shaped by a particular constellation of values that arise distinctively from the Reformed Tradition. Among the values in that constellation is a fundamental belief in the importance of honoring and respecting the dignity and worth of every person — a value that can be shared by people of many worldviews, but which for the Reformed Tradition is undergirded by the belief that every person is created in the image of God, which many people may not believe to be the case.”

Reflections

Josh Lodish ‘22, who serves as the co-President of the Jewish Student Union on campus, raises an important interrogation of the college: “It's important for the Davidson administration to recognize that there's nothing wrong about the Reformed Tradition, but there's also nothing inherently better [...] These values are good, and maybe even great, and they can be present in numerous traditions alongside the Reformed Tradition.”

Hana Kamran ‘23, Vice President of the Muslim Student Association and a member of the Campus and Religious Life Committee, adds, “I think that students of my faith tradition [...] don't necessarily feel a direct impact of the Presbyterian tradition on our everyday lives or recognize the connection to the tradition, as most aspects of the tradition that we recognize at Davidson are universal, beyond Presbyterianism alone.”

Lodish comments that he does not recognize the Reformed Tradition impacting his everyday life in “profound ways” on either end of the spectrum. Though not a direct result of its Presbyterian affiliation, Lodish observes that Davidson can become an extension of a majority “American Christian lifestyle” that asks members of underrepresented religious groups to make what he calls an internal “calculus” during their religious traditions; on occasion, they must decide if they should observe those traditions or stay on track academically and socially with Christians in the Davidson community.

Davidson’s connection to the Church, according to Jonathan Swann ‘19, is “a very loose one.” He learned during Davidson’s Religious Studies Symposium that the Tradition operates on the “obligation to a larger society, emphasis on civic virtue over private advancement, respect for each other, and love for God and thy neighbor.” Swann does not have a specific religious preference, and mentions that even with a more agnostic identity, the Reformed Tradition “really didn’t manifest itself too much day-to-day”; however, in reflection, he credits the Tradition in helping him develop his “personal and social identities.”

While Swann and others do not feel the direct impacts of the Tradition on their everyday life, Jack Swinson ‘21, a member of the leadership team for Weekly College Worship at Davidson, notes a deeply personal affect: “In my daily routine, I would say the Reformed Tradition manifests itself most through Weekly College Worship. We meet once a week, and I would like to think that the community’s emphasis on acceptance, forgiveness, and love inform how I interact with others and myself. Also, I think that the Reformed Tradition’s emphasis on inclusivity has had a really big impact on me as well [...] This Presbyterian emphasis on social activism had a huge impact on my worldview, career, and faith.”

Past & Present Policies

Currently, some of our concrete policies include the Philosophical and Religious Perspectives and the Justice, Equality, and Community graduation requirements, the required presence of a diverse chaplaincy (including representation from Buddhist, Catholic, Jewish, and Presbyterian traditions) and professor of Reformed Theology on

campus, and the guideline that one-quarter of the seats on the Board of Trustees must be filled by Presbyterian leadership.

With less than 10% of the current student body being made up of Presbyterians, there exists a real concern about the representation on the Board. Kamran mentions that prior to the changes in our bylaws, “There seemed to be a disconnect regarding how to be affiliated and properly maintain an affiliation with the Reformed Tradition on Davidson's campus without excluding students [...] The celebration of faith and presence of a church on Davidson's campus are beautiful aspects of the campus, but it was disheartening to hear that many students who dedicate their heart and soul to improving and contributing to Davidson's campus are unable to do so on the Board of Trustees later on.”

Most of the policies informed by the Reformed Tradition are less visible to the student eye and have in some ways become the ethos of Davidson. From our Honor Code to an emphasis on the athletics and arts departments as vocation (or in other words, a calling to draw on one's gifts), to the college's Center for Diversity and Inclusion, the Reformed Tradition informs a largely positive portion of the Davidson experience.

In Davidson's past, policies were much more concrete and prevalent. According to the Report of Reformed Tradition Working Group from 2017, “For the first 125 years of Davidson's existence, Presbyterian worship was woven into the fabric of the lives of students, faculty, and administrators through required attendance at weekly services. This worship was held in the sanctuary of the Davidson College Presbyterian Church, the very name of which indicates how deeply the congregants were involved with the life of the College.”

Even as recently as 1984, when Rev. Spach was a senior at Davidson, there were only four religious groups on campus. All of these were Christian-oriented, and many of the professors in the Religious Studies department were also ordained Presbyterian ministers. Now, there are 17 religious groups on campus, each founded by students who practiced those religions themselves. The Chaplain's office has encouraged these groups to flourish by creating more inclusive spaces on campus for these students, including ablution facilities for Muslim students and spaces located around campus for meditation, prayer, and worship including those in the Oasis and the Spencer-Weinstein Center.

Addressing the Past & Making Sense of the Future

Although tangible changes have been made, it is vital to address the elephant in the room: the Church's oppressive past that can yield an exclusive present for marginalized groups and underrepresented religions. Though PC(USA) as it operates today did not exist until 1983, the denomination is inherently tied to the traditions which came before it, and can thus never fully be absolved of the past baggage it carries. There is no debate that the Church's history is steeped in racial bias and prejudice, marked by the exclusion of gender and sexual minorities, and tied to the exploitation of Native and enslaved people.

According to Eric Miller, author for Religion & Politics magazine, in his article *The American Church's Complicity in Racism: A Conversation with Jemar Tisby*, “The fraught racial history of the United States has infiltrated and influenced all of its institutions, including the Christian church. Though certain figures and movements did join the struggle against slavery, segregation, and violence at various times and places, the majority of white American Christendom fell somewhere on the spectrum between open endorsement and quiet acceptance.”

In many branches of Christianity, these harmful practices of the past have extended into the present and have created distrust of the modern church and those who affiliate with it.

This is not to undermine the intentional and hard work done by a wide range of Christians who have for decades actively addressed the harmful past and have worked tirelessly to instill practices that are more equitable in the present. In fact, PC(USA) prides itself on progress toward becoming an affirming and inclusive space for all people. At DCPC, there are many examples of this work playing out in action: in the 1960's, the pastor of the church was a courageous advocate for Civil Rights, the church was once fully staffed by female pastors, people of all gender and sexual identities can be married and ordained in the church, and congregation members march in the Gay Pride Parade in uptown Charlotte annually.

However, wounds from the past, even when addressed and actively interrogated by the present, are still very real for some folks.

Rev. Spach encourages that the Christian community “needs to apologize, in honest real ways, and acknowledge that we and our forebears were wrong [...] To me, it's appropriate to ask genuinely with a humble heart for forgiveness. There's no obligation on their part to forgive you. But I think if you honestly apologize, and ask for forgiveness, for the wrongs that you, yourself, your church, and your tradition have committed, that opens up new possibilities.”

According to Ottati, this harmful past, however, should not only be accredited to the Church. He says, “Sometimes at this school, we assume that Presbyterianism is what was affiliated with slavery. Of course, it was. But so was the liberal arts education. One interesting question is how liberal arts tradition is going to understand itself within that history. And another really interesting question is how Presbyterianism is going to understand itself in the south with that history.” He continues, “You have to be willing to criticize a past and a present [...] There's this talk about the gift of a deeply flawed past. It's a gift if it's sufficiently flawed to be recognized, so that you can begin to try and distinguish yourself from it. And here, we ought to probably try and own the real sorts of opportunities, and possibilities that accrue to a deeply flawed, deeply problematic, and highly interesting past.”

As a student body, we can look forward to the release of the Report on Reformed Tradition this spring. Dr. Ottati, who serves on the current Working Group, believes that we are going to see explicit explanation about our affiliation with the Tradition and what exactly that means for students. He adds that we will probably see “reflections about how Reformed Tradition can be embodied on the campus in a way that is supportive of the liberal arts project as it's taking place at Davidson today.”

As we consider these changes, Lodish calls upon our identity as an academic institution to address how we might prioritize inclusivity. He says, “We are an educational institution, which I think is something that we can use as a tool to make our school more inclusive. For example, having more Jewish Studies professors and classes about other religions. But also, a lot of issues of marginalization are kind of interconnected. It's just like the Asian American Initiative. Supporting that, although that's not even necessarily about religious life, would help in making Davidson more inclusive and would improve the quality of life here.”