February 20, 2018

The following article is located at: http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2014/september/wrong-kind-of-christian-vanderbilt-university.html

Christianity Today, August, 2014
HIGHER EDUCATION | CT MAGAZINE

The Wrong Kind of Christian

I thought a winsome faith would win Christians a place at Vanderbilt's table. I was wrong.

TISH HARRISON WARREN / POSTED AUGUST 27, 2014

Image: Kevin Vandiver / Genesis

I thought I was an acceptable kind of evangelical.

I'm not a fundamentalist. My friends and I enjoy art, alcohol, and cultural engagement. We avoid spiritual clichés and buzzwords. We value authenticity, study, racial reconciliation, and social and environmental justice.

Being a Christian made me somewhat weird in my urban, progressive context, but despite some clear differences, I held a lot in common with unbelieving friends. We could disagree about truth, spirituality, and morality, and remain on the best of terms. The failures of the church often made me more uncomfortable than those in the broader culture.

Then, two years ago, the student organization I worked for at Vanderbilt University got kicked off campus for being the wrong kind of Christians.

In May 2011, Vanderbilt's director of religious life told me that the group I'd helped lead for two years, Graduate Christian Fellowship—a chapter of InterVarsity Christian Fellowship—was on probation. We had to drop the requirement that student leaders affirm our doctrinal and purpose statement, or we would lose our status as a registered student organization.

I met with him to understand the change. During the previous school year, a Christian fraternity had expelled several students for violating their behavior policy. One student said he was ousted because he is gay. Vanderbilt responded by forbidding any belief standards for those wanting to join or lead any campus group.

In writing, the new policy refers only to constitutionally protected classes (race, religion, sexual identity, and so on), but Vanderbilt publicly adopted an "all comers policy," which meant that no student could be excluded from a leadership post on ideological grounds. College Republicans must allow Democrats to seek office; the environmental group had to welcome climate-change skeptics; and a leader of a religious group could not be dismissed if she renounced faith midyear. (The administration granted an exception to sororities and fraternities.)

Like most campus groups, InterVarsity welcomes anyone as a member. But it asks key student leaders—the executive council and small group leaders—to affirm its doctrinal statement, which outlines broad Christian orthodoxy and does not mention sexual conduct specifically. But the university saw belief statements themselves as suspect. Any belief—particularly those about the authority of Scripture or the church—could potentially constrain sexual activity or identity. So what began as a concern about sexuality and pluralism quickly became a conversation about whether robustly religious communities would be allowed on campus.

In effect, the new policy privileged certain belief groups and forbade all others. Religious organizations were welcome as long as they were malleable: as long as their leaders didn't need to profess anything in particular; as long as they could be governed by sheer democracy and adjust to popular mores or trends; as long as they didn't prioritize theological stability. Creedal statements were allowed, but as an accessory, a historic document, or a suggested guideline. They could not have binding authority to shape or govern the teaching and practices of a campus religious community.

At first I thought this was all a misunderstanding that could be sorted out between reasonable parties. If I could explain to the administration that doctrinal statements are an important part of religious expression—an ancient, enduring practice that would be a given for respected thinkers like Thomas Aquinas—then surely they'd see that creedal communities are intellectually valid and permissible. If we could show that we weren't homophobic culture warriors but friendly, thoughtful evangelicals committed to a diverse, flourishing campus, then the administration and religious groups could find common ground.

When I met with the assistant dean of students, she welcomed me warmly and seemed surprised that my group would be affected by the new policy. I told her I was a woman in the ordination process, that my husband was a PhD candidate in Vanderbilt's religion department, and that we loved the university. There was an air of hope that we could work things out.

Line in the Sand

But as I met with other administrators, the tone began to change. The word *discrimination* began to be used—a lot—specifically in regard to creedal requirements. It was lobbed like a grenade to end all argument. Administrators compared Christian students to 1960s segregationists. I once mustered courage to ask them if they truly thought it was fair to equate racial prejudice with asking Bible study leaders to affirm the Resurrection. The vice chancellor replied, "Creedal discrimination is still discrimination."

Feeling battered, I talked with my InterVarsity supervisor. He responded with a wry smile, "But we're moderates!" We thought we were nuanced and reasonable. The university seemed to think of us as a threat.

For me, it was revolutionary, a reorientation of my place in the university and in culture.

I began to realize that inside the church, the territory between Augustine of Hippo and Jerry Falwell seems vast, and miles lie between Ron Sider and Pat Robertson. But in the eyes of the university (and much of the press), subscribers to broad Christian orthodoxy occupy the same square foot of cultural space.

The line between good and evil was drawn by two issues: creedal belief and sexual expression. If religious groups required set truths or limited sexual autonomy, they were bad—not just wrong but evil, narrow-minded, and too dangerous to be tolerated on campus.

It didn't matter to them if we were politically or racially diverse, if we cared about the environment or built Habitat homes. It didn't matter if our students were top in their fields and some of the kindest, most thoughtful, most compassionate leaders on campus. There was a line in the sand, and we fell on the wrong side of it.

We liked being in pluralistic settings, mining for truth in Nietzsche and St. Benedict alike. But if Christian orthodoxy was anathema in a purportedly broad-minded university, where did that leave us?

My husband and I love the idea of the university, a place of libraries and lawns, a space set aside to grapple with the most vital questions of truth, where many different voices gather to engage in respectful conversation. Both of us had invested considerable time and money into pursuing advanced degrees. He was preparing to be a professor.

We liked being in pluralistic settings, mining for truth in Nietzsche and St. Benedict alike. But if Christian orthodoxy was anathema in this purportedly broad-minded university, where did that leave us? What did that mean for our place in the world and how we interacted with culture?

And what did that mean for all the PhD candidates in my student group who were preparing for a life of service in the secular university? Did we need to take a slightly more Amish route of cultural engagement?

And what did all this mean for the university?

Facing an Impasse

A culture of fear seemed to be growing on campus. There were power plays and spin. A group of professors penned a thoughtful critique of the new policy, but remained silent when sympathetic department heads warned that going public could be "career damaging."

As a private university, Vanderbilt had the right to adopt particular beliefs and exclude certain religious groups. What bothered me was that they didn't own up to what they were doing. I wanted them to be truthful, to say in their brochure, "If you are a creedal religious person, don't expect to find a campus group here." I wanted intellectual honesty and transparency about their presuppositions.

Instead, top officials seemed blind to their assumptions, insisting all religious groups were welcome while gutting our ability to preserve defining beliefs and practices.

Those of us opposed to the new policy met with everyone we could to plead our case and seek compromise. We published essays and held silent protests with signs calling for pluralism and religious liberty. Hundreds of students and some faculty respectfully objected to the new policy. Catholic and Protestant students, low-church and high-church, met together daily in front of the administration building to pray.

As a writer and pastor, I value words, love careful argument, and believe good ideas prevail. I believed that if we cast a vision of principled pluralism, showed how value-laden presuppositions are inherent in any worldview, and reiterated our commitment to Vanderbilt and avoided the culture wars, the administration would relent.

But as spring semester ended, 14 campus religious communities—comprising about 1,400 Catholic, evangelical, and Mormon students—lost their organizational status.

A year later, my family and I moved to a different state to plant a new InterVarsity chapter. It was painful to leave beloved faculty, students, and ministry colleagues with the campus conflict unresolved. There was no happy ending, no triumphant reconciling moment. After that long and disorienting year, I left not in confident, defiant protest, but in sadness. What I thought was a misunderstanding turned out to be an impasse.

We Are Here

What's happening at Vanderbilt is happening at other universities. Increasingly, orthodox beliefs and practices are forbidden as those in power forfeit a robust understanding of religious pluralism.

Our task moving forward is to resist bitterness, cynicism, or retaliation, demonizing the university or the culture. As Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn said, the line between good and evil runs through every human heart, a reality that makes everything more complex. We have to forgive and to look squarely at places in our own heart that require repentance. In community, we must develop the craft of being both bold and irenic, truthful and humble.

And while we grieve rejection, we should not be shocked or ashamed by it. That probationary year unearthed a hidden assumption that I could be nuanced or articulate or culturally engaged or compassionate enough to make the gospel more acceptable to my neighbors. But that belief is prideful. From its earliest days, the gospel has been both a comfort and an offense.

> We need not be afraid; the gospel is as unstoppable as it is unacceptable.

N. T. Wright points out in *Paul: In Fresh Perspective* that the unlikely message of a crucified Jew raised from the dead "was bound to cause hoots of derision, and, if Acts is to be believed, sometimes did." Throughout history and even now, Christians in many parts of the world face not only rejection but violent brutality. What they face is

incomparably worse than anything we experience on U.S. college campuses, yet they tutor us in compassion, courage, and subversive faithfulness.

We need not be afraid; the gospel is as unstoppable as it is unacceptable. Paul persisted, proclaiming that Jesus was, in fact, the world's true Lord. And, as Wright notes, "people (to their great surprise, no doubt) found this announcement making itself at home in their minds and hearts, generating the belief that it was true, and transforming their lives with a strange new presence and power."

After we lost our registered status, our organization was excluded from new student activity fairs. So our student leaders decided to make T-shirts to let others know about our group. Because we were no longer allowed to use Vanderbilt's name, we struggled to convey that we were a community of Vanderbilt students who met near campus. So the students decided to write a simple phrase on the shirts: WE ARE HERE.

And they are. They're still there in labs and classrooms, researching languages and robotics, reflecting God's creativity through the arts and seeking cures for cancer. They are still loving their neighbors, praying, struggling, and rejoicing. You can find them proclaiming the gospel in word and deed, in daily ordinariness. And though it is more difficult than it was a few years ago, ministry continues on campus, often on the margins and just outside the gates. God is still beautifully at work. And his mercy is relentless.

Tish Harrison Warren is a priest in the Anglican Church in North America and works with InterVarsity at the University of Texas–Austin. For more, see TishHarrisonWarren.com.