

An Overture from the Presbytery of Cimarron to the Synod of the Sun

Recommendation: The Presbytery of Cimarron overtures the Synod of the Sun to examine the University of Tulsa's covenant with the Synod of the Sun and to clarify the University of Tulsa's status as a Presbyterian-related university. We request that such clarification occur through conversations between Synod of the Sun leadership and the University of Tulsa leadership, members of the Board of Trustees, and/or the Sharp Chaplain (currently Rev. Jeff Francis). We hope that the Synod's inquiry into the University of Tulsa will impact the work of the Presbyterian Mission Agency and the Task Force to Study the Purpose and Place of the Humanities. We in Cimarron Presbytery are ready to participate in such conversations if invited, perhaps in conjunction with members of Eastern Oklahoma and Indian Nations presbyteries.

Rationale: The University of Tulsa has adopted a radical restructuring proposal that begins to take effect in the 2019-2020 academic year.¹ In "True Commitment: Reimagining The University of Tulsa," the academic program closures and consolidations reduce humanities to a minor footnote to the university's mission.² These cuts are of deep concern to Presbyterians who highly value liberal arts and understand the humanities to provide a vital foundation for ethical and moral reasoning, which is at the heart of liberal arts education. Deep student engagement with liberal arts is critical to the career paths chosen by many students, such as business, health care, and law.

TU's restructuring is taking place at a time when the Presbyterian Church (USA) is confronting the widespread trend that considers higher education primarily as a vehicle to commercial success. Groups of students, faculty, and alumni have protested this sudden reorientation of the university toward 'job training,' objecting to the administration's lack of transparency and rushed process as well as the resulting program cuts.³ The Association of Presbyterian Colleges and Universities lists the University of Tulsa as a member. We would hope that this organization, though a voluntary collaboration among our denominational schools, would uphold the liberal arts values that we regard as important. A pillar of our Reformed tradition is our understanding that all vocations are focused on love of God and neighbor, not as solo pursuits of wealth as the mark of 'the good life.' The 223rd General Assembly (2018) approved formation of a task force to study the place and purpose of the humanities at Presbyterian-affiliated colleges and universities.⁴ The overture that requested this task force makes a strong case for the joining of faith and reason as foundational to Presbyterian values, which is more important than ever in our time of 'alternative facts,' divisive nationalism and institutional racism.

The Presbyterian heritage handed down through generations of TU faculty and students is not a narrow, denominational stream of thought separated from the world outside the doors of academe. Instead, the Reformed tradition represents open-minded, generous scholarship that finds kindred spirits in world religions beyond the Judeo-Christian tradition, and in the secular humanities, particularly philosophy and religion. Presbyterian-related colleges and universities are well positioned to provide a college experience that grounds students in ethics, history, and moral reasoning in order to resist consumerism, to develop respect for diverse cultures, and to be good stewards of creation whatever their chosen career. Because the University of Tulsa has been a respected liberal arts institution in the south-central and southwest region of the United States and has been a covenant partner with Synod of

¹ <https://utulsa.edu/truecommitment/>

² <https://utulsa.edu/truecommitment/academicstrategy/#future>

³ <https://www.tuplan.org>

⁴ <https://www.pc-biz.org/#/committee/3000012/business>, "On a Collaborative Study of the Place and Purpose of the Humanities in the Teachings of PC(USA) Liberal Arts Colleges and Universities"—From the Presbytery of Greater Atlanta.

the Sun, we are especially distressed at its new direction and will find it difficult to recommend TU to Presbyterian students.

Concerns:

- 1) The University of Tulsa has not consulted with the Presbyterian Church (USA) about the changes that would diminish Presbyterian values supporting the liberal arts and humanities.
- 2) Representation of the Presbyterian Church (USA) on the Board of Trustees of the University of Tulsa is completely lacking.
- 3) What was once a university-wide, historic Presbyterian connection now appears to be developed and recognized only through Sharp Chapel programs and events that are attended by a small proportion of the TU community.
- 4) The University of Tulsa is not fulfilling its responsibilities as a covenant partner within the Synod of the Sun.
- 5) Though the Presbyterian Mission Agency was instructed to form and resource this task force by the 223rd General Assembly, it has not been named as of this date.⁵

Respectfully Submitted,
Rev. Deborah Meinke, Stated Clerk
Cimarron Presbytery

⁵ http://oga.pcusa.org/section/committees/committees/ga223-special-committees-and-task-forces/#Places_Purpose