



## PTS BOARD ADOPTS COMMITMENT TO RACIAL JUSTICE

At its May meeting, the Board of Directors of Pittsburgh Seminary adopted a “Commitment to Racial Justice.” A writing group had been authorized by the Board in November with the charge to develop a statement detailing the Seminary’s commitment to social justice, articulating “where we have been, where we are, and where we are going.” With the leadership of board members Dr. Ron Peters and Dr. Don McKim '74, a writing group, consisting of faculty, Board members, and staff, drafted a statement and presented it to the Board for review in February. The collegial leadership modeled by Drs. Peters and McKim enabled the full Board to become engaged and to tackle this difficult conversation and reach a unanimous decision by the time of the May meeting.

As you can see, the statement sets out commitments in four specific areas: education, financial aid, faculty and staff, and denominations. You will also see that the foundations for these commitments are found in the biblical and theological roots of the Reformed Tradition on which Pittsburgh Seminary is founded. A longer version of the statement, also adopted by the Board, provides a deeper review of these roots, including specific connections to the Barmen and Belhar Confessions. If you would like a copy of the longer version, please send a note to [Click to view e-mail](#).



# COMMITMENT TO RACIAL JUSTICE

Pittsburgh Theological Seminary's mission is to participate in God's ongoing mission in the world as a community of Christ, joining in the Spirit's work of forming and equipping people for ministries familiar and yet to unfold and communities present and yet to be gathered.

Without question, the year 2020 and beyond revealed in unavoidable ways the depth of fear, pain, distrust, and division involving racial injustices that continue to plague our society and constitute challenges this institution is called to address. Deaths of persons like Breonna Taylor, George Floyd, and innumerable others assumed guilty of criminal behavior and killed on the spot because of their race, reflects countless acts of violence against Asians, Latinx, Indigenous people and hosts of other visibly identifiable racial/ethnic persons in society because of race, all within the context of a worldwide pandemic. Rooted in the Reformed theological tradition of the Presbyterian Church (USA)'s biblical and theological understandings, Pittsburgh Theological Seminary affirms that the Gospel of Jesus Christ is inherently anti-racist.

The Reformed tradition recognizes human equality before God and our ties to each other as created in the image of God. This means all persons, regardless of race, are "neighbors" and are to care for each other and provide for others' needs. The Reformed confessional tradition recognizes God's people are "to work for justice and peace in society" (Confession of 1967) and that the church "must stand where the Lord stands, namely against injustice and with the wronged" (Confession of Belhar). [*see Full SRJ, lines 83-171*].

In keeping with our mission to "*participate in God's ongoing mission in the world as a community of Christ joining in the Spirit's work...*" of reconciliation, we seek racial justice and equity in all aspects of the Seminary's life. Four topics are specially named: Education, Financial Aid, Faculty and Staff, and Denominations.

## THE FOUR TOPICS

### Education

Because all people bear the image of God, we will seek to honor all people in all that we think, say, and do in and outside the classroom as we learn with and from the diverse communities God gathers for obedience and witness. Since God desires and commands justice, we commit ourselves to transformational practices that bear witness to God's compassion for those who suffer and to God's ongoing liberation of those who are oppressed. Accordingly:

We listen attentively and respectfully to each other, particularly to historically marginalized persons and communities, and to the theological traditions that emerge from those experiences and contexts.

We are vigilant about naming and investigating the grievous legacy of slavery and colonialism worldwide and especially the ongoing reality of racial injustice in the US.

We continually assess our policies and practices in relation to deep-rooted racism, seeking to improve all the dimensions of theological education, including curricular design, teaching and learning, and the hiring and evaluation of faculty.

In all our degree programs we incorporate and assess learning outcomes that reflect our commitment to justice, so that our students can be equipped with postures and skills to envision communities of love in Christ and to nurture and lead communities in joining God's mission toward justice in the world.

### Financial Aid

The testimony and faith of the apostolic church in Acts 4 found concrete expression in the economic dimensions of communal life. The seminary will continue this expression by acknowledging the inequalities and injustices of the past and present, especially among marginalized, minoritized, and oppressed people, and respond to the financial needs of our students. Accordingly:

We are attentive to the grievous economic legacy of slavery, racial segregation, discrimination, subjugation, and injustice in the US.

We assess and address the financial needs of our students in ways that

1. recognize the disproportionate debt burden of Black households,
2. reflect our commitment to economic justice in the seminary and beyond, and
3. free students from financial anxiety as they are equipped to lead others to join God's mission toward justice in the world.

We are working to ensure that financial challenges will not prevent any student the opportunity to secure theological education during their time at the seminary.

### Faculty and Staff

Pittsburgh Theological Seminary is an inclusive institution that welcomes all God's children to prepare for various forms of Christian vocation in established, new, and rapidly changing contexts worldwide. We will increasingly strengthen an institutional culture that reflects Christ's mandate to *love our neighbor as ourselves*. To that end, the Seminary invites, welcomes, and seeks to empower its diverse staff and faculty.

We repudiate tokenism. Affirming that the Spirit's work of reconciliation cannot be reduced to recruiting individuals as symbols of diversity, PTS strives to foster a community that embodies the priorities and practices of God's justice. Beyond treating one another with



respect, such a community of Christ celebrates differences among us as gifts to be shared and cultivated at PTS for ministry that aspires to serve all parts of God's world through the pursuit of justice and equity. Members of our community are encouraged and enabled to contribute individual talents and unique perspectives to our institutional mission, regardless of title or position.

We assert that it remains impossible to acknowledge or listen to our neighbor, much less love them as ourselves, without naming and addressing the Seminary's complicity in historical patterns of discrimination that continue to exert influence in society and on campus. The Seminary's policies for hiring, compensation, promotion, and support of all personnel must reflect our commitments to affirming diverse gifts and viewpoints, dismantling the structures and assumptions of white supremacy, and removing obstacles to the thriving of historically marginalized groups.

## **Denominations**

Divisions among Christians remain deeply and painfully riven across the denominational landscape of our nation. Their persistence in the structure of the church convinces many that racial and economic institutionalizations of segregation and exclusion are permanent, justifiable, and acceptable to God. We believe that such division is an affront to the Gospel and demands our repentance. Pittsburgh Theological Seminary will seek to live out its historic Reformed identity in in ecumenical engagement as a first-order priority, and to treat other communions as equal partners.

This enlarged ecumenical focus will include strengthening relationships of mutual blessing and admonition with congregations and denominations that are historically Black, being careful that our posture is one of humility and mutuality that rejects the objectification of historically Black churches. Through gracious invitation, institutional generosity, and adaptive transformation, the seminary enters into a process of prayer, conversation, and mutual discernment with representatives of such communities.

## **BACKGROUND – WHY THIS? WHY NOW?**

A key understanding of scripture is that God the creator of the universe (Gen. 1:1) is the creator of humanity. All human beings are created in the "image of God": "So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them" (Gen. 1:27). We owe our life and existence to God and are created in relationship with God and all other persons. A capstone of Old Testament concern is the words of Micah: "He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?" (Micah 6:8). [see Full SRJ, lines 28-81]

Jesus Christ, as God's chosen servant, exemplified divine teaching about justice, revealing that justice is the behavioral implementation of God's love for all people. Jesus' behavior modeled God's love for those frequently vulnerable, disrespected, and/or ignored by society's more affirmed, respected, and/or privileged constituencies (Mk. 10:13-16; Jn. 4:1-30). He summarized God's law as: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself" (Luke 10:27. Then follows Jesus's "parable of the Good Samaritan;" 10:25-37). [see Full SRJ, lines 28-81]

The violent vandalizing of the Capitol on January 6, 2021, disrupting Congressional business and threatening harm to legislators, shocked the world. Police/military preparedness and response to the dominantly White mob engaged in this criminal behavior was vastly different from typical law enforcement responses to peaceful demonstrations by Black and other citizens of color. For the majority of Black citizens and other visibly identifiable ethnic groups harmed by bigotry and its various forms of violence, such a response to the Capitol riot was not surprising. [see Full SRJ, lines 173-221]

Throughout the colonial period, during, and after American independence, racial bigotry and violence in service of privilege and power for a few reigned as various interpretations of scripture were used to both condemn and defend slavery. Christian denominations split along North/South regional lines in bitter theological debate as the nation descended into Civil War. Beyond the war, the Ku Klux Klan emerged with its own ideological use of scripture as arguably the nation's oldest domestic terror group. Today racial bigotry frequently surfaces throughout society with the benign neglect or outright support of business, civic, and church leaders, resembling behaviors faith heroes like Karl Barth and Dietrich Bonhoeffer opposed in Nazi Germany and Allan Boesak and Archbishop Desmond Tutu resisted during South Africa's Apartheid.

In today's context of racial injustice, Pittsburgh Theological Seminary's affirmation that the Gospel of Jesus Christ is inherently anti-racist commits the Seminary to "*participating in God's ongoing mission in the world as a community of Christ joining in the Spirit's work of forming and equipping people for ministries familiar and yet to unfold and communities present and yet to be gathered*" into "the ministry of reconciliation" (2 Cor. 5:18) to the glory of God.

Pittsburgh Theological Seminary  
616 North Highland Avenue  
Pittsburgh, PA 15206  
Phone: 412-362-5610



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