

Message to SPU Board of Trustees and Faculty/Staff Colleagues
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Dear SPU Board of Trustees and Fellow SPU Colleagues:

The Board of Trustees presented its recent decision to the SPU faculty and staff on the basis of SPU's Faith Statement, but in doing so it seems to us that they have, in effect, declared the existing SPU Faith Statement invalid or, at least, inoperable. The claim was made (in the official statement by the Board) that SPU cannot change its hiring policy because of our "orthodox" and "Wesleyan" commitments. But in making its decision using this reasoning, the Board has restricted the meaning of these terms in a way that causes the carefully balanced integrity of our Faith Statement to collapse.

SPU's Faith Statement insists that SPU is both "orthodox" and "ecumenical." Including both of those terms together places SPU in a relatively unique posture among Christian institutions, a posture that others have sometimes referred to as "generous orthodoxy" and Wesleyans have often called a "catholic spirit." This generous orthodoxy may be the only way forward for Christians who wish to work together across historic church divisions. A generous orthodoxy recognizes that, though Christians may disagree on some matters of doctrine and practice, we nevertheless commit to holding that disagreement together on particular, shared ground—namely, on Christian Scripture as understood through the historic Christian creeds, which affirm that the God who creates, redeems, and sustains us is Triune. The "historically orthodox" marker of SPU's Faith Statement focuses exclusively on those things; and this is precisely why we are able to hire and promote folks from every branch of Christianity recognized as "orthodox" on those terms. Thus, for example, we are able to hire Roman Catholics alongside members of the Presbyterian Church USA, despite the fact that the official documents of these respective denominations interpret Christian orthodoxy differently on the matter of LGBTQIA inclusion. This apparent discrepancy is allowable because of the "generous orthodoxy" outlined in the Faith Statement.

When the Board of Trustees made their decision on the basis of their interpretation of "historic orthodoxy," however, they are making the claim that a range of Christian communions represented at SPU—which affirm gay marriage, for instance—are, in fact, "unorthodox." In doing so they have restricted "historic orthodoxy" to those groups that affirm a traditional stance on human sexuality; "orthodoxy" for the Board of Trustees is thus not understood to mean *we agree to meet around the scripture and the creeds in the name of the Triune God*; orthodoxy rather requires us to meet around *the scripture and the creeds in the name of the Triune God and a traditional stance on human sexuality*. If that is in fact the case, then on those terms SPU cannot be both "orthodox" and "ecumenical"—at least according to the ecumenical framework within which SPU currently operates.

The position was likewise bolstered by reference to our "Wesleyan" heritage. The SPU Faith Statement says that we stand within the Wesleyan-Holiness branch of Christianity, and that the

Free Methodist Church is our founding denomination. Thus, SPU does its work “informed by the theological legacy of John and Charles Wesley.” That theological legacy has, in fact, birthed a range of denominational traditions, and those denominations are themselves divided over questions of human sexuality. As we all know, denominations (which, by definition, are not and cannot be “ecumenical” and thus understandably require within themselves a less than generous orthodoxy) are splitting over this issue. Indeed, it was division over Christian attitudes toward marginalized peoples (the oppression of African Americans and poor white people, specifically) by folks committed to Wesley’s Holiness message that led to the nineteenth century founding of the Free Methodist denomination in the first place. Nevertheless, the Board of Trustees’ position claims that our “distinctively Wesleyan” heritage requires us *not* to change our policy, when in reality it is the *current Free Methodist position* on human sexuality that is being held forth as the sole representation of what it means to be “distinctively Wesleyan.”

As former President Dan Martin frequently reminded us, SPU is not a church or a denomination; it is a university, an institution that one of SPU’s founders identified as “Christian first, Free Methodist second.” Because we are a university and not a church, we can do some things that a church cannot do: that is, we can become a place of meeting for Christians of every different church family. Where else in our society can Christians find such a place?! Where else can Christians prayerfully seek God’s truth amidst our divisions? Most churches today certainly are not providing this space. This is the distinctive gift of a Christian university that is deeply grounded in a Faith Statement like our own. And it should not be missed that it is precisely the “distinctively Wesleyan,” catholic-spirited view of things that allows us to be a place that affirms the possibility of being orthodox and ecumenical at the same time.

In sum, the Board of Trustees’ decision appears to demand a Faith Statement that is not *Orthodox, Evangelical, Wesleyan, and Ecumenical*, but rather a statement that is narrowly *Orthodox, Evangelical*, and specifically twenty-first century *Free Methodist*. Consequently, we believe that all constituents of SPU—Board, faculty, and staff—should strongly reaffirm all markers of the carefully balanced Faith Statement we actually have, the one that was approved by the Board of Trustees on May 21, 2004—because that Faith Statement has effectively guided our hiring practices and shaped our communal life since that time.

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