

Seattle Pacific University  
May 18, 2022

**From: SPU Faculty Chair April Middeljans and SPU's Faculty Council**  
**To: SPU Board Chair Cedric Davis and SPU's Interim President Pete Menjares**

On behalf of Faculty Council and Faculty Senate, I write to convey the grave concerns that faculty from all corners of the university have expressed (to us and to one another) regarding the recent actions taken by two Board of Trustee members. The following letter lays out the context of institutional progress in which these actions occurred, our concerned perception of how these actions undermine that progress, and a request from faculty regarding how the Board might respond to these actions.

### **Context**

Over a year ago, our university's theological and cultural disagreements concerning the employment of LGBTQ+ persons opened a network of rifts amongst students, staff, faculty, administrators, and trustees. It revealed many differing conceptions about how we approach the interpretation of scripture; how we understand the diversity of student experiences and needs on campus; what we see as SPU's mission within its geographical context; and what the relationship between a Christian university, the Christian church, and secular culture should be. Because we had not been sufficiently conversing with one another for many years about these divergent perspectives, and because many factors (such as the pandemic and the president's resignation) exacerbated the difficulty of communicating with one another, the conflict reached a point where faculty lost confidence in the Board's leadership.

In the context of this deep miscommunication and mistrust, the SPU community as a whole decided that we must radically engage one another on this issue and others in order to more deeply understand each other's faith, values, labor, roles, and responsibilities. This difficult process of relationship-building was crucial not only to restoring trust but to improving our vantage point for determining how to preserve and sustain this university, which has been an agent for God's kingdom since 1891, and to which we are all deeply committed.

Against many odds and with the help of expert and dedicated consultants, we agreed to form work groups comprised of representatives from the Board, administration, staff, and faculty. Such an embodiment of shared governance is extremely rare for institutions of any kind, and a tremendous achievement in its own right. The understanding for all parties was that this shared governance process would provide a confidential space where members from all parts of the university could earnestly and authentically search for mutually acceptable pathways toward a common goal. Furthermore, although these groups were not authorized to decide SPU policy, they would provide a robust mechanism of input directly to the Board for the many decisions it needs to make.

The hours spent in these groups have been long, and the conversations have been emotionally charged and at times extremely difficult. Yet the reports of personal interactions within in these

groups have been strongly positive. I can personally attest that all the members of the LGBTQ+ Work Group, while having distinctly different personal views, were consistently candid and transparent. Furthermore, the fact that this particular group—dealing with the university’s most contentious current issue—could come to broad consensus about potential options forward provides strong evidence that the SPU community can indeed come together for the common good, in what many have called a “unity that is deeper than agreement.” Something new and potentially transformative has just begun to take root here.

### **Concern**

Given this substantial, hard-won progress, faculty are exceedingly dispirited concerning recent events.

As you know, the LGBTQ+ Work Group presented a PowerPoint of its report and recommendations to the Board on April 22. The PowerPoint included the Work Group’s suggestion that even if SPU were to change its conduct policy to allow for the hiring of individuals in same-sex marriages, SPU could still potentially stay affiliated with the Free Methodist Church at the *affiliated* and *associate* levels; according to the 2019 Book of Discipline (§4800-4830), these levels require educational institutions to conform with the Articles of Religion (which SPU does), but they do not have explicit requirements about conduct policies for those institutions.

At some point shortly after the April 22<sup>nd</sup> presentation to the Board, it is our understanding that one or both members of the SPU Board of Trustees who also serve on the FMC Board of Administration (BoA) brought a resolution to the BoA. Subsequent to deliberations on that resolution, in the first week of May, the BoA announced to its Association of Free Methodist Educational Institutions (AFMEI) that they had passed the following motion:

- *Any AFMEI institution that alters their hiring policy to permit the hiring of individuals living a lifestyle inconsistent with the Free Methodist Book of Discipline's teachings on sexual purity will be considered to have disaffiliated with the denomination and will not be considered for any level of affiliation as long as this hiring policy is in place. This policy is considered to be in effect from this date until the next General Conference. A motion will be presented to the General Conference to clarify language in our Book of Discipline regarding the AFMEI and its commitments to the Free Methodist Church.*

This new policy effectively dead-ends a potential pathway of “shared direction” (to quote the Work Group’s charge) before the SPU Board of Trustees has had a chance to deliberate on—or seek further conversation about—that pathway.

We do not know the motives for these individuals’ actions; they may have been well-intentioned. But even those who are not parliamentary experts would be hard-pressed not to conclude that these actions give the strong appearance of a *conflict* or *duality of interest* that “might reasonably appear to impair the Trustee’s independent, unbiased judgment in the discharge of the Trustee’s responsibilities to the University” (Art. XIII, Sec. 1 of the SPU Bylaws).

The Work Group brought its report to the Board in full transparency and good faith; it operated with a “duty of care” (using its best judgment), a “duty of loyalty” (discerning what is in the best interests of the institution), and a “duty of obedience” (ensuring it adhered to SPU’s Christian mission as well as with civil law). The expectation for every Work Group has been that the Board would honor this work and apply these same standards to its own deliberations. But the actions of these two Trustees have been interpreted by many in the SPU community as placing the interests of the church above the interests of the university.

### **Request**

In light of what has occurred—and in response to a petition from senior faculty who regard these events as constituting a conflict of interest and an attempt to manipulate the outcome of the Board’s decision process—we respectfully request that the Board consider recusing these individuals from both the discussion and vote regarding the LGBTQ+ policy decision, as outlined in Art. XIII Sec. 3 of the SPU Bylaws.

If either of the Trustees in question remains for the discussion and vote, the SPU community will certainly perceive this as allowing undue influence or even direct and targeted interference from the church. This perception will not only undermine the legitimacy and authority of any decision the Board makes but will also corrode the community’s confidence in their own representatives. The vast majority of faculty, staff, and students have not had the privilege of interacting directly with Board members. They know only what their representatives report. Our constant refrain to the community has been “trust the process; there is substantial hope for progress.” These events compromise everyone’s credibility and threaten to disintegrate the community’s already fragile faith in the overall project of shared governance.

Faculty Council has sent you this letter privately in lieu of making a public statement, but we invite you to share its content with the full Board, especially if there is a need to have a vote regarding recusal. Given our many positive experiences with Board members over the past year, we are confident that the Board as a whole is taking this matter extremely seriously. We also recognize that the authority for the decision to recuse lies entirely with the Board. But we want to express very clearly on behalf of the SPU faculty—and indeed the entire community—how much these actions corrupt our confidence in the Board and the shared governance process as a whole.

In Christ,

April Middeljans, Faculty Chair and Professor of English and Cultural Studies  
Leland Saunders, Chair-Elect and Professor of Philosophy  
Carlene Brown, Immediate Past Chair and Professor of Music

Peg Achterman, Professor of Communication  
Dale Cannavan, Professor of Exercise Science  
Ryan Ellis, Professor of Music  
Vicki Eveland, Professor of Marketing

Greg Fritzberg, Professor of Education  
Brian Gill, Professor of Mathematics  
John Hossler, Professor of Mathematics  
Jeff Keuss, Professor of Christian Ministry, Theology, and Culture  
Patrick McDonald, Professor of Philosophy  
Heidi Monroe, Professor of Nursing  
Lane Seeley, Professor of Physics  
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