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## At SPU, a struggle between competing visions of Christianity

Aug. 21, 2022 at 12:01 pm Updated Aug. 21, 2022 at 2:01 pm



Seattle Pacific University students Grace Ihle, left, Bennett Bennett and Sierra Lebovitz participate in a sit-in inside the university's administrative building, Demaray Hall, Friday, June 3, 2022. (Erika Schultz / The Seattle Times)

By [Kevin Neuhouser](#)  
Special to The Times

On July 30, Seattle Pacific University made The Seattle Times' front page for all the wrong reasons. The article disclosed that SPU had filed suit against state Attorney General Bob Ferguson to halt an investigation into whether the university's policies violate Washington's anti-discrimination law. [["Seattle Pacific University sues WA attorney general, saying probe into LGBTQ+ policies violates religious freedom,"](#) A1].

In an email to a blindsided faculty, Interim SPU President Pete Menjares stated the lawsuit was necessary to "ensure our religious identity." In other words, Menjares and the SPU board of trustees, who initiated the suit, claim that discrimination against LGBTQIA+ job applicants is an essential element of the Christian faith.

Their equation of “Christian” with LGBTQIA+ discrimination may not shock many readers, simply confirming their worst impression of American Christianity. It may be a surprise, however, that this discrimination has been repeatedly rejected by the vast majority of SPU faculty, staff and students. Thus, the conflict is not — as the complaint alleges — a conflict between Christianity and secular government; it is a struggle between competing visions of Christianity. When the SPU board sued for the right to discriminate, it placed itself in opposition to the deeply committed Christians who constitute the greater part of the institution it claims to serve. For years, faculty, staff and students have worked to expand the inclusivity of SPU’s policies and practices, but recent board actions have slammed the door on that progress.

In spring 2021, in response to a sex discrimination lawsuit, 75% of faculty and 68% of staff supported [revising SPU’s Lifestyle Expectations policy to allow employment for applicants in same-sex marriages](#). When the board rejected this proposal, SPU faculty (72%) [overwhelmingly voted “no confidence” in the board](#). The chasm between the board and the university community was so deep that the board hired consultants who recommended creation of an “LGBTQIA+ Work Group” made up of Trustees, administrators and faculty to seek “a shared direction regarding sexual conduct expectations and employment policy (specifically with respect to LGBTQIA+ individuals).”

The Work Group’s report to the Board in May 2022 recommended just such a potential “shared direction” — a “Third Way” by which SPU strives to be an educational space where all perspectives on human sexuality and identity can openly and honestly be explored, using the best insights from all the disciplines we teach — theology, natural and social sciences, arts and humanities. Building such a learning environment requires a radical inclusivity that respectfully engages conservative faculty and staff and invites LGBTQIA+ individuals into the community and conversation. Despite the lawsuit’s claim, radical inclusivity doesn’t require religious conservatives to give up their religious identity, it simply asks them to engage in a broader conversation.

When the board rejected this recommendation, the campus response was swift. SPU faculty — more than 80% — [enthusiastically endorsed the “Third Way” option](#). Students engaged in a months-long sit-in of the administration building and submitted discrimination complaints to the Washington Attorney General. In the midst of this ongoing conflict, the revelation of the board’s lawsuit was shocking and discouraging to faculty, staff and students who have worked to make SPU a more inclusive university.

Despite this significant setback, the faculty at SPU continue to call for and work toward change in university policies to allow the hiring of qualified Christian job candidates, regardless of LGBTQIA+ status. We believe we are called to create a space in which Christians can seek God’s truth together. We believe that becoming this kind of Christian university will better serve our students, and through them, the church and the community.

Kevin Neuhouser is a professor of sociology at Seattle Pacific University, co-chair of the LGBTQIA+ Work Group and faculty adviser to Haven, the SPU LGBTQIA+ student club.