

Prayer for a Welcoming Community

By Doug Friesema, Columbia Theological Seminary

Columbia Theological Seminary is a PC(USA) school in Decatur, Georgia. Columbia's current housing policy, which it has operated under for many years, allows current students and the legally married partners of current students to live in campus housing. Since same gender marriages are not legally defined by the state of Georgia, committed, covenanted, same gender couples are not allowed to live together in campus housing.

In recent years, many students, faculty, and staff have expressed a hope that the privilege of campus housing might be extended to couples who could provide some proof of a committed relationship. This conversation has created great amounts of anxiety, hurt, and frustration. Many students have been reticent to speak their minds on the subject for fear of being shunned by the community. Many students have felt that the policy discriminates against them unjustly.

Last spring, a current student and her partner applied to live in campus housing together. They were denied a housing assignment. This year, the school's board of directors, student coordinating council, administration, and student body have all had conversations about this policy. The board of directors placed authority for this decision into the hands of the seminary's president and his cabinet. Imago Dei, a gay/straight fellowship and advocacy group, worked with the administration to draft new language for a potential policy update. The students requested that the cabinet provide a timeline for when an evaluation of this policy and decision would be made.

Then, on April 20, the president sent an email to the student body stating, "the decision was made not to change the policy at this time." That email generated many responses from students and alumni. On April 23, the president sent a second email, further commenting on the complex issues at stake in the decision and saying that "this conversation and process will continue" and that "everything is still on the table."

The conversation and process is continuing. The faculty has met to discuss the policy, the president held an open forum listening to students, alumni, faculty, staff, and spouses for two hours on April 23. A community forum has been scheduled, campus conversations are happening daily in classrooms and at lunchtables, worship and prayer services have been organized, many are writing letters and speaking through social media to express their responses, their faith, and their hope. Here is one response:

Today I am praying that Columbia Theological Seminary might become a more welcoming community.

Today I am praying that people who believe homosexual sex is a sin will feel welcome to share their theology with the Columbia community without fear of being labeled as hateful or unfaithful. I pray that Columbia Theological Seminary become a community that engages in just and loving dialogue where all of our brothers and sisters might be able to speak as full members of Christ's body, without fear of exclusion for following Christ as best they know how.

Today I am praying that people who live their lives in loving partnership with someone who shares their gender will feel welcomed as full members of the Columbia community. I pray that Columbia Theological Seminary would become a community that engages in just and loving dialogue where all of our brothers and sisters might be able to speak as full members of Christ's body, without fear of exclusion for following Christ as best they know how.

Today I am praying that the Columbia community will seek God's will together, following God wherever God may lead us. I pray that the community might not limit its ability to discern God's will by excluding, or failing to fully invite, any voices that God might speak through.

As our community remains strongly divided about who will be welcomed to live on our campus, I pray that if we are to err, we strive to err on the side of love and hospitality. I pray that we intentionally open our minds and hearts to seek out the voices of people who feel silenced or oppressed. I pray that we create spaces for them to speak and strive to hear them so that they can speak from the position of neighbor, rather than the position of enemy or minority.

As our community remains strongly divided about who will be welcomed to live on our campus, I pray that we strive to err on the side of love and hospitality. I pray that we intentionally open space for same gender couples to live together on campus so that they can engage this conversation from the position of neighbor, rather than the position of outsider.

I pray to a God who is loving and just. I pray to a God who is holy and hospitable. I pray to a God who welcomes me home no matter how far afield I've strayed. So I pray boldly, asking God to hear my prayer to make Columbia Theological Seminary a more welcoming community.

Doug Friesema is a second year M.Div. student at Columbia Theological Seminary where he co-chairs the Outreach Committee.