

The Values and Practices of Covenant Community At Princeton Theological Seminary

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*This document is intended as a resource to spark ongoing campus conversation;
The PTS Board of Trustees endorsed the directions of this vision at their October 2017 meeting.*

Princeton Theological Seminary is a vibrant center for faith and scholarship whose mission is to educate faithful Christian leaders. We believe that Princeton Seminary is called by God to embody the transforming, reconciling love of God in Jesus Christ and to carry this love joyfully into the world. This gospel is at the heart of our educational purpose and drives our vision for the Seminary's future. For more than 200 years, Princeton Seminary has been entrusted with the sacred task of preparing faithful women and men for lives of leadership and service to the church and the world. Looking forward to the next hundred years of faithfulness to our call, we are committed to transforming the ways that we engage the challenges facing the church and the world even as we renew our educational model and strengthen our foundations of rigorous scholarship and formation for leadership.

A distinctive feature of Princeton Seminary's educational model is a deeply formative residential experience. As students and their families live and study alongside one another, our campus becomes one large classroom where faith and the life of the mind constantly intersect in worship, study, work, and play.

We believe that the experience of living in a diverse Christian community is integral to shaping the habits of heart and mind that characterize effective Christian leaders. For this reason, we are committed to building a community that is centered in Jesus Christ and fully reflective of the kingdom of God in its rich and multifaceted diversity. The diversity of our campus community is essential to excellence in our mission. It is a vital part of the learning environment and our formation as Christian people. In Christ, diversity is understood as a gift to be celebrated, for we need those who are different from ourselves in order to experience more of Christ. When manifold perspectives and gifts are freely shared, we can more deeply experience truth, beauty and joy.

As an authentic community we must also navigate conflicts in ideas, values, and practices within our life together. This is also a significant and intentional part of the learning experience, providing the opportunity for students to gain the capacities to thrive across lines of difference. It is precisely this dynamic that allows us to offer a singular learning opportunity that uniquely matches the essential requirements for leadership formation in the church and the world in today's global context. As students encounter perspectives or experiences that are different than their own, they must grapple with them in the context of face-to-face relationship as fellow members of a community. Residing in this community cultivates in our students the capacities of Christian hospitality, generous listening, a gracious spirit, and the ability to face complexity with intellectual honesty and rigorous thinking.

In pursuing this approach, we are purposefully bucking the trend. At a time when many of our peer schools are moving towards online education, we are renewing and strengthening our commitment to the transformative power of Christian community, seeking ways to further enhance and maximize the residential experience for our students and for all who participate in the Seminary community. There are many models of theological education that have merit, but this is the model that we feel called to practice with excellence because it enables us to fulfill our mission most effectively.

“Covenant community” is the term that we use to reflect our aspirations for realizing the full potential of our residential model of theological education. This vision encompasses both the values that inform our life together and the practices that constitute the rhythms of this experience. Authentic community can never be manufactured, but with intentionality we can create the occasions for the intellectual formation, spiritual nurture, and leadership development that are essential for Christian leaders. This is the goal we are committed to achieve in realizing our vision for a covenant community.

The Values of Covenant Community

At Princeton Seminary we uphold important commitments of faith that are informed by our Presbyterian and Reformed heritage. We do not require students to subscribe to these tenets in their personal beliefs, but we do expect that those who choose to become part of our learning community will be productive participants in a learning environment that is grounded in these commitments. Our concept of community is informed by the Reformed tradition and its emphasis on the study of Scripture, the life of the mind, and the centrality of Christ. Joining the Princeton Seminary community is a commitment to participate fully in this way of life together.

Faith: What We Believe

- We confess our faith in Jesus Christ as head of the church and together worship one God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.
- We affirm the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments to be, by the Holy Spirit, the unique and authoritative witness to Jesus Christ in the Church universal, and God’s word to us.
- We value the nurture of deep faith as vital to mature Christian leadership, and we encourage the cultivation of faith in ourselves and in others by regularly practicing spiritual disciplines, including study of Scripture, prayer, worship, and sharing the Lord’s Supper, because it is through Word and sacrament that we are shaped as Christian people and bound together in one community.
- We celebrate a variety of expressions of Christian worship and spiritual practice, as we embrace the rich diversity of cultures, races, ethnicities, denominations, and Christian traditions that make up our community. The Reformed tradition affirms that the church exists wherever the Word is rightly proclaimed and the sacraments

rightly administered. Accordingly, it is an inherently ecumenical movement, and we embrace this ecumenism as a central value.

Scholarship and Intellectual Life

- We value the critical study of Scripture, the theological tradition, and the breadth of academic disciplines as a means of understanding God, ourselves, and the world.
- We affirm that “God alone is Lord of the conscience,” and we embrace the right of private judgment and individual freedom. We also recognize the limits of freedom within Christian community and pledge to honor one another with respect and compassion.
- We appreciate that there are perspectives on which people of conviction and faithfulness will differ. We welcome a vibrant contest of moral claims within our intellectual community, and we affirm the necessity of exercising mutual forbearance towards one another when we disagree. We value intellectual inquiry that can engage a wide range of viewpoints, including those that diverge from our own deeply held convictions and commitments, for this is the crucible in which our theology is formed.
- Princeton Seminary is a graduate school of the church that demands rigorous engagement with ideas that challenge one’s theology. While the physical safety of our students is primary, the Seminary is not an intellectual “safe space” in which one is protected from ideas that may conflict with one’s own commitments or sensibilities. It is not the Seminary’s goal to prevent our students from having to encounter serious questions to what they hold dear. Rather, it is vital to preparation for ministry. The ability to represent one’s own views with conviction and grace while engaging others with compassion and respect is an essential quality for leaders in our time.

Community Life

- We aspire to create covenantal community that is characterized by a right relationship to God and to one another. To be a member of the Seminary community is to pledge oneself to seek the wellbeing of the community and its members. This community is not simply a loose association of those who take common courses or live in the same neighborhood. We seek to enroll students who are ready to be formed by the community and willing to assume responsibility for each other and our common life.
- We value the relationships that develop through living, learning, and worshipping alongside one another in residential community. Our commitment to residential life is reflective of the incarnational love of God. We confess that God calls us to know one another face-to-face.

- We are committed to nurturing a Christian community that is characterized by love, grace, and mutual accountability. We seek to live together peaceably, to honor each other, to celebrate and learn from one another's differences, remembering our common center in Jesus Christ.
- We desire for our community to reflect the full expression of the kingdom of God, and we affirm that the rich diversity among students, faculty, and staff is vital to both faithfulness and excellence.
- We prepare students to serve the church in a broad variety of ministries. We take vocational discernment seriously, and we are a community in which calling can be tested and defined. As a school in the Presbyterian Church (USA), the Seminary affirms the church's polity on ordination standards. We do not require all to affirm these standards, recognizing that members of the community come from traditions with differing perspectives on these questions, yet we insist upon an environment of mutual respect in which all people can share their gifts freely.
- We value eating together as an act of Christian fellowship, remembering that the disciples recognized the risen Christ among them while they were breaking bread and that Jesus' own eating habits reflected a radical hospitality that invited all to a common table.
- We also value active participation and engagement in other communities in the church and in the world. We exist not for ourselves or our community itself but for service to Jesus Christ in the world beyond our campus.
- We affirm the Christian calling to be stewards of God's creation. To this end, we commit ourselves to promote practices of sustainability on our campus and in our region.
- We understand that the Reformed tradition is an inherently *reforming* tradition, constantly calling us to greater fidelity to Jesus Christ as revealed in Scripture. So too, the community must always be reexamining and evaluating our life together. We must change, respond, and adapt to the context of our time and location as we seek to be faithful to our mission and responsive to the stirrings of the Holy Spirit.

The Practices of Covenant Community

These values and commitments inform the ethos of our community, and they must be embodied in specific practices. In other words, these values demand action and have implications for how we relate to one another and to the world beyond our campus. We will facilitate these practices through our curriculum and co-curriculum, by building design and use of campus space, and in the rhythms of community life. We will strengthen and be more intentional about existing practices that are foundational to the learning experience, and we will also develop new practices and programs that will facilitate the quality of

community life to which we aspire. The development and realization of our campus master plan will be a significant component of facilitating covenant community by providing the appropriate landscape and setting to effectively support the learning experience. Achieving our aspirations will require us to reexamine every aspect of our life together.

Practices within the Academic Curriculum

The academic curriculum is the heart of the educational experience at Princeton Seminary. Our Reformed commitment to scholarship in the service of faith means that we will continue to aspire to give our students an education of depth and rigor that will equip them well for ministry. Becoming the covenant community in no way requires us to curtail our pursuit of academic excellence but in fact calls us to remain steadfastly committed to it because of its crucial role in forming faithful Christian leaders in an increasingly anti-intellectual age.

To this end, the faculty will be asked to undertake a thorough review of our degree programs, curriculum, and pedagogies. This is a challenging and highly complex task that will require the faculty to:

- Reach a new level of shared understanding of curricular goals that support our mission and then establish the curriculum and structures that will allow those goals to be reached;
- Determine the set of pedagogical practices that best serve our students; and
- Examine our degree programs and assess their ability to equip students for ministry, making the necessary changes to refine programs, create new programs, or sunset existing programs.

The classroom is a primary site of formation for Christian leadership, and it is the foundation of the comprehensive learning experience that extends from curriculum to co-curriculum. Consequently, we will uphold specific commitments about the nature of the faculty and the purposes of its intellectual activity. We are committed, as we have been throughout our 200-year history, to develop and support a faculty of the highest caliber whose members are actively engaged in leadership in their fields of study and are people of faith who participate in the life of the church. We will continue to deploy tenure as a tool to attract and retain great faculty members and preserve an ethos of collegiality among the faculty. We reject the concept of a two-tier hierarchy of ranked and unranked faculty as antithetical to our purpose of sustaining a covenant learning community in which our faculty are deeply engaged. We will maintain a strong PhD program because it enriches our other degree programs; helps us attract and retain top faculty; supplies excellent faculty members to colleges, universities, and theological schools both in North America and around the world; and produces practitioners whose ministries are empowered by their doctoral work.

We will also keep in view our obligation to be faithful stewards of the academic resources with which we have been blessed and to share them generously. Our faculty are capable of

meeting important needs for academic leadership within the PC(USA), the Reformed tradition worldwide, and the global church as a grateful and faithful response to what God has entrusted to us. We have an important role to play as a place where the mainline Protestant tradition of theology can be carried out, and we want our practices as an institution to reflect this commitment and calling to resource the church more broadly.

Practices within the Co-Curriculum

We know that the academic curriculum is an essential but not sufficient tool to prepare our students for faithful and effective Christian leadership. Every part of the student experience—from the classroom to the chapel, from the library to the dining hall, from the apartments to field education sites—must be shaped to best prepare our students for the leadership vocations to which they are called.

The goal of the co-curriculum is to strengthen and live out the tenets of our faith as a covenant community while broadening and deepening the capacities of our students to lead and to serve the church in the broader world. To this end, it is important that the co-curriculum be carefully and intelligently coordinated with the academic curriculum. Because we have a research-caliber faculty, they will participate in the co-curriculum but not lead it. From the student perspective, the curriculum and co-curriculum should instantiate a coherent, seamless, and complementary overall experience of formation. Our residential accommodations provide an important setting for learning, but the co-curriculum extends far beyond housing to provide a comprehensive learning experience for the entire student body, including the relatively small number of students who do not live on campus. The significant aspects of the co-curriculum will include the essential disciplines of the Christian life.

- Worship

Worship is at the heart of Christian practice and has always been a significant component of life at Princeton Seminary. Corporate worship is vital to the cohesion and coherence of the community. We want to ensure that all members of the Seminary community who so desire can participate. This may require changes in the operation of campus offices so that the entire community—students, faculty, staff—can pause from work to orient ourselves to the praise of our Creator. We will recover the historical practice of chiming the Seminary bell to call the community to daily worship and mark the rhythm that orders our days. Worship is also an important part of the educational experience. The daily services in Miller Chapel reflect the breadth of Christian traditions represented in our community and thus expand our students' experiences of Christian practice. Students also gain experience in leading and planning worship, and we will seek ways to provide additional opportunities for students to gain important leadership experience through our daily services and other worship opportunities that they may create in other spaces on campus.

- Service

We will explore ways to integrate service more deeply into our curriculum and co-curriculum. The more faithfully we serve one another and the world, the more effectively we will be able to equip our students for servant leadership in the church and the world. There are models from undergraduate service-learning programs from which we can learn. Our field education program incorporates some dimensions of service-learning, but more is possible. We need to develop our pedagogy of service-learning and properly staff the programs that result. We will seriously consider the possibility of developing a site in Trenton that can serve as a teaching/meeting/collaborative space—building a lab for urban service that is the analog of the Farminary.

Our entire campus will be engaged in service beyond our campus. We will find concrete ways for every member of the covenant community to serve our neighbors in Princeton and the surrounding region. We will be particularly intentional about our relationship to the Trenton community, for we have much to gain and much to give by making a permanent, sustaining commitment to learn from, serve, and partner with the Trenton community.

- Fellowship

- Cohort groups: Over the last 15 years, we have successfully experimented with using cohorts to enhance the educational experience and foster deeper relationships within the community. These cohorts can be organized around themes, curricular emphases, Christian practices, or demographic groups. These small groups also create opportunities for leadership training for students as they learn to structure and lead groups of their own. We want to make cohort groups a defining part of the student experience. While they are adaptable to many different goals, we will need to establish a pedagogy and set of best practices that govern all cohort groups. We want to become experts in the area of using cohorts to enhance our ability to prepare students for their future ministries.
- Table fellowship: Jesus built relationships over meals, and as Christians we know the tremendous power of fellowship and food to bring people together. Classroom learning is extended around the table as conversations flow from coursework. Mealtimes can be a practicum in negotiating difference, as people from diverse races, cultures, nations, and traditions share stories, experiences, and food. For generations, PTS students have treasured the camaraderie of meals in Mackay and barbeques at CRW as a significant part of their seminary experience. But there is more that we can do to take full advantage of the sacred act of sharing meals. We may consider, for example, ways to encourage the entire community's participation in a weekly lunch. Sharing meals could be an intentional experience integrated into cohort groups, faculty advising, or service projects.

- Residential Living: Currently our housing separates students by marital status, creating an unintended but significant division right through the heart of our aspiration to forge a covenantal learning community. The realization of our master plan creates the opportunity to correct this and provides for a single, enlarged, integrated campus that includes the Tennent-Roberts property.

Our residential life is an incredibly rich learning opportunity, allowing for Christians of differing age, gender, sexual orientation, marital status, race, ethnicity, nationality, theology, political ideology, background, and belief to live in community with each other. It is an opportunity that our peer schools cannot or choose not to offer. Our residential accommodations will become a singular, differentiating factor of the Princeton Seminary experience—not in their luxury but in their ability to foster rich community. Much learning and community formation already happens in our residences organically, but we want to enhance and make more deliberate this aspect of the student experience.

We will be intentional about how to maximize this opportunity to foster the participation of all people—students, spouses, children—in the life of the covenant community. This could include reevaluating our student deacon program, integrating cohort group experiences into living arrangements, and encouraging the cultivation of Christian practices in living spaces (e.g., Bible study, worship, or service projects organized by residence hall floor). We will also develop a chapel residency program that will employ recent graduates to help to carry out new programming and provide pastoral care to students and their families.

- Orientation

Orientation will now become an effective tool for getting students ready to be members of the covenant community. This will require an immersive program right before the semester begins. Elements will include studying scripture together to provide a theological framework for students' participation in the covenant community, the inclusion of spouses and family members so they acquire a much stronger sense of welcome and belonging to the community as a whole, introduction to the cohort program and immediate, small group service experiences so that the intentions of life in our covenantal community are animated with action right from the start. Administrative components will be kept to a minimum.

- Discernment

In all that we do, we are called to be a community that is guided by the Holy Spirit in seeking the will of God. As an educational institution of the church, the Seminary is particularly oriented towards vocational discernment. The mission statement articulates that this is a place where “calling is tested and defined.” This

kind of discernment is not a solitary endeavor but requires the engagement of the whole faith community. Quite simply, we need one another to discern God's purposes. Consequently, members of the community must understand the responsibility and mutual accountability they have to one another to be faithful partners in discernment. One of the primary ways to deepen this aspect of life together is to implement a mid-degree assessment program to provide students with a structured opportunity to discuss their sense of call and vocational plans with a group of faculty, administrators, and peer colleagues who can encourage, challenge, provide feedback, and discern with them. Our expectation is that this program will not only be important to the individuals who complete it, but also to all who participate as counselors, advisors, and peer listeners, for it will reinforce a foundational claim of covenant community that we are accountable to one another for seeking the will of God together. A pilot program is launching this year.

Becoming the Covenant Community

The ideas and commitments expressed here are neither finished and complete in their individual elements nor comprehensive in their coverage. However, we are committed to action, and this is how we will begin. In the months and years ahead, we will continue to foment, define, and evaluate the most effective ways to realize this vision for becoming a covenant community. As we examine practices of community life with renewed scrutiny and seek the most effective ways to provide an unparalleled residential experience of formation for our students, new and different ideas will emerge and be incorporated. The entire community will be involved in these deliberations and the manner by which we carry out this process will itself be an opportunity to build covenant community.

At stake in this endeavor is not only fidelity to our mission and excellence in its execution but a calling to carry out our work in ways that are transformative for our community, for the church, and for the kingdom of God. The church and the world hunger for faithful and effective leaders who are capable of embracing the complex challenges of our era with intelligence, imagination, and love, and we believe that this kind of leadership is best nourished in a community rooted in Jesus Christ that takes seriously the life of the mind and the life of faith. As we look to the future, we affirm Princeton Seminary's calling to engage the world around us with a compelling Christian witness consistent with our Reformed identity, to love and serve our neighbors, to address challenging issues that confront the church and society, and to encourage the intellectual life that sustains a deep faith.