

February 19, 2018

Joseph DeLozier, Chairman
The Rt. Rev. John Howard, Chancellor
Margaret McLarty, Secretary
John M. McCardell, Jr., Vice-Chancellor

Dear Officers of the Board of Regents,

We believe that the recent action of the university Regents declining the petition to revoke the honorary degree conferred upon Charlie Rose in 2016 was taken with the best interests of the university in mind. We also know that under constraints of time and without opportunity for wider consultation, all of us can make decisions that with further reflection we may wish to revise. And so we, tenured members of the faculty of the School of Theology, want to contribute to this conversation by writing a public letter explaining why we are troubled by some of the theological assertions contained in your letter to the student trustees.

Because your letter invokes the concept of forgiveness, we wish to situate the matter of the revocation or retention of Mr. Rose's honorary degree within the larger, theologically-grounded tradition of pastoral response to sin and forgiveness. In church tradition, forgiveness is offered after repentance and contrition. Typically, that means making appropriate restitution to those whom the individual has wronged, and the grace of forgiveness is singularly theirs to offer. What steps Mr. Rose may or may not have taken in this regard are not known to us. But we note that forgiveness does not cancel the serious consequences of sin, nor does it require restoring an individual to the same places of honor that he had held before.

Respectfully, we must insist that there *is* a hierarchy of sin, long recognized in the tradition. In the gospels, Jesus himself makes such distinctions, and he forcefully censures those who place a "stumbling block" before others—that is, create scandal that impedes faith (Matt. 18:6-7). In late antiquity, it was only grave sin that excluded anyone from the fellowship of the church. The medieval categories of mortal and venial sin underscored the point that some sins were, indeed, worse than others. The Reformation's insistence that we are all sinners nevertheless did not preclude pastoral distinctions about the gravity of certain sins. And present-day pastors and bishops certainly recognize that some sins are more harmful than others, both to the sinner and to the victim of the sin, and the disciplinary canons of the church reflect this.

Further issues arise in the case of public offenses. When sin becomes a scandal, it is treated differently from private sins. This is embodied in the disciplinary rubrics of the Book of Common Prayer: clergy are to repel from communion not all sinners but those who are "living a notoriously evil life" and those "who have done wrong to their neighbors and are a scandal" (Book of Common Prayer, p. 409). Public scandal is, in the tradition, regarded as a reason to send a message. One struggles to think of a case of public scandal more obvious than the behavior of Mr. Rose. A *skandalon* is literally a "stumbling-block," and it seems clear to us that the continued investiture of Mr. Rose with honors by this university constitutes a stumbling-block to the university community.

We also hold it necessary to distinguish between issues of sin and redemption, on the one hand, and those of good order on the other. No one has seriously proposed excommunicating Mr. Rose from the altars of Sewanee; no one has argued that the revocation of a degree would entail his loss of salvation; no one has asserted that the University Senate and Board of Regents can grant or withhold salvation. We do not believe that the revocation of an honorary degree constitutes an inappropriate “condemn[ation of] the individual” but rather a recognition that the actions of one that once had seemed meritorious no longer appear as such, as more information has come to light. Withdrawing the degree, in those circumstances, is a measured response, signifying that the behavior of Mr. Rose was dishonorable.

It is our understanding that the university awards honorary degrees not only for specific achievements, but also for the general cloud of merit around an individual—the aggregation of a lifetime of achievement, high moral character, and the perception that the individual is worthy of honor. Rescinding an honorary degree is different from rescinding an earned degree, which might be done in the case of a subsequent discovery of plagiarism on a thesis or comprehensive exam, but would not be a measured response to an offense unrelated to the completion of degree requirements. It is difficult to see Mr. Rose as either meritorious or honorable, now that we know more about his conduct. But the decision to grant an honorary degree lies with the Regents and the University Senate, acting in concert; the decision to reverse such a degree would rest with the same bodies.

The revocation of an honorary degree is, of course, a symbolic act, but it is no more or less symbolic than the decision to confer one. In the School of Theology, we traffic in symbols: we teach the rituals of the church to our students; we teach them to convey the *symbolum* of faith, the Creed; we form them as priests so that they will know the power of symbols, symbolic action, and symbolic language to those whom they will serve. Withdrawing an honorary degree from a serial sexual offender whose behavior has become a *skandalon* may be a symbolic gesture, and on its own it would surely never be sufficient. We are grateful for all of the steps to address the malformed sexual culture of this institution that are outlined in your letter. We believe there are more steps to be taken, not least a critical examination of Greek culture on campus. But symbols do matter, and the retention of its honors by one who has behaved in such a scandalous way dishonors this university. Symbols speak: while symbols without matching substance are hollow, symbols convey the deep values of a culture, a people, a university. Allowing Mr. Rose’s degree to stand is its own symbolic declaration of the university’s values.

In their letter of January 22, the Presiding Bishop and the President of the House of Deputies called on the Episcopal Church to use Ash Wednesday to meditate “on the ways in which we in the church have failed to stand with women and other victims of abuse and harassment and to consider, as part of our Lenten disciplines, how we can redouble our work to be communities of safety that stand against the spiritual and physical violence of sexual exploitation and abuse.” They urged us to examine our history and to “confess and repent of those times when the church, its ministers or its members have been antagonistic or unresponsive to people—women, children and men—who have been sexually exploited or abused.” We pray that this university will have the courage to respond to this call, and that it will seek to demonstrate in symbol and in substance that it respects the dignity of every human being, and demands similar respect be shown by all whom it honors.

Sincerely,

William F. Brosend
Professor of New Testament and Preaching

Cynthia S. Crysdale
Professor of Christian Ethics and Theology

Julia M. Gatta
Bishop Frank A. Juhan Professor of Pastoral Theology

Paul A. Holloway
University Professor of Classics and Ancient Christianity

Benjamin J. King
Associate Professor of Church History

Robert MacSwain
Associate Professor of Theology

James F. Turrell
Norma and Olan Mills Prof of Divinity and Professor of Liturgy

Rebecca Abts Wright
C.K. Benedict Professor of Old Testament