



**Richard B. Hays**  
Dean of the Divinity School  
George Washington Ivey Professor of New Testament

26 August 2014

To Members of the Duke Divinity School Community,

I am writing to address some recent concerns in the Divinity School, and to correct some regrettable and inaccurate impressions that have circulated on campus and beyond.

I begin by affirming, in the strongest possible terms, that Duke Divinity School is a diverse community that not only welcomes all students, faculty, and staff in a non-discriminatory environment but actively seeks to promote respectful dialogue among persons with deeply held convictions. We seek to be a community that embraces difference within a deeper unity in Christ.

Unfortunately, some of my remarks during last week's orientation for new students were gravely misinterpreted by some who were present. At the orientation session on Friday, Aug. 22, in my role as Dean of the Divinity School, I talked to entering students about the importance of diversity as a value central to the life of the school and to the work of ministry for which students are preparing during their studies at Duke. I emphasized that this is a school where all are welcome and all are encouraged to come to one table in an atmosphere of love, respect, and mutual acceptance. Participants in the subsequent faculty panel spoke about inclusion of gay and lesbian students as a feature of the Divinity School's life, noted the organizations and services for supporting such students, and strongly restated their commitment to inclusion as a value and mission of the school.

I then pointed out additionally that the diversity of the community extends to theological and ecclesial beliefs. We welcome students and faculty from diverse denominations and perspectives, and, as an ecumenical theological center, we ask that all members of the community be willing to test their cherished views and assumptions. In a world painfully polarized by stereotypes and divisions, we strive to create a generous community of honest conversation. Within such a community, students need to understand that serious differences may persist, and that some of these differences are grounded in the teachings and traditions of particular church communities.

Duke Divinity School is an official theological school of the United Methodist Church. Accordingly, I told the group, students need to be aware of the statements on sexual conduct within the *Discipline* of the United Methodist Church. This book, which outlines denominational standards and procedures, declares that all persons are "individuals of sacred worth." At the same time, the *Discipline* restates the church's long-standing disapproval of same-sex relationships, and prohibits clergy from performing same-sex unions. The statement in the *Discipline* concludes with these words: "We implore families and churches not to reject or condemn lesbian and gay members and friends. We commit ourselves to be in ministry for and with all persons."

I read this statement in full to the students and explained that the Methodist Church's position on these matters is currently under debate, which mirrors a debate in other ecclesial communities and in society at large. Some voices in the church strongly support the traditional teaching, and others just as strongly argue that in our time, the Spirit is moving the church to revise and correct its position.

In the midst of these controversies, as I had said in my opening remarks, here within the Divinity School we seek to be a community that, despite difficult differences, comes to one table in love.

Sadly, a truncated account and inaccurate version of my remarks was circulated online, creating an impression that is completely opposite of what I actually said in the orientation session. My intent then, and again today, was to reiterate strongly the Divinity School's commitment to gracious and charitable inclusion and discussion of differences.

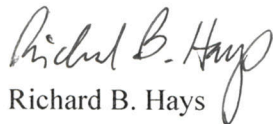
The Divinity School's policies and practices are fully consistent with Duke University's official Nondiscrimination Statement, which affirms that "Duke University is committed to encouraging and sustaining a learning and work community that is free from prohibited discrimination and harassment. The university prohibits discrimination on the basis of race, color, religion, national origin, disability, veteran status, sexual orientation, gender identity, sex, genetic information, or age in the administration of its educational policies, admission policies, financial aid, employment, or any other university program or activity."

Duke University has a longstanding history of championing these values and commitments in words, and actions. We encourage students to take advantage of Duke's Center for Sexual Gender Diversity, which provides an array of support, mentoring and advocacy for the greater LGBT community. Within the Divinity School, we have a student organization called Sacred Worth, whose purpose is explicitly to promote "the equal participation and full inclusion" of sexual minorities and their allies and "to be both a prophetic voice to the larger community and also a safe, supportive space" for such persons and perspectives within the community. We also have an academic certificate program in Gender, Theology, and Ministry, which offers opportunities to women and men to study gender in the life of the church, in the Christian tradition, and in contemporary culture.

Just as importantly, beyond prohibiting discrimination, we in the Divinity School are in the business of actively seeking reconciliation within our communities, and within the churches and communities our graduates serve, while at the same time respecting the complexity of our traditions and their engagement with biblical and theological resources.

I hope that this rather lengthy letter will help to dispel misunderstanding and encourage constructive dialogue in the days ahead. May the coming academic year be a time of deep reflection and the cultivation of wisdom for us all.

Grace and peace,

  
Richard B. Hays