

Christians @ Rhodes

Rhodes University, Grahamstown

Email: car.chairperson@gmail.com

Facebook group: Christians @ Rhodes

<https://www.facebook.com/groups/1506562896227281/>



Christians @ Rhodes

Submission for Transformation Summit

July 2017

Introduction

Christians @ Rhodes is a network of Christian student societies and staff members at Rhodes University. We represent a diverse variety of Christian groups on the university campus. We are deeply invested in Rhodes University's vision "to be an outstanding internationally-respected academic institution which proudly affirms its African identity and which is committed to democratic ideals, academic freedom, rigorous scholarship, sound moral values and social responsibility."¹ As followers of Christ in an academic context, we endeavour to support this vision in various intellectual and spiritual ways. As stakeholders in the university project, we would like to raise a few areas where we believe that we can contribute to the transformation of this university.

1. Transformation and the search for truth

It is often stated that the purpose of early modern universities was 'the search for truth'. We believe that this should continue to be at the core of the university project at all times. We believe that truth is transformative and should inform the goals of transformation. Truth should be sought out and valued no matter what source or tradition it comes from.

This means that there is a need for transformation of the curriculum that incorporates truths from bodies of knowledge originating in the global South. It also means that truths from bodies of knowledge originating in the global North should not be discarded because of their origins. When we critically evaluate knowledge claims, truth should always be at the centre of our standards for evaluation.

We are also aware that the notion of truth has become unpopular in what is increasingly being labelled a "post-truth"² era, and that the search for truth may equally lead to unpopular stances. Thus we call the university community to heed Martin Luther King Jr's call to become a "transformed nonconformist", borrowing the words of the apostle Paul³. King's words apply well to this moment in our history:

¹ Rhodes University. 2017. Vision and Mission. <https://www.ru.ac.za/introducingrhodes/visionandmission/>. Accessed 21 June 2017.

² See for example Snodgrass, L. 2017. Academics can't change the world when they're distrusted and discredited. <https://theconversation.com/academics-cant-change-the-world-when-theyre-distrusted-and-discredited-77420>. Accessed 3 July 2017.

³ The Holy Bible, Romans 12:2

Today we stand on the brink of moral and physical destruction and the great need of the hour is sincere nonconformist men [and women] who will stand amid a world of materialism and treat all men [and women] as brothers [and sisters], men [and women] who will stand up in a world that attempts to solve its problems by war and declare that he [or she] who lives by the sword will die by the sword.⁴

We encourage and challenge the university community to allow its transformation to be one that is shaped by truth even when this requires nonconformity with the dominant trends of our times.

2. Academic freedom and freedom of expression

For truth to be pursued, all ideas and knowledge claims need to be given a fair hearing in the academic sphere, no matter what their source. From this it follows that academic freedom and freedom of expression should be core values of a transforming university. This is true even though it may lead to discussions which may be discomforting to different people at different times. Robust and frank discussions need to be held even concerning what are considered ‘personal matters’ to some, bearing in mind the aphorism that “the personal is political”⁵.

As Christians, we are not ashamed to put forward ideas shaped by Christianity in the public sphere of the university. We are convinced that they withstand critical scrutiny. We simply ask that these be given a fair hearing alongside ideas from other traditions.

At the same time, we believe that all exchanges of ideas must be marked by gentleness and respect⁶, and that the university should demand that views are not put forward in ways that are genuinely coercive or disrespectful to others.

We agree firmly with our vice-chancellor, Dr Sizwe Mabizela, who has frequently quoted Desmond Tutu’s wise words: “Don’t raise your voice. Improve your argument.”⁷ However, this requires an environment in which ideas can be heard and discussed on their merits. We call on the university community to do all in its power to facilitate such an environment.

⁴ King, M.L. Jr. 1954. Transformed nonconformist. Sermon delivered at Dexter Avenue Baptist Church, Montgomery, Al, November 1954.
http://okra.stanford.edu/transcription/document_images/Vol06Scans/Nov1954TransformedNonconformist.pdf. Accessed 21 June 2017.

⁵ Hanisch, C. 1970. The personal is political. In Firestone, S. and Koedt, A. (eds.). *Notes from the Second Year: Women’s Liberation – Major Writings of the Radical Feminists*. New York. 76-77.

⁶ The Holy Bible, 1 Peter 3:15

⁷ Tutu, D. Quoted in Desmond Tutu Peace Foundation. 2015. 10 pieces of wisdom from Desmond Tutu on his birthday.
<http://www.tutufoundationusa.org/2015/10/07/10-pieces-of-wisdom-from-desmond-tutu-on-his-birthday/>. Accessed 21 June 2017.

3. Moral transformation

While this submission has focused thus far mainly on the epistemic dimension of the university's transformation, we dare not ignore that effective transformation should also have a moral dimension. We applaud the fact that the university's vision commits it to "sound moral values"; however, in practice discussion of moral values has often been absent from the university's curricula and has not formed a strong component of the university's institutional culture. We would therefore like to encourage the university to consider carefully what moral values should be practised in our institutional culture, and how moral values should be discussed, taught and learned in our curricula.

As Christians, we believe that sound moral values are grounded in the nature of a good and just God. We do not seek to impose Christian morality on people whose beliefs differ with ours. However, we would like to offer to engage in discussion with other bodies in the university as to how reflection on moral values can be made a more integral part of our curricula and practice as a university.

4. Practising faith on campus as a living space

Faith and spirituality are integral parts of the daily lives of many, if not the majority, of students and staff members at Rhodes University. If the university is to be considered a 'home for all', this needs to be taken into account in the ways in which space on campus is utilized. A university campus without spaces for worship and fellowship would be an extremely alienating place for many students and staff who arrive at the university. There is therefore a need for such spaces, and a need to create living arrangements which are conducive to tolerance of a diversity of beliefs. Often the needs of different groups will need to be balanced. From our experience of practising faith on our campus, there are a variety of practical considerations that we would like to draw attention to:

- Christians from different societies meet regularly in small groups (usually with fewer than 20 students), usually for group discussion, Bible study and prayer. Such small group meetings have sometimes occurred in residence rooms, but this tends to cause unnecessary noise disturbances and other risks associated with overcrowding. We recommend that one room per dining hall be made available for booking throughout the year as a place for such small groups to meet. Such a room need be furnished only with a few chairs and a table, and could be available to members of any group seeking a place for small group meetings on campus. In most cases, suitable rooms already exist in residence dining halls; all that would be required is for them to be made available and possibly for bookings to be administrated by a hall administrator. It would be necessary for suitable noise guidelines to be devised for the use of these spaces, and the leadership of Christians @ Rhodes would be happy to be involved in devising these guidelines and urging Christian societies and ministries to abide by them.
- Before and during exam times, venues on campus are closed for booking by student societies. However, these are times in which many students find that corporate prayer and worship are most beneficial to their psychological well-being, relieving stress and allowing them to focus better on their studies. These students view such prayer and worship as an "essential service"

rather than something that can simply be discontinued during exams. As a result, societies and Christian ministries often move their meetings before and during exams away from central venues into meeting places they can secure close to the residences. However, this often creates noise disturbances for those studying in the residences. We recommend that a venue on campus a sufficient distance away from residences and other study venues be identified which can be opened for bookings by religious societies and student ministries over exams. In this way, possible noise disturbances can be minimized and students of faith can have opportunities for corporate prayer and worship during these pressurized times.

- One measure that could assist in relieving pressure on venues is if the Chapel of St Mary and All the Angels could be made available for booking by Christian societies and student ministries free of charge. Currently this venue is under-utilized by these groups because a fee is charged to pay for the presence of a technical assistant at the venue at all times while it is being used. The Chapel was built and given to the university as a place of Christian worship, and so it would be fitting for it to be made more readily available for this purpose.
- Finally, we would like to urge the university to reconsider the practice of curtailing society activities on campus during Orientation Week. Since this request entails a change in some policies, it requires some motivation. We recognize that Orientation Week is a crucial time in which students not only prepare for their academic studies at the university, but also make social connections with fellow students. During this week new students may either integrate well into the social life of the university, or become to a large extent alienated from it, to the detriment of their studies and general wellness over the course of their degrees. However, at present, the programme presented to students during Orientation Week for the most part treats them in a ‘one-size-fits-all’ manner. This may have the effect of indicating to students that all Rhodes University students are expected to think and behave in the same way, and does not give the impression of an institution that values diversity. Students of faith in particular can find this environment extremely alienating. We realize that society events were originally curtailed during Orientation Week in response to concerns about overly aggressive recruitment strategies pursued particularly by some Christian societies. However, we contend that aggressive recruitment has not ceased during Orientation Week; students have always been aggressively recruited into the student drinking culture during this time through peer pressure. If societies are allowed a larger presence during Orientation Week, they can show that there are viable social alternatives to the drinking culture, and they can show students in special interest groups, including students of faith, that their beliefs and interests are valued in the university space. This would demonstrate that our institution not only tolerates, but celebrates diversity and is committed to creating spaces for individual flourishing.

5. Partnering with the community

The university acknowledges community engagement as a pillar of academic activity. At the beginning of 2017, the Vice-Chancellor, Dr Sizwe Mabizela, held a very constructive meeting with representatives

of civil society from Grahamstown / eRhini. The majority of these people were representatives of local churches in our city. As a network of Christian societies, student ministries and staff members on campus, we have a wide variety of links to many of these local churches, which in turn run a proliferation of community upliftment projects in our city. For this reason, Christians @ Rhodes has the potential to be a vital link between the university and these churches and faith-based projects. We would be honoured to assist Rhodes University Community Engagement and other divisions of the university in forging mutually beneficial relationships between university bodies and these churches and community projects.

Conclusion

Christians @ Rhodes is proud to be part of our university at this moment in its history, and we want to encourage and support the university's efforts at transformation wherever they uphold the values of truth and morality discussed in this submission. We are praying regularly for the university and in our own spheres of influence are working toward this type of transformation on a daily basis. We would be delighted to contribute further this transformation process by engaging with the rest of the university community on matters relating to transformation, including but not limited to the ones raised in this submission. We are committed to the transformation of this university!

Contact details

To contact Christians @ Rhodes or engage with us regarding this submission, please send an email to both of the following addresses:

Ian Siebörger (Chairperson, Christians @ Rhodes Board of Advisors): ian.sieborger@ru.ac.za

Kayla Mizen (Chairperson, Christians @ Rhodes Impact Team): car.chairperson@gmail.com