

November 8, 2011

Mr. Mark F. Dalton, Chair
Vanderbilt University Board of Trust
305 Kirkland Hall
Nashville, Tennessee 37240

Dear Chairman Dalton and Members of the Vanderbilt Board of Trust:

The Southern Baptist Ethics & Religious Liberty Commission, the National Association of Evangelicals, and the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops are deeply concerned that Vanderbilt University has abandoned its longstanding tradition of religious tolerance. Compelling religious student groups to forfeit their ability to have leaders who share the groups' religious beliefs is antithetical to religious liberty. We therefore urge the University to return to its time-honored commitment to religious diversity and pluralism by again respecting religious groups' leadership decisions.

A University cannot aspire to promote religious diversity on campus while instituting a policy that religious groups cannot expect their leaders to share their religious convictions and lead religious studies, prayer, and worship from that perspective. How can religious diversity exist if a Christian group must allow Hindu students to lead its worship, or a Jewish group must allow Christian students to lead its study of the Torah?

Yet the University claims to have adopted just such a policy. In an email to the Christian Legal Society's student president, dated August 9, 2011, the University criticized the venerable practice of religious groups requiring their leaders to agree with the groups' basic beliefs, and declared that "Vanderbilt's policies do not allow any student organization to preclude someone from a leadership position based on religious belief." Remarkably, the University further stated that a religious group's mere expectation that its officers should be able to lead its Bible study, prayer, or worship, also violated University policy.

A religious group obviously organizes itself around specific religious beliefs in order to promote those beliefs and, for that reason, must take into account its leaders' commitment to its core religious beliefs. Leaders necessarily express and model the group's religious tenets, whether through worship, prayer, the study of scriptures, or service to others. Leaders often speak on the group's behalf to the University community.

The University seems to have abandoned a common sense interpretation of its nondiscrimination policy for an unnecessarily draconian interpretation that harms the very religious students the policy is intended to protect. Indeed, it would seem that the University violates its own nondiscrimination policy by prohibiting religious student organizations from having leadership requirements that reflect their religious viewpoints, while allowing nonreligious student groups to have leadership requirements that reflect their nonreligious viewpoints.

For these reasons, we respectfully ask that Vanderbilt University reaffirm its tradition of religious tolerance and, once again, respect religious student groups' ability to choose their leaders according to the groups' sincerely held religious beliefs.

Sincerely,



Leith Anderson, President
National Association of Evangelicals



Dr. Richard Land, President
Southern Baptist Ethics
& Religious Liberty Commission



Anthony R. Picarello, Jr., General Counsel
United States Conference
of Catholic Bishops