

## EDUCATING TO CREATE JUST COMMUNITIES THAT COUNTER OPPRESSIONS

### is a priority in our educational work

As a theological school, educating in a world blessed with resources of beauty, grace, resistance, and transformation and marked by intersecting forms of violence and injustice, we have made Educating to Create Just Communities that Counter Oppression a priority. The following statement summarizes our vision and hope and serves as a guiding document in our work.

#### 1. "To be what we want to see."

Former chair of Starr King's board, Rev. Rosemary Bray McNatt has asked, "How [can] we teach authentically about creating the beloved community [unless we can] model it within our own walls?"

We recognize that we teach by how we are. We seek to embody just and loving human community, in which people are free to be fully themselves, in which people engage one another in respectful, welcoming ways, and in which no one is rejected, silenced, or exploited because of gender, race, sexual orientation, age, class, or physical character.

We seek to claim the possibilities always present in life: that we will meet one another in love. We seek to affirm rather than break bonds of intimate connection, interdependence, and relationship that are the givens of our existence. We seek to "be with one another, as we are with ourselves, as we are with the ground of all relating, which some call God," in the words of Robert Kimball.

To keep faith with this desire requires us to recognize that we strive to love one another and to be just, even as our lives have already been affected by violence, oppressions, and injustice. We have been victims in some contexts, and in others, perpetrators or complicit bystanders.

To be what we want to see involves us in the work simultaneously of *recovery* from oppression, and of *conversion* -- amending our lives and seeking to restore right relationships when we have been complicit with violence, or have actively perpetuated oppressions. It also means deepening our capacity to be honest, direct, and present to one another.

#### 2. "To shelter prophetic witness in the world."

We seek to embrace, support, and promote the religious leadership, vision, and wisdom of prophetic people of all genders, who bring to the human community experiences and knowledge that the dominant culture has ignored or silenced. We affirm that such

knowledge is present among those often excluded from theological education and from institutionally recognized offices of religious leadership.

We intentionally and pro-actively support the religious leadership of people of color, of euro-american women, and of transgender and queer people of all colors because of the importance of the witness of their experience and the gift of their religious insight.

In attending to the "precincts not heard from," the human community may discover wisdom that can lead us beyond the present patterns of oppression and violence towards one another and the earth.

*"We are affirming the knowledge and vision from people of color, sexual minorities, and women that holds promise for the creative transformation of our culture.*

*Religious leadership in our time is coming from people who are capable of being present to suffering without turning away; people whose own life experience has taught them that it is possible to cross thresholds and survive; people who are willing to be authentically themselves when others wish to silence them; people whose presence inspires, challenges, surprises, and calls forth strength from others; people who give themselves to the work of mending the world, and are themselves grounded in love."*

Starr King Journal, Spring, 1996

*"We envision theological education that includes engagement with culturally diverse values and life experiences, including those of people whose economic circumstances, lack of education, sexual orientation, and racial characteristics mark them as less valued by culturally dominant groups. This engagement must take place to add freshness to the questions, to deepen caring, and to create just community."*

Starr King Educational Planning Committee, February, 1993

### 3. "To counter white supremacy."

We seek to resist the perpetuation of cultural and institutional patterns in which the well-being of 'whites' is assumed, often unconsciously or uncritically, to be of greater importance than the well-being of *all*; and in which the well-being of whites is achieved through ignoring, oppressing, or exploiting the lives of others.

People of color have resisted white supremacy in many ways. Communities of color teach patterns of resistance. Each person who survives oppression has found and moved along a path of resistance.

Those who 'were never meant to survive' but *have* survived, extend to the larger human community the wisdom and ways, options and opportunities, sounds and rhythms of resistance and survival. Such people make their lives a gift of authentic presence and witness.

Members of the dominant society often miss the opportunity for fuller human meeting. To become more fully present and engaged, we must all engage in the work of seeing how white identity has been constructed in narcissistic ways. An embrace of fuller humanness relinquishes self-centered needs, arrogance, and self-serving patterns, and contributes to fresh possibilities for just and sustainable community.

Members of the dominant society must accept responsibility for this religious task, without depending on people of color to be 'the mirror that talks back' and makes whites visible in their ignorance, thoughtlessness, or denial. At the same time, genuine and transformative human encounter happens when people are willing to speak the truth in love to one another and are open to being confronted.

White supremacy reveals a spiritual crisis at the heart of the dominant culture. Over-consumption and exploitation are hidden and tolerated for the sake of a quality of life that is neither abundant nor sustainable. Engaging white supremacy involves discovering a deeper experience of abundant life. This discovery, in turn, means confronting and changing social systems, including economic systems, that perpetuate too banal a sense of 'the good life', making it available to too few and causing harm to too many and to the earth.

#### 4. "To work for the common good."

We seek to advance liberation, healing, and the establishment of a just and sustainable society by enabling people to gain the knowledge, experience, skill, and religious understanding they need to address intersecting forms of violence in North America and around the world.

This means our courses and sites of learning need to provide students of theology with opportunities, *for example*, to:

- explore various options, theories, and practices of resistance/liberation/social analyses and transformation
- critique theological norms and patterns that undergird racial violence, gender violence, violence against the earth, etc.
- discover, re-imagine and construct liberating theological visions
- gain literacy beyond the 'white canon'
- learn the histories of resistance and struggle against oppressions, as well as the histories of violence and oppressions
- critically examine the assumptions and foundations of our current, dominant economic system, which sustains the wealth of too few, and is historically

aligned with a construction of race and racial hierarchy that justifies exploitation and stratifies wealth by race and gender

- draw on learning and experience in one area of resistance (for example, resistance to sexism) to make common cause with another (for example, resistance to racism)
- engage directly with oppressed communities and suffering people in the work of survival and resistance
- explore ways congregations and religious institutions can promote the common good

In our pedagogy and educational philosophy, work in ways that:

- trust in an empowering and liberating grace larger than ourselves
- call forth and welcome the full, authentic presence of people
- welcome silenced knowledge, feeling, experience;
- undergird human wholeness, integrity, interdependence, and agency
- foster self-awareness and self-respect
- strengthen relational capacities and the ethics of community
- deepen knowledge and wisdom arising from engagement with primary texts and primary experience
- embody an ongoing practice of inquiry, study, action, and reflection.

(Note: Rebecca Parker, President of Starr King School, prepared this statement in 1996. The statement is based primarily on work done by the Board of Trustees during a 1992-1995 project of theological education with the Board, led by the Long Range Educational Planning Committee. During that project, students, faculty, trustees, graduates, invited guests and consultants considered the mission and vision of the School. Subsequent public statements of the School, as well as the board and faculty conversations, informed the statement. The faculty and the Board reviewed and reflected on the statement during the 1996-1997 year. During Fall, 1998, the faculty voted to establish the “Educating to Counter Oppressions Committee” with this statement as the working document to which we seek to hold ourselves accountable. In the fall of 2005, the ECO Steering Committee edited the document further.)