

February 20, 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 are writing this open letter to respectfully request that you reconsider the retention of Charlie Rose's honorary degree. We would like to add our voices to those of the student trustees, in their original petition to the university Regents, and the voices of the tenured faculty of the School of Theology. We fully endorse the points made in their letters (for Theology letter, see <https://www.episcopalcafe.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/Sewanee-Fac-Ltr-Re-Rose-Degree-Feb-19-2018.pdf>). We would also like to thank the Honorary Degree Committee for creating a forum for faculty comments and also for recognizing that some faculty may wish to contribute to this process anonymously.

Although we acknowledge, as these parties have, that there are many difficulties presented by such a decision, we would like to present to you the case based on current thinking in the fields of criminal justice and victim advocacy.

Much of the impetus behind the #metoo and #timesup movements has emerged from victims and allies willing to go on the record and speak the truth about sexual harassment and violence. Many have risked a great deal to come forward with their stories, and the impact of the current moment is almost entirely based on victims' willingness to go on the record. We would like to particularly acknowledge the student trustees, Claire Brickson (C'18) and Mary Margaret Murdock (C'19), for their courage in pursuing the honorable course of action. Thus, we would also like to go on the record with our concerns regarding this decision.

The Theology faculty have spoken eloquently on church text and tradition and the guidance it provides, certainly far more eloquently than we might. We would like to add that the position taken in the letter of response to the student trustees is not consistent with current best practices in criminal justice or advocacy.

There is a place for forgiveness in the secular systems of justice. The restorative justice movement focuses on helping to return all members of a community to a state of well-being after a crime, instead of primarily focusing on punishment. This week, Bishop Tutu's daughter, Thandeka Tutu-Gxashe, is visiting campus, and South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission is a well-known example of a justice process that includes a prominent role for the possibility of forgiveness in the aftermath of violence.

However, this is a process that starts with, as the name of the South African commission suggests, truth. Although Charlie Rose released a statement with a brief apology, he also minimized and denied the incidents and tried to re-frame them as pursuit of mutual romantic interests. These sorts of minimizations are further harms in and of themselves, not any true form

of restorative justice or restitution. It is worth quoting briefly from the account provided by Kyle Godfrey-Ryan. She worked for Rose in the mid-2000s, and she “recalled at least a dozen instances where Rose walked nude in front of her while she worked in one of his New York City homes. He also repeatedly called the then-21-year-old late at night or early in the morning to describe his fantasies of her swimming naked in the Bellport pool as he watched from his bedroom, she said.” (note Rose would have been in his 60s at the time) (https://www.washingtonpost.com/investigations/eight-women-say-charlie-rose-sexually-harassed-them--with-nudity-groping-and-lewd-calls/2017/11/20/9b168de8-caec-11e7-8321-481fd63f174d_story.html?utm_term=.554144a17c93). These and other incidents are not accidental overtures in circumstances that might be reasonably expected to be received positively. This is systematic victimization of people over whom he had considerable authority, and whose responses could have a profound negative impact on their livelihoods.

Minimization, denial, and blame are the key tools that perpetrators use to get away with abuse and to avoid any punishment for abuse. Yes, Charlie Rose might some day be forgiven, but it is inappropriate to forgive him while he continues to invalidate the accounts of these women and deny the full truth of what he has done.

We would also like to address the issue of “due process” that has been brought up in many recent discussions regarding this emerging reckoning. Due process is one of our most important legal rights, but it refers to the death penalty, imprisonment, the confiscation of property, and other government-imposed penalties. Due process does not necessarily require a standard of “beyond a reasonable doubt,” even in courts, which often use a “preponderance of evidence” standard for civil cases. Certainly, Sewanee should not attempt to imprison Charlie Rose. However, it is perfectly appropriate for Sewanee to rely on the preponderance of evidence in determining who Sewanee honors. This push back against disclosures, by calling for a higher and higher bar to be met before even the most minor social (not legal) consequences can be imposed, is an instrument of oppression meant to silence victims.

Our first obligation is to protect our community and our students. It is imperative that we create a safe, accessible space for all students, which is a Title IX obligation as well as the core value on which our institution is founded. By refusing to revoke this honorary degree, then we communicate that the harassment of women is less important than having a TV show. We communicate that the harassment of women is less important than celebrity. We communicate that the harassment of women is less important than avoiding acknowledging that our institution made an innocent mistake, based on the imperfect information that was available at the time.

Charlie Rose is not a role model for our students. He does not deserve the esteem of faculty, staff, or alumni. He is a serial predator who used his position of power to harm others, thinking only of himself and the indulgence of his desires. We know from decades of research that these harms have lasting physical and psychological consequences that often extend over decades.

We end with the same request made by the student trustees and by the theology faculty, that Sewanee demonstrates that our institution and our community respects the dignity of every human being and that all members of this community, including the honored ones among us, meet this same standard of behavior.

In community,

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