

Some thoughts on Michael Andres' "A Call for Clarity and Vision"

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1. Michael Andres suspects that "*an aggregate number*" or "*a significant number*" of NWC faculty are neither Reformed nor Evangelical. He contends that we should do "*careful research*" whether this is the case, though he leaves it unspecified what "an aggregate number" might be...two ? many? a majority? everyone but Michael? He also contends that if this is the case we should do something to rectify the situation, presumably to change current hiring and tenuring policies or, failing that, at least to be honest about this departure from what he regards as the college's tradition.

2. I find the claim that anything less than the overwhelming majority of NWC faculty are Reformed or Evangelical incredible, as well as divisive. Almost every faculty member whose beliefs I know anything about not only believes all nine of the defining assertions, but takes them of the first importance in their lives, teaching and scholarship. It is fair to say that a significant number of faculty would not interpret some of the concepts that appear in Michael's definition of "Reformed" (*sovereign, electing, covenanting*) in the Reformed way, but surely most of these colleagues are paradigmatically evangelicals.

3. Drawing on the Faculty Handbook, Michael examines the college's policy on the hiring of faculty who are not Reformed. He points out that faculty from other theological traditions are expected to be supportive of and sympathetic to the mission of the college. Michael's interpretation of this doesn't seem plausible to me. He appears to read the Handbook as requiring that "*a faculty member of this college should be in broad approval of Reformed theology,*" where in the context "approval of" means "believing." But that leaves us with the policy that we can hire non-Reformed persons just so long as they believe in Reformed theology. That seems far from a reasonable construal. I suggest that it means something like thinking that a Christian liberal arts college in the Reformed tradition is a worthy idea and being willing and able to work cooperatively with colleagues who are Reformed even if one's own theological views are different.

4. Michael's call for honesty and clarity in how Northwestern describes itself is laudable. In his automotive mereological analogy, Michael points out that it would be a mistake to call a car a Honda Accord when it has a hood from a Jeep, a Humvee roof, a Chevy bumper, and so on. Rightly so. But the analogy can mislead. Whether the car has the right combination of parts to count as a Honda Accord doesn't matter when it comes to its worth as a car; what matters is whether it has the right combination of parts for doing whatever it is supposed to do. The vehicle Michael imagines might be the best vehicle for getting us where we want to go. If it is, it would be a mistake to reject it because it doesn't belong in an established category.

5. The Board of Trustees recently articulated an alternative policy on some of the matters Michael addresses, stating that "*it is important to maintain a significant Reformed presence within the faculty, ideally across the disciplines*" and that "*it is possible, even desirable, to hire and welcome some persons who are not Reformed - both 'ecumenical' and 'evangelical' Christians.*" Perhaps to some this looks like a "*failure to formulate, articulate and apply a*

coherent and clear theological identity [that] will do immeasurable harm to the life of this academic institution,” but there is nothing incoherent in trying to be the sort of college the Board endorses, not if this is what best serves the college's mission. The Trustee's vision for Northwestern is more complex and difficult than either the theological uniformity that is the norm at most Christian colleges or some sort of vague “generic” Christianity. The policy poses a number of definitional questions, e.g. what counts as a *significant* Reformed presence? The gloss some of us received on the policy defined “Reformed” in terms of “*accepting and following*” the Reformed confessions, but how is this to be understood? Not, I hope, in so narrow a way as to by stipulation excise from the ranks of the Reformed many who regard themselves as such. And what is an “ecumenical” Christian, anyway? Given the prevailing evangelical ethos of the college are we really prepared to hire serious Christians who are not evangelicals? There are plenty of questions, but overall the Board's statement is an excellent articulation that is, I believe, true to the history of the college and one we can rally around today. Reformed theology best creates a framework within which Christians from a wide range of backgrounds can work together to profess Jesus Christ in an academic setting; this is the wisdom of the policy spelled out by the Trustees.

6. When I was hired there was a prevalent account of what the Handbook means when it speaks of support for and sympathy with the Reformed mission of the college. NWC was happy to hire persons whose theological views are not Reformed so long as they possessed a “Reformed attitude” toward Christian higher education and could, because of that, be sympathetic to and supportive of the college's mission. In practice, this criteriology typically was applied negatively: those who regarded Christian education as indoctrination, or as apologetics, or who saw a profound sacred/secular distinction that renders areas of study off limits for Christians, or who conceived the relation of faith to learning in moralistic terms, or who endorsed a fundamentalist separatism, or who adopted a narrow anti-cultural form of Christian faith, or who saw rational inquiry as inimical to piety, or who accepted a compartmentalization that rendered it impossible for their faith and their disciplinary learning mutually to interact would not be a good fit for NWC irrespective of the character of their Christian faith on other dimensions. Such views were regarded as at odds with the college's mission conceived in terms of the robust integrative and transformative vision of God as both Redeemer and Creator that flows from the Calvinist tradition. Indeed, in theory, an individual lacking Reformed theological convictions even on the great soteriological truths might be a better candidate than one who formally endorsed every Reformed doctrine while lacking what could be called a “Reformed sensibility” toward Christian higher education. This implicit hiring policy made sense to me in virtue of its clear connection to the mission of the college. I think it still makes sense, and the vision reiterated by the Trustees exemplifies an ongoing commitment to it. The Board's statement envisions a college that has a unique, coherent and theologically principled identity.