

What I learned from our seminary's conflict about hosting Tim Keller

At times, the cost of theological diversity is painfully clear.

by [M. Craig Barnes](#) in the [August 16, 2017](#) issue



Alexander Hall at Princeton Theological Seminary. [Some rights reserved](#) by [Djkeddie](#).

I teach a course at our seminary on conflict. The first point I make in class is that the goal for leaders of congregations is not to avoid inevitable conflicts but to seek transformation through them. And to learn along the way.

Last April our seminary made its way through a substantive controversy. The Kuyper Center on our campus offered its annual award to the Reverend Tim Keller as a way of affirming the success of his ministry. As the award winner, he was asked to be the keynote lecturer at the annual Kuyper Conference.

As soon as the award was announced, some students began protesting the center's plan to give this award to a leader of the Presbyterian Church in America because the PCA does not ordain women or LGBTQ+ individuals. We've had many other speakers on campus who represent denominations and religions that ordain only males, and we will again, but granting an award for excellence in Reformed theology took on a greater significance because of a deep wound among our divided Reformed churches.

Through social media and blogs, the voices of objection spread rapidly. As the president of the seminary it fell to me to remain in the eye of this storm, respond nonanxiously to the protests and petitions, and work with trustees and other seminary leaders to find the best way forward.

During the second of four thoughtful phone conversations with Keller, he and I decided we were both more interested in having him speak on campus than in granting or receiving the Kuyper Prize. So I announced that Keller would be giving his lecture on Lesslie Newbigin, but that Princeton was setting aside the award this year. It was an attempt to thread the needle of maintaining freedom of speech on campus without appearing to endorse views that diverge from the seminary's position about the important issues involving ordination in the Reformed churches.

At that point a second wave of protests and petitions developed, primarily through Facebook, blogs, and the op-ed pages of a few major newspapers. One headline insisted this was a snub to Keller. Others interpreted our action in the same way even though Keller had been a part of the decision. He could not have been more gracious through the whole episode, and he even took some heat from his side of the Reformed churches for agreeing to come to our campus in the first place.

Now that the dust has settled, we're asking ourselves what we've learned. One of the most profound insights is that local communities of faith have unique opportunities to resolve conflict. By the time the day for the lecture had come, the storm on campus had settled down to being one of many experiences in theological diversity. That's because as a residential community we could talk our way through

this critical issue face-to-face. The senior administrators and I met with everyone who wanted to express a concern. More importantly, people who disagreed spoke with each other.

This accountability to a community is what's missing in social media, and why the fire that jumped the road around campus continued to burn after the seminary itself had found its way forward.

Some of our students organized a helpful Preach In event in our chapel that featured the voices of women and LGBTQ+ preachers. Students scheduled this for the hour before the lecture to allow people to attend both events. There were no demonstrations. Keller gave his lecture to 600 people and stayed for almost two hours greeting people, including some who participated in the Preach In event.

Another thing we learned is how important—and sometimes tenuous—is a sense of belonging. I heard from students and alumni who expressed the worry: “I’m not sure I still belong here.” I lost count of how many times I carefully explained that our community is centered in Christ. We all belong to him. If we are clear about that, we don’t have to worry about the boundaries because the center will always hold. So you can disagree with a speaker on campus about an important issue, or a decision the administration makes, but that doesn’t mean you don’t still belong. Theological diversity is meaningless if we all agree.

It wasn’t lost on us that this controversy flared at a time when many are anxious about the direction in which the country is moving. Our school is not moving to the left or the right, but at times the cost of theological diversity becomes painfully clear. That cost was at the heart of this controversy. If we are all true to our personal convictions and our commitment to being centered only in Christ, this won’t be our last controversy. This is one of the ways seminaries serve the church: we’re supposed to be an arena for controversy.

Still another insight from this controversy is that seminaries aspiring to theological diversity need to think through the wisdom of giving out awards to any church leaders. Just learning from them is closer to our mission. Besides, as my 88-year-old mother told me, “The crowns are supposed to wait until heaven. And then we give them to Jesus.”

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