

Summary of Community Conference On-Screen Participant Comments From Final Report by Dr. David Hooker and Dr. Allen Hilton

The lists below record the elements this wide community identified as the dominant narrative in the CTS community.

Core Issues There are additional materials in the Becoming CTS archive, which include results of menti-meter and word clouds. This additional material can be accessed through Becoming CTS website storage*

These individual descriptions by participants paint the foundational elements of life and culture in the CTS community that lie behind manifest behavior.

- o A lack of trust between and among administration, faculty, students
- o Symbolic Reminders of White Space
- o A History of Affirming and Supporting the Enslavement of Humans
- o The Historical Legacy of Southern Christianity
- o Program design (curriculum, internships, theology) structured to support students interested in serving in “Tall Steeple” Southern White Churches with limited resources and imagination to assist those interested in alternative ministry placements
- o Anxiety and Precariousness from many different perspectives, those who think change is happening too fast, those who fear it is not happening at all or not fast enough
- o Feelings of Elite-ness and Chose-ness among Presbyterian students faculty and administrators
- o Settler Connection and Orientalism

Manifestations of That Core

The participants also named the manifestation of those foundational narrative forces that they see in attitudes and behaviors on campus.

- ☞ ○ Defensiveness of Status Quo Stakeholders
 - Intentional and Unintentional Slights against Black Members of the Community (Microaggressions)
 - Feelings of Isolation among Black Members of the Community
 - Vestiges of the Old Boy Network
 - A Sensed Obligation among Black Students to Sacrifice Dignity for the Sake of Harmony
 - Expectation That Black Members Must “Educate” or “Serve” or “Adapt”
 - Recent Resurgence of Presbyterian Superiority and Pride
 - Lack of Transparency
 - Black Students Feel “Invisibilized”
 - Rate of Change toward Inclusion Raises Anxiety
 - Black Members Adopt Survival Mode
 - Relationships That Cross Identity Boundaries Can Feel Awkward
 - Getting Lumped in by Assumption Because of Identities (e.g., Theology Assumed to Be Progressive)
 - Awareness/Feelings of Being Watched or Conspicuous
 - Limited Financial Support for Urban or Multiracial Church Internships
 - The Invisibility of Staff
 - Rage
 - Performative Culture with No Action or Follow-Through
 - Poor Communication

Second-Level Outcomes

One step further along, the participants named patterns of behavior that have formed in the CTS community as a result of the foundational narratives and the specific actions and attitudes that pop up on campus.

- o Academic and Cultural Contributions of Black (and Other Minority) Members Undervalued and Left on the Periphery.
 - o Conformity to White Expectations
 - o No Process for Resolution
 - o Culture Stays the Same without Letting New Populations Impact CTS Identity
 - o Quieting/Order as a Priority
 - o Paradigm of Scarcity as Cause of Competition between Minority Groups
 - o Perceived Absence of Space to Reconstruct Presented Theologies to Fit Liberative Alternatives
 - o Lack of Transparent Decision Making
 - o Limited Infrastructure to Provide Care or support in the midst of changing culture - these seems to be an assumption that every one embraces the changes and is ready to make them
 - o Distrust in Admin as Incompetent - These critiques are experienced/Perceived as being racialized and misogynistic
 - o Deeply Infused with Presbyterian Values, Language, Symbols, Relationships
 - o Rigidity Against Interdisciplinary Projects that Grow Out of Cultural Difference
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- o Unequal access to beneficial relationships between and among faculty and students to some the unequal distribution has a racial character. Because of the high value on relationships, this inequality directly impacts possibility for denominational success
 - o A Failure to Recognize the Infusion of Black Culture as an Opportunity by the Spirit to Change CTS Identity in a Positive Way
 - o Inequitable Housing Policies for Faculty
 - o Faculty Retention Suffers
 - o Student Satisfaction Suffers from a Growing Distrust Consolidation of Power in Board and President
 - o Gap Between Seminary and Church on Pace of Reaching/Addressing These Issues Produces Static for Congregational Support of the Initiatives
 - o Inability to Address Exhaustion That Is Based on Being Both an Academic and Acting in Acting in CTS and the World
 - o Inability to Sustain Focus on Black Questions Due to Discomfort with Centering This Question (As Opposed to Other Marginal Groups on Campus) Produces Annoyance and Frustration with a Non-Black Ally to Recenter
 - o Pain Associated with Faculty Dismissals
 - o The Expectation That Black Staff and Students will Comply and Bee “Good Black Persons”
 - o Non-Inclusive Spaces (Chapel Service, REFECTORY)
 - o Frustration That We Are Still Talking about This
 - o No Process for Resolution of Conflict

Mapping the Counternarrative:

A smaller, but nonetheless critical, second goal of the caucuses was to identify the “counternarrative” on race, the elements of CTS culture that work against the grain of the dominant narrative. This counter narrative identification is to recognize that not every aspect of the CTS context is problematic as it relates to issues of race, belonging, and flourishing. Near the end of each caucus, the participants were asked to imagine that a friend or someone else they liked had been offered a job or admission at CTS and asked them, “What is the story of CTS?” Their honest answers offered a second, smaller supply of data often, though not always, featured encouraging and hopeful elements of the racial dynamics of CTS. This part of the conversation further thickened the description of CTS culture and supplied the starting point, on which the TCC participants expanded considerably, for describing the counternarrative.

As part of the counternarrative caucus participants identified the following features of CTS:

- o “Most Diverse Seminary You’ll Find” (One Student’s Observation)
- o Aware of Paradox and Complications
- o Professors and Administrators Reaching Out and Intentional about Meeting Needs
- o People Succeed against the Odds
- o Students, Faculty, and Staff
- o Appreciation of God’s Changing Church and World
- o Good Conversations
- o Culture Includes Interior Work
- o A Good Context for Difficult Conversations Re: Race
- o Multiple Languages, Musical Genres in Chapel
- o Good at Preparing Some Types of Pastor
- o Soul to Seoul
- o Intellectually Challenging Learning Environment
- o Students Given Opportunities to Lead (Conference and Other Ways) and a Freedom for Other Forms of Participation
- o Willing to Measure Change and Hold CTS Accountable beyond Performativity
- o Worship Life Becoming Inclusive of All Voices
- o Willingness to Be Accountable to the Process of Change
- o Change is Good for All Constituencies
- o African American, Womanist, Decolonial Scholars Free to Do Their Own Mark
- o CTS Living into the Global Church
- o CTS’s Several-Year Engagement with Race Issues

Among the aspects of CTS community life that made the issues identified in the outer core possible (middle ring)

- o Lament Is Happening
- o Student, Faculty, Staff, and Alumni Insistence on Raising Racial Justice Questions
- o Members of CTS Community Have a Heart to Do the Right Thing.
- o Desire to Transform Identity
- o Vision to Initiate Transformative Community Conferencing Process
- o Recognition by New Staff of What is Already Moving and Turning
- o Turmoil as a Good Sign
- o Vision about CTS Becoming National and International (Less Regional) Seminary
- o High Aspirations
- o PCUSA Wrestling with Its Own Legacy of Racial Injustice
- o A General 2020- National Referendum on Racial Injustice
- o Trusted Friendships
- o Dedication of Campus Building to Dr. Riggs
- o Common Texts
- o Seeking Permission to Change Old Ways
- o Non-White Faculty, Staff, and Admin Recently Hired
- o Kindness and an Atmosphere of Hospitality
- o Deep Financial Resource Pool
- o A Common Language
- o A Habit of Leading with Care in Learning Environment
- o Hope

At the core of CTS that served to undergird all of the outer two rings were the existence of:

- o Deep Traditions to Draw On
- o Deep Reserve of Multi-Generational Black Presbyterian Community
- o World Class and Diverse Faculty
- o Geographic Location in Atlanta Area
- o High Relationship Culture (Moreso Pre-Covid)
- o Belief that God is in This Process
- o Awareness of the Historical Legacy
- o Kindness and an Atmosphere of Hospitality
- o Deep Financial Resource Pool
- o A Common Language
- o A Habit of Leading with Care in Learning Environment
- o Hope

Going Forward

The ultimate purpose for the TCC was for participants from across the CTS community to decide what future they preferred together and then identify how to live toward that future. In order to drive home the significance of that community decision, participants were polled as to whether they would prefer a future driven by the identified dominant narrative, or a future formed by the counternarrative. After some brief confusion about whether the question concerned what IS or what OUGHT TO BE, the gathered community voted overwhelmingly to do the work that would build life in community at CTS according to the counternarrative.

To guide the conversations about what attitudes and actions would effectively maintain the dominant narrative and what attitudes and actions could transform it, four specific elements of community life were identified as essential to the formation and transformation of culture:

- o Relationships
- o Resources
- o Structure
- o Testimonial Authority

How to Continue Life under the Dominant Narrative

In order to illustrate the importance and difficulty of consciously embracing and working toward the counternarrative, participants were asked briefly to describe what steps would perpetuate the status quo.

Relationships

The brief, sticky-note-length descriptions below point to how to pattern the community's personal and group relationships in order to resist transformative progress.

- o Silence dissenting voices
- o Dismiss others as binary (e.g., reactive, apathetic)
- o Fear all conflict.
- o Keep being defensive.
- o Stay silent
- o Refuse to accept the experiences of others.
- o Only take classes from white professors or professors who agree with me.
- o Limit relationships to people within one's language group.
- o Only build relationships with people who are like-minded to me.
- o Only get to know faculty and students "like me".
- o Not give people the benefit of the doubt because they've disappointed me in the past.
- o Communicate by e-mail instead of person to person.
- o Let my own biases dominate my hearing.
- o Keep conversations limited to those in affinity groups. (Student to student, faculty to faculty.)
- o Continue only with current relationships – none in community except one faculty.
- o Continue reactivity.
- o Continue performative change rather than real change.
- o Not participate in campus community activities.
- o Build transactional relationships.
- o Keep siloed conversations going.
- o Not work to develop new relationships.

Resources

Participants also imagined how the community could steward resources in ways that perpetuate the dominant narrative.

- o Set needs of others as implicit threat against our own resources.
- o Don't see Reformed theology and Presbyterian history as a resource.
- o Only look to Presbyterian resources for financial support.
- o Don't spent time/money on continuing IDP process.
- o Trust in scarcity.
- o Think of resources only in terms of current needs without connecting them to the future vision/possibilities.
- o No scholarship/supervised ministry stipend opportunities for those who are not already resourced from "tall steeple churches" which reflects wide inequity of wealth as a result of policies, past and present.
- o Refuse to fund creative new initiatives
- o Imagine that the past was better.

Structure

Third, the group pictured the ways could prop up the dominant narrative through the way that it structures community life, learning, and administration.

- o Keep curriculum the same.
- o Maintain rigidity in the curriculum.
- o Not change our curriculum
- o Ignore the problem and hope it goes away (it won't)
- o Return to pre-pandemic [ways] post-pandemic
- o Keep the divisions of shared governance separate and isolated.
- o Keep the problem binary.
- o Continue to distrust administration (presumed incompetence, accusations of injustice)
- o Remain in position of defending system in place.
- o Be unwilling to accommodate what God is doing by insisting on my current privilege and power.
- o Refuse to decenter my white heteronormative experience.
- o Maintain provincial focus.
- o Not further diversify the board.
- o Fail to advocate ordination changes with PC(USA)
- o Don't accept invitations to participate in community changes as an alumnus.
- o Stop collaborating.
- o Continue to marginalize staff.
- o No changes to seminary by-laws – keep shared government hierarchical.

Testimonial Authority

Finally, the group considered whose voices CTS culture currently grants the right to be heard and how that distribution of authority could be maintained toward stasis.

- o Continue to center my white heteronormative experience.
- o Redirect conversations when I'm uncomfortable.
- o Narrow understanding of "stakeholder"
- o Try to fix every problem when it's mentioned rather than letting people express and lament together.
- o Remain silent and don't center black voices and black experiences.
- o Keep thinking Presbyterian voices = White voices
- o Continue prioritizing white Presbyterian voices.
- o Refuse to learn from emerging scholars who are PIPOC
- o I could stop learning.
- o Celebrate theologians of CTS history out of context.
- o Fail to recognize other models of leadership offered by the Spirit.
- o Imagine that the past was better.

While no one of these actions individually could maintain the dominant narrative, taken in some combination these are actions that the TCC participants identified as making it more likely than not that the old way of being CTS would prevail.

How to Live into a Shared, Preferred Future

Next the participants shifted gears to identify quite a number of steps that could be taken in support of the preferred narrative. These might include:

Relationships

Participants were asked what ways of being in community together could usher in the counternarrative/preferred narrative. Here are their responses.

- o Continue giving people the benefit of the doubt even when they disappoint me.
- o Schedule board, faculty, student forums.
- o Facilitate intercultural dialogue on campus.
- o Respect one another
- o Develop real, honest relationships with people who are different from us.
- o Not only understand the value of diversity, but also have/seek knowledge about other cultures and their origin
- o Attend events!
- o Give grace for mistakes.
- o Self-differentiation: understand family systems and our/my role in various systems
- o Continue to build trust and respect across lines of difference.
- o Be transparent.
- o Treat all people as individual vs group members.
- o Practice communal lament.
- o Celebrate AA scholarships and tuition funding without griping or harboring jealousy.
- o Further diversify the board

Resources

What distribution of community resources would support transformation toward the preferred narrative?

- o Use all our human resources well.
- o Share the lessons of “To Count Our Days” during orientation sessions.
- o Connect to leaders in the wider religious and theological movements.
- o Celebrate AA scholarships and tuition funding without griping or harboring jealousy.
- o Have open discussions about Presbyterian history and identity as both a problem and a resource.
- o Provide adequate pastoral support for all students.
- o Support faculty efforts to learn and grow without shaming.
- o Develop policies that empower.
- o Learn the history of prior CTS reformations/major changes.
- o Create new donors from a broad constituency
- o Annual shared book reading and discussion for board, faculty, staff, students.
- o Use non-academic expertise: spiritual directors, coaches on staff/faculty.
- o Develop funds that attach to a new vision.
- o Provide resources with their own language (?) [Within students’/staff’s/faculty member’s own language?]
- o Diversify funding sources.
- o Continued investments in programs focused on implicit bias training.
- o Conduct a diversity and equity audit of course syllabi for every course offering in the program

Structure

How could the way community CTS orders its life, learning, and administration to support the counternarrative?

- o Further diversify the board of Directors
- o Participate fully in revisioning/rebuilding.
- o Participate actively in practices of mutual accountability
- o Include staff representative on board.
- o Solicit archival donations that document experiences that have not been centered historically.
- o Keep diversifying the board.
- o Annual shared book reading and discussion for board, faculty, staff, students.
- o Adopt a philosophy of 'siblings before hierarchy.'
- o Review decision-making processes, to the furthest extent possible, disinvest central decision making authority and make decisions more transparent.
- o Encourage healthy institutional practices and practice/use them.
- o Take a long view – practice hope.
- o Approve African studies and Asian studies classes as fulfilling distribution requirements, rather than keep them as elective courses.
- o EDIC should be composed of all levels of the organization.
- o Keep asking why – question the structures
- o Encourage interdisciplinary collaboration
- o Create degree program pathways so core classes can vary
- o Shared governance that distinguishes advice from primary authority
- o Ensure alumni board represents broad diversity
- o Allow student government positions to count as seminary service.
- o Create degree program pathways so core classes can vary.
- o Spread out the responsibilities that currently fall under OSACL
- o Restore the function of KAM
- o Engage all stakeholders in decisions.
- o Engage the stakeholder in decision-making
- o Create faculty/Director small groups.
- o Commit to ongoing systems improvement.
- o Continue to assess curriculum
- o Create multilateral avenues of decision-making

Testimonial Authority

Whose voices need to be heeded by the community, if the preferred future is to ensue?

- o Seek other sources/read widely
- o Be curious
- o Have a few students introduce themselves to the board at each meeting.
- o Attend to the reality of damages that grievances cause before unpacking causes (but do both)
- o Listen, Understand, Act, Assess (Repeat)
- o Create space for lament, and listening even if all problems can't be solved.
- o Continue doing campus-wide "reads" or similar small group studies
- o Acknowledge white fragility and the resulting defensiveness that resists critique and change
- o Share non-PCUSA denominational history/trends
- o Create the cultural space for stories to be shared.
- o Look to leadership voices both within and beyond CTS.
- o Invite emerging scholars to lead.
- o Digitize church registries in the archive that include enslaved members – shifting their place in historical hierarchy, an opportunity to Offer the Names, Lead Church community in steps toward reconciliation.
- o Commit to listening with genuine desire to understand.
- o Participate actively in practices of mutual accountability
- o Include staff representative on board.
- o Solicit archival donations that document experiences that have not been centered historically.
- o Keep diversifying the board.
- o Annual shared book reading and discussion for board, faculty, staff, students.