

An Open Letter to Tennessee Legislators

To Those Tennessee Lawmakers calling for the dissolution of Diversity efforts within the UT system:

We, the undersigned, as Christian clergy, Tennessee taxpayers, and campus ministers at UTK are disappointed and frustrated by the erroneous claims that diversity at the University of Tennessee, particularly religious diversity, poses any threat to the religious freedom of students, faculty, and staff. By offering university departments suggestions on best practices for ensuring that all their faculty and staff, not just the Christians, feel respected during holiday festivities, the Office of Diversity functioned admirably. To suggest that a publicly funded office remain friendly to all employees is not at all extremist. In fact, such views are commonplace in corporations and places of business all over our nation. However, we do find your calls for the resignations of Chancellor Cheek and Diversity Vice Chancellor Hall (actions which disrupt the running of a university the size of a small city by threatening its administration, in the middle of finals no less) irresponsibly alarmist.

Individuals, families, friends, and churches should and do invite friends and colleagues to Christmas parties at their homes and places of worship. Public universities and university departments, however, should not. Public universities are publicly owned and thus literally the property of all Tennesseans, not just Christians. Consideration of employees' varied beliefs is a hallmark of professionalism. Responding to a perfectly reasonable request (not a mandate) that university end-of-year parties reflect university diversity as if it were an intrusion on any Christian's rights is inaccurate. Christians all around Tennessee celebrate Christmas freely. No one, certainly not Chancellor Cheek or the Office of Diversity at UT, is infringing on our rights. In fact, Chancellors Cheek and Hall are strong supporters of our rights, precisely by including us as Christians with those of other religions and those of non-religious belief, as people who should be welcomed together at an end-of-year party, without any of us being required or expected to participate as if we believed other than we do.

Moreover, UTK administration has a long history of cultivating a strong relationship with the UTK Campus Ministers Council, insisting that campus ministries are vitally important to student well-being and retention. Indeed, Vice Chancellor Vincent Carilli and Dean of Students Melissa Shivers are outspoken allies of campus ministry organizations, the vast majority of which are not only Christian, but also conservative evangelicals. Rest assured that Christians, be they student, faculty, or staff, are not in any way being punished or persecuted on the UTK campus.

Chancellor Cheek and Vice-Chancellor Hall are doing excellent work at a challenging time, and they deserve support and appreciation, not rebuke. Please retract your call for Chancellor Cheek's resignation and apologize to the public for making a mountain out of a perfectly serviceable molehill.

Grace and Peace in this Advent season,

The Rev. John Tirro, Tyson House Episcopal-Lutheran Campus Ministry, UT-Knoxville

Robin Lovett, Ministry Intern, Tyson House Episcopal-Lutheran Campus Ministry, UT-Knoxville

The Rev. Timothy Kobler, Wesley Foundation United Methodist Campus Ministry, UT-Knoxville

The Rev. Heather Godsey, Wesley Foundation United Methodist Campus Ministry, UT-Knoxville

Rev. Richard R. Andre, C. S. P., St. John XXIII Parish and Catholic Center, UT-Knoxville

Michaela Lawrence Jeffery, Advent House (UTK) Chaplain / Adventist Christian Fellowship (ACF) Director, UT-Knoxville