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May 7, 2021

Dr. Melissa Vanden Bout

VIA ELECTRONIC & U.S. MAIL

Dear Melissa,

I had hoped, anticipated, and expected to deliver this information first to you personally. As you know, I have tried repeatedly, through various means (emails and calls), to schedule a meeting with you for follow up of our meeting on April 30. These multiple efforts to meet with you have been unsuccessful. For various reasons, you seem unable or unwilling to meet with me today. Most recently, when I attempted yesterday to email you yet again for a meeting, I received an "Out of Office" message stating that "I will be out of the office and checking email sporadically over the break." This message is confusing and concerning, inasmuch as the semester is not yet complete, but I have to trust that you have completed your responsibilities for the semester before posting this message. In any event, I have come to the reluctant conclusion that I need to communicate the following information to you by letter in the first instance, although I still believe it would have been better to meet. Please know that I am willing to meet with you once you have had a chance to review this letter and consider its contents.

I am writing to follow up upon our meeting held on April 30, 2021, to discuss concerns and complaints that the College has received about the mode and manner of your public engagement and your conduct during discussions with colleagues. You and I attended the April 30 meeting, as did Dr. Aron Reppmann (Chair of the Philosophy Department) and Julia Foust (Director of Human Resources).

As you will recall, on April 28, 2021, you and I originally scheduled this meeting to be held on May 3, 2021. We accelerated the meeting to April 30 so we could discuss some recent communications of yours that I believe exemplified the concerns underlying my original request for a meeting and that were actively causing concern and distress for members of the campus community.

Julia Foust and I had hoped to meet in person or on video with you to further discuss the College's concerns. In lieu of that meeting, we instead need to share with you via letter the decision to non-renew your appointment and the reasons for this decision. This letter confirms what was discussed during our initial meeting and the reasons for the decision to non-renew your appointment.

Nature of the Concerns and Complaints:

As you know, reports have come to the attention of the College indicating that you have publicly communicated using vulgar, intimidating, and arguably threatening language – all of which are inconsistent with the professional standards of the Trinity Christian College faculty, your agreement with the College, and the College's Christian academic tradition and mission. These communications have also already undermined the reputation of the College with its wider community.

During our April 30 meeting, we discussed the following samples of your communications (with certain profane and/or vulgar words abbreviated from your original posts with “—”):

- *You tweeted, during a social media exchange about COVID 19 vaccines, **"F---k this Administration."***
- *You tweeted, during a social media exchange about a criminal prosecution, **"Context: white dude gets a pass after driving through BLM protestors because the f----ker thought he'd give them an 'attitude adjustment.'"***
- *You tweeted, during a social media exchange soliciting support for transgender individuals, **"Alright you transphobic bastards. When you attack my trans sisters, you attack me. And don't f--- around with my trans brothers or my NB siblings. I'll take it personal. As a cis woman my identity is not located in my uterus. I'm a woman on the same basis as my trans sisters are."***
- *You tweeted, during a social media exchange about police, **"F ---k the police."***
- *In another exchange about police, you wrote, **"Tell the gun-hard, wannabe Rambo, slave-catcher heirs, fascist enforcer types to stop j----king off to the fetid myth of the noble officer calmly staring down death every time he puts on the uniform . . ."***

In addition to the examples above, which we discussed on April 30, an additional example has recently been brought to my attention:

- *In a social media exchange about police violence, you wrote, **"[NAME REDACTED TO PRESERVE IDENTITY] is masturbating to the idea of police officers being constantly courageous and constantly in danger... So no, [NAME REDACTED]. You yanking off to some fever dream of manly courage is not permission for another murder."***

As also discussed during our April 30 meeting, a number colleagues have expressed concerns and lodged complaints about the mode and manner of your communication and concerns about intimidation or general hostility in engagement.

Again, I reiterate, as I stressed to you on April 30, that the concerns we sought to discuss with you relate to the mode and manner of your communication with others. The College is *not* focusing upon your personal political viewpoints. As you well know, Trinity is a distinctly Christian institution and has explicit requirements in its governing documents for its faculty toward that Christian mission. Within those foundational commitments, there is wide room for differences as to how Christianity informs a person's view of policies, politics, and complex topics.

Rather, the concerns that we have discussed, and that form the basis for the decision to non-renew your appointment, stem from your use of language in a manner that is vulgar, unprofessional, unbecoming of a faculty member, and intimidating. It is your modes of communication, not your political or other opinions, which implicate the professional standards applicable to you as a Trinity Christian College faculty member, impact the learning environment, and demonstrate your inability to reflect, promote, and advance the College's mission.

Your Response during our April 30 Meeting:

As I indicated at the beginning of our April 30 meeting, the purpose of meeting was to share with you the complaints and concerns about your communications that had come to the attention of the College. We were hoping to have a dialogue with you about whether your mode of communication conformed to acceptable professional standards for Trinity Christian College faculty, to attend to the way that mode of communication was impacting the learning and workplace environments, and to hear your perspectives.

Regrettably, no constructive dialogue on your part occurred. You did not acknowledge any personal responsibility for the way your speech impacts the learning and working experiences of others within the Trinity Christian College community. You also did not acknowledge, in spite of the internal-to-the-campus complaints, any possible relationship between your use of certain language and the ability or willingness of other Trinity employees – productively and without intimidation – to engage with you in the workplace. You also did not acknowledge possibility that your actions have been received as intimidating, un-collegial, or otherwise disruptive of the workplace and educational environment.

Disruptive, intimidating, and inappropriate modes of communication from faculty members raise not only operating but also very significant mission issues for the College. Trinity's Mission Statement, which is included as a part of the Faculty Handbook, provides, for example, that:

In keeping with a philosophy of education that is based upon these [Christian; liberal arts; reformed] principles, all members of the academic community – faculty, staff, and students – endeavor to provide an educational environment of Christian integrity and love that enhances and supports the entire learning experience.

Likewise, our commitment to academic freedom places upon faculty special obligations to consider the impact, both on the College community and on the reputation of the profession. This includes being scrupulous about avoiding speech that falls short of professional standards:

The respected position as a professor at Trinity imposes special obligations. The Trinity Christian College faculty member should remember that the public will tend to judge the profession and the institution by his/her utterances. Therefore, he/she should be accurate at all times, exercise proper restraint, and respect the right of others to express their opinions.

Faculty Handbook, Chapter 2.3.

These professional and mission-based standards for faculty are also infused into many other Faculty Handbook provisions that are relevant in analyzing your conduct, as well as into your agreement with the College. To cite just a few of the relevant Handbook provisions, Trinity Christian College faculty members, like other College employees, are directed to refrain from "sending or posting messages or material that could damage the institution's image or reputation." Faculty Handbook, Chapter 6.8.5.1. Faculty members also must refrain from conduct that is harassing or intimidating. Faculty Handbook, Chapter 6.18.

Your response during our meeting last week, coming from someone who has performed valuable service for the College over time, was deeply troubling to me, Melissa. I have thought a great deal about it since then. In particular, your unwillingness to acknowledge the impact, or even the potential for impact, of your behavior upon the College community is inconsistent with the expectation that a Trinity Christian College faculty member will communicate and interact in a collaborative, constructive fashion, particularly when we are discussing and resolving issues and differences. We model this for our students and community as educators and as Christians, particularly in a time when political polarization is pervasive and models for such engagement are few.

Non-Reappointment and Next Steps:

Our meeting last week sharpened, rather than alleviated, the College's reasonable concerns that you are acting in a manner inconsistent with College's professional standards and with our mission as teachers and as Christians. Moreover, the essential facts about the manner in which you have communicated are not in dispute, and your conduct was unquestionably inappropriate. As a result, and with regret, I have concluded that your conduct and your response during our April 30 meeting demonstrates that your current appointment, which expires as of August 15, 2021, should not be renewed. This constitutes formal, written notice of non-reappointment. In addition, and as I wish to have been able to discuss in an in-person meeting, given the nature of your conduct, we have determined that your employment responsibilities are completed as of the date of this letter. The College will continue to pay you, with benefits, through August 15. In addition, we will assign your contracted summer course to another faculty member but we will pay you the contracted amount. Finally, we will pay you the amount of the Collaborative Initiative Grant that you were awarded for summer work (\$500), though you will not participate in that grant.

Given the conduct at issue in this matter (which included inappropriate electronic communications), you will no longer have access to the College's computer networks or other IT resources, including your College e-mail account. You are not to remotely access Trinity technology resources (email, Brightspace, etc.) or have any contact with Trinity employees and students using those resources; we will place an "out of office" message on your College email address and students will be referred to your Chair for further information. In addition, you will not have access to campus and should not participate in any activities or operations of the College, including, but not limited to, Commencement or meetings of the Faculty Association. Your Chair will arrange for your classes to be covered for the remainder of the semester. If students or fellow employees contact you about anything other than purely personal matters, please forward all such emails to Julia Foust's attention so that we can make sure all outreach receives a response.

Melissa, I close by expressing my deep regret, again, that this decision proved necessary. I further regret that this was not communicated in person. I remain willing to discuss this with you once you have had a chance to review the letter. I note that it has been emailed both to your Trinity account and, because of the stipulations described above, to an alternate email account of yours that the College has on file. Under the Faculty Handbook, you have the right to appeal this determination using the procedure set forth in Chapter 2.10. You may address any questions about the appeal process or anything else to do with this matter to Julia Foust, Director of Human Resources, or to me.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Aaron J. Kuecker". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke at the end.

Aaron J. Kuecker, Ph.D.
Provost

c: Dr. Aron Reppmann, Chair, Philosophy Department
Julia Foust, Director, Human Resources