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From the President

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FROM THE PRESIDENT

"We are a religious people whose institutions presuppose a Supreme Being. We make room for as wide a variety of beliefs and creeds as the spiritual needs of man deem necessary. We sponsor an attitude on the part of government that shows no partiality to any one group and that lets each flourish according to the zeal of its adherents and the appeal of its dogma."

HOW DO THOSE WORDS, uttered by the Supreme Court in 1952 to describe the place of faith within the American constitutional democracy, apply to Furman, an independent private liberal arts university no longer affiliated with any one faith tradition, in 2012? I believe that the Supreme Court's elegant words provide a durable roadmap for the twin principles that should guide the role of spirituality at Furman.

Our first guiding principle is religious liberty. We embrace pluralism and diversity. We make room for as wide a variety of beliefs and creeds as the spiritual needs of our community may require.

Our second guiding principle is the encouragement of lives of moral and spiritual depth. We are not agnostic. In our foundational documents and in our ongoing programs, we encourage connection to forces and causes larger than ourselves.

Furman's Character and Values Statement, one of the university's most basic expressions of its core values, articulates these connections in two ways. The statement calls, openly and without apology, for our students to use the knowledge they acquire for the betterment of humankind:

The university recognizes its responsibility both inside and outside the classroom to encourage students to confront the problems of contemporary society and to exercise moral judgment in the use of knowledge. To this end, Furman fosters in its students a sense of social justice and encourages them to exercise their civic responsibility in creating a fair and equitable order. Students are educated to solve human problems rather than to use their knowledge as a means of gaining further advantage over those who are disadvantaged.

The statement then calls, again openly and without apology, for our students to explore lives of moral and spiritual resonance:

Furman University affirms the worth of both the life of learning and the life of faith and integrity. The occasion of receiving a university degree should become a genuine commencement for graduates to continue their education, to engage in moral reflection, and to deepen their civic involvement "with a sacred regard to the interests of morality and religion."

These are not mere high-toned words. They reflect what we actually do at Furman. Our commitment to engaged learning requires students to translate theory and values into actual hands-on experiences, such as research opportunities, internships, civic engagement, public service and study away. Yet such engagement is incomplete unless it touches the "whole person," encouraging exploration of the moral and spiritual dimensions of a student's life.

In my Baccalaureate address last spring, and in my address at the Opening Convocation that began this academic year, I invoked these values. At convocation I called for all students to ask the questions posed by the Lilly Center for Vocational Reflection: Who am I — most authentically? What do I believe — most deeply? What does the world need — from me?

I reflected with our students on the effect two books from my own college years had on me. William James' *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, published in 1907, taught me the sense of beauty, exhilaration, curiosity and connection that might come from a genuine and authentic effort to accentuate not the points of ideological and theological division over which the peoples of the world are so often sorely and tragically and violently divided, but rather those common experiences — quests for identity and purpose and meaning and peace — that are so universally shared. Robert Penn Warren's novel *All the King's Men* taught me the importance of asking the great questions, not the petty ones, and being ever vigilant against becoming all and only the things we want, and nothing more.

My hope for Furman students is that they too will be touched by their college experience in such profound ways, at once broadening their minds and nourishing their spirits.

— ROD SMOLLA