

**“The Cross at Wren Chapel” Exhibit 1:
Nichol’s Email of December 20, 2006**

The full text of President Gene Nichol’s email of December 20, 2006 was published in the student newspaper, *The Flat Hat*:

“To the College Community:

I trust that you are enjoying the close of the semester. There are, as yet, still a few exams to be completed, papers to be graded, projects to be mastered, and, finally, miles to be traveled toward those who have missed you more than it was thought possible. My family and I have again been amazed by the warmth of the College community. From the Yule Log, to the carolers and singers who have brought greetings to our house, to the later-night enthusiasts of the Sunken Garden, you have lifted our hearts.

I write, though, on another front. Controversy continues about my decision to alter the display of the cross in the Wren Chapel. Although the faculty has been strongly supportive, and the Student Senate voted by a wide margin not to oppose the change, opinion on campus is far from uniform. And beyond our walls, many alumni and friends of the College have urged, in the strongest terms, that the decision be reconsidered.

I have tried to read each letter, note and email I’ve received about the issue—though the volume has been high and the language sometimes heated. And even as the semester has drawn to a close, I have continued to speak with faculty, students, staff, campus ministers, alumni and the members of our Board of Visitors about ways to honor our traditions while assuring that the Chapel is equally welcoming to all. I’ve found no magic answers. But having heard much, and having had the opportunity for at least some quiet reflection on the dispute, I write to offer a few words about the steps we’ve undertaken, the disagreements that have ensued, and my hopes for the future.

I am much taken with the Wren Chapel. Like many others, I attend an array of crucial College events there. Unlike others, I also have a key to its imposing west door. So I make studied and frequent use of the Chapel late in the evenings. It is, by my lights, the most ennobling and inspiring place on one of the most remarkable campuses in the world. That’s saying a good deal.

But I hadn’t been here long before I began to understand that the experience of the Chapel is not the same for all of us. Over the past eighteen months, a number of members of our community have indicated to me that the display of a cross—in the heart of our most important and defining building—is at odds with our role as a public institution. They did not say, of course, that the cross is an offensive or antagonistic symbol. They often understand that to Christians, like me, the cross conveys an inspiring message of sacrifice, redemption and love. Rather, they have suggested that the presence of such a powerful religious symbol—in a place so central to our efforts—sends a message that the Chapel belongs more fully to some of us than to others. That there are, at the College, insiders and outsiders. Those for whom our most revered space is keenly inviting and those whose presence is only tolerated.

Nor are such sentiments merely fanciful. I have been saddened to learn of potential students and their families who have been escorted into the Chapel on campus tours and chosen to depart immediately thereafter. And to

read of a Jewish student, required to participate in an honor council program in the Chapel during his first week of classes, vowing never to return to the Wren. Or to hear of students, whose a capella groups are invited to perform there, being discomfited by the display of the cross. Or of students being told in times of tragedy of the special opening of the Chapel for solace—to discover that it was only available as a Christian space. Or to hear from a campus counselor that Muslim students don’t take advantage of the Chapel in times of spiritual or emotional crisis. Or to learn of the concerns of parents, immensely proud for the celebration of a senior’s initiation into Phi Beta Kappa, but unable to understand why, at a public university, the ceremony should occur in the presence of a cross.

I have sought, then, to find ways to assure that the Wren Chapel is equally open and welcoming to every member of this community. My goal has not been to bleach all trace of religious thought and influence from our facilities and programs, but rather to offer the inspiration of the Wren to all. As an array of our campus ministers have indicated—in expressing strong support for the altered policy—it is the very vitality and the increasing diversity of our religious community that calls for a more encompassing and accessible use of the Wren.

But many, many have seen it otherwise. They have worried that, as a new president, I have failed to understand and sufficiently value the storied traditions of the College. I can imagine myself, were our roles reversed, coming to a similar conclusion. (Although no cross would have been displayed in the colonial Chapel, one has been placed in the Wren for many decades.) Others have believed, even worse, that my actions disparage religion. No Christian can warm to the label “anti-Christian”—even if he is a public figure with need, on occasion, of thickened skin.

I have also perhaps added to the turmoil by my own missteps. I likely acted too quickly and should have consulted more broadly. Patience is a vital virtue—especially for a university president. I’m still learning it. The decision was also announced to the university community in an inelegant way. I know, or at least I hope, that you are accustomed to fuller and more appealing explanations of our practices.

But still, I have asked myself and others, does the Wren Chapel, our most remarkable place, belong to every member of the College community, or is it principally for our Christian students? Do we take seriously our claims for religious diversity, or do we, even as a public university, align ourselves with one particular religious tradition? And I know that despite disagreements over my actions, no member of the extended William & Mary family believes that any of our students should be cast as outsiders—however unintentionally—because of religious preference.

I am mindful, nonetheless, of the powerful claim that altering the display of the Chapel cross ignores the storied traditions of the College. Accordingly, I have asked Louise Kale, director of the historic campus, to take the following modest steps:

First, we will commission a permanent plaque to commemorate the Chapel’s origins as an Anglican place of worship and symbol of the Christian beginnings of the College.

Second, in an effort to give further recognition to the heritage of the Chapel without substantially affecting its openness and accessibility for College use, I have asked that the altar cross be displayed throughout the day on Sundays with expanded hours. The cross will also continue to be in place on the altar when the Chapel is used

for Christian religious services or when any individual requests its display for moments of quiet prayer and contemplation.

Neither these alterations, nor anything I have said, will likely halt the controversy. The issues it touches are perhaps too powerful, and heartfelt, and close to the core. And the College community—both within our walls and across the globe—is too articulate and passionate and too committed—for easy words or opinions to assuage. But, the cross is, at present, being displayed frequently, by request, in the Chapel. A number of Muslim and Jewish students now report, for the first time, that they are using the Chapel for prayer and contemplation. And I was pleased to learn that the student organization Hillel recently made a reservation to use space in the Wren for the first time anyone can remember.

I close only by noting common ground—both for those who support the decision and those who oppose it.

We believe in the cause of the College—its singular history, its tradition of life-changing learning rooted in character and rigor, and its promising role in the future of the nation and the world.

We believe, to the person, in fostering and sustaining an institution, in the words of the College’s Diversity Statement, “where people of all backgrounds feel at home.”

And we believe in the inspiration, even if not uniformly in the theology, of Archbishop Tutu’s claim: “In God’s family there are no outsiders. All are insiders. Black and white, rich and poor, Jew and Arab, Palestinian and Israeli, Roman Catholic and Protestant, Muslim and Christian . . . all belong.”

Go Tribe.

Hark upon the Gale.

Gene Nichol”¹

Endnotes

¹ Joshua Pinkerton, “Nichol announces changes to Wren Cross Policy,” *The Flat Hat*, December 20, 2006, <http://flathatnews.com/content/nichol-announces-changes-wren-cross-policy>, accessed January 2009.