

The Cross at Wren Chapel (B)

On March 6, 2007, the College of William and Mary's (W&M) student newspaper, *The Flat Hat*, reported on the ongoing controversy over the cross at Wren Chapel. After six months of discussion and debate, alterations and amendments, and intense media coverage, the college seemed poised for a resolution. The Committee on Religion in a Public University made a unanimous recommendation, well in advance of the deadline, to President Gene Nichol and the Board of Visitors:

The Wren Chapel cross shall be returned for permanent display in the chapel in a glass case. The case shall be located in a prominent, visible place, accompanied by a plaque explaining the College's Anglican roots and its historic connection to Bruton Parish Church. The Wren sacristy shall be available to house sacred objects of any religious tradition for use in worship and devotion by members of the College community.¹

The cross could not be removed from the chapel but could be displayed on the altar by request.

Nichol's response was measured: "This might not be exactly the way I would approach it, but I think it is an approach which makes progress and honors the traditions of the College and the aspirations of its future, so it is one that I am happy with."²

Two groups who had weighed in on opposite sides of the dispute – Our Campus United and SavetheWrenCross.org – issued statements in support of the Committee's decision. Our Campus United decried the attacks against Nichol by "politically-motivated activists," while SavetheWrenCross.org expressed thanks and appreciation for the decision:

We are especially grateful that the unanimous judgment of William and Mary's Religion Committee to return the cross is an unambiguous repudiation of the destructive idea that William and Mary should ever tolerate intolerance towards religious symbols.³

They also encouraged the Committee to continue to examine the broader range of questions related to religion at public universities and to seek input from students, alumni, and the community.

The next day, March 7, 2007, Nichol and the Board of Visitors (BOV) issued a joint statement, released to alumni, which accepted the recommendations and stated that they would be implemented immediately.

After the Recommendations, Calls to Remove Nichol

Some alumni and others who opposed Nichol's decision regarding the cross now stood in opposition to the renewal of his contract. One letter, sent on April 11, 2007 to Rector Michael Powell of the BOV, expressed some of their ongoing concerns. Karla Bruno's letter read, in part: "Nichol created a problem of such magnitude that it took five months and a committee to reach some sort of agreement." She indicated that Nichol's decision had resulted in the loss of millions of dollars' worth of donations from alumni, and an 80 percent reduction in admissions growth. Moreover, the loss of the college's reputation "will take years to overcome."

Bruno urged the BOV to replace Nichol: “Surely the Board can find a better man or woman to serve as president who will not only revere and protect our college’s traditions and history, but one who has the maturity and wisdom to avoid rash and petty actions that result in a downward spiral of our reputation.”⁴

The controversy over the cross was slow to resolve: on October 30, 2007, an article in *The Flat Hat* noted that while the college community was divided, the majority of students and faculty supported Nichol; however, some of the alumni did not. A small group of students, alumni, and other observers of the cross controversy continued to ask questions about Nichol’s leadership and alleged that Nichol misrepresented fundraising statistics when he was under siege.⁵

A Resignation

On February 12, 2008, Gene Nichol resigned as President of the College of William & Mary; it would be effective immediately. The day before, Rector Powell informed Nichol that his contract would not be renewed in July. In Nichol’s resignation letter, he described the four sets of decisions that have “stirred controversy”: changes to the display of the cross in Wren Chapel; the refusal to ban student-selected programs from campus; initiating an “aggressive” Gateway Scholarship for Virginia students with financial need; and cultivating greater diversity in the students, faculty, and administrative leadership.⁶

Nichol expressed deep disappointment at the tenor of the discussions and debate, and characterized the campaign against him as “committed, relentless, frequently untruthful, and vicious.” Nichol also indicated that the BOV had offered him money to resign, which he refused. The same day, the BOV issued a press release which confirmed Nichol’s resignation and added: “This decision was not in any way based on ideology or any single public controversy. To suggest such a motivation for the Board is flatly wrong.”⁷

Within a week, a member of the Board of Visitors resigned, releasing a statement to alumni that was supportive of Nichol and critical of the BOV.⁸ Rector Powell later said, “The board cares passionately about the same values Gene Nichol did, the policies that made the school more diverse and welcoming.” He added that while the decision was difficult, it was based on limitations to his leadership skills. *The Washington Post* quoted Powell: “It was not the controversies... but how and whether they were resolved.”⁹

Reactions on Campus and Beyond

Nichol’s resignation was a shock to many on campus. In the days that followed, students and professors protested the BOV’s decision not to renew Nichol’s contract. On one occasion, thousands of students gathered in Wren courtyard, some with candles, others with thank-you notes for Nichol. As he addressed the crowd, Nichol thanked the students and said, “The notion that I would not be your president in the coming months and years is one of the deepest wounds I can imagine.”¹⁰

Some at W&M, however, felt the BOV made the right decision, as stated in a staff editorial in *The Flat Hat*: “Two and a half years ago, Nichol swept onto campus with a presence almost too large to be allowed. His eloquence enraptured. His passion inspired.” Yet, the editorial continued, “Months of discussion, independent research and outside input have proved one thing: Nichol’s executive failures and pattern of mismanagement clearly indicated that he is no longer qualified for the job.”¹¹

Others beyond the college community celebrated the decision. Wendy Wright, president of Concerned Women for America, wrote:

Universities have pushed the envelope in censoring Christianity and promoting pornography. Under the leadership of Gene Nichols, the College of William & Mary, a respected, historic institution, became the poster child of the degradation of higher learning.¹²

Nichol's decisions and departure also proved to be a matter of concern for other colleges and universities. On February 19, 2008, the University of Richmond held a special Town Hall meeting to discuss the implications of the controversy for their campus and community.¹³ The larger questions raised by the cross at Wren Chapel were not unique to W&M.

Conclusion

Today, Nichol is a professor of law at the University of North Carolina, teaching courses in constitutional law, civil rights law, election law, and the federal courts; he also directs the Center on Poverty, Work, and Opportunity. While Nichol has not spoken extensively about the cross controversy after his tenure at W&M, his letter of resignation appears to sum up his perspective:

[A]s is widely known, I altered the way a Christian cross was displayed in a public facility, on a public university campus, in a chapel used regularly for secular College events -- both voluntary and mandatory -- in order to help Jewish, Muslim, Hindu, and other religious minorities feel more meaningfully included as members of our broad community. The decision was likely required by any effective notion of separation of church and state. And it was certainly motivated by the desire to extend the College's welcome more generously to all. We are charged, as state actors, to respect and accommodate all religions, and to endorse none. The decision did no more.¹⁴

Endnotes

¹ Austin Wright, "Cross to be permanently displayed in Wren Chapel," *The Flat Hat*, March 6, 2007, <http://flathatnews.com/content/cross-be-permanently-displayed-wren-chapel>, accessed January 2009.

² Ibid.

³ "Cross Returned to Wren Chapel," Save the Wren Cross Web site, <http://www.savethewrencross.org/stwcstatement.php>, accessed December 2008.

⁴ "Request to BOV – William and Mary deserves better," April 12, 2007 post on blog, "Save the Wren Cross," <http://savethewrencross.blogspot.com/2007/04/request-to-bov-let-gene-nichol.html>, accessed January 2009.

⁵ Austin Wright, "Nichol's critics target lost 12 million," *The Flat Hat*, October 30, 2007, <http://flathatnews.com/content/nichol's-critics-target-lost-12-million>, accessed January 2009.

⁶ "Statement from Gene Nichol," Office of University Relations, William & Mary Web site,

<http://web.wm.edu/news/archive/index.php?id=8672>, accessed January 2009.

⁷ Katherine T. Phan, “College President Resigns After Controversial Tenure,” *The Christian Post*, February 13, 2008, http://www.christianpost.com/Education/Higher_edu/2008/02/college-president-resigns-after-controversial-tenure-13/index.html, accessed January 2009.

⁸ Jackie Spinner, “Nichol Supporter Resigns in Protest,” *The Washington Post*, February 21, 2008, http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2008/02/20/AR2008022001573_pf.html, accessed January 2009.

⁹ Susan Kinzie, “William and Mary President Resigns,” *The Washington Post*, February 13, 2008, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2008/02/12/AR2008021201078.html?sid=ST2008022003020>, accessed January 2009.

¹⁰ Angela Cota, “Thousands gather to support Nichol,” *The Flat Hat*, February 13, 2008, <http://flathatnews.com/content/thousands-gather-support-nichol>, accessed January 2009.

¹¹ “Staff Editorial: A painful, proper decision,” *The Flat Hat*, February 15, 2008, <http://flathatnews.com/content/staff-editorial-painful-proper-decision>, accessed January 2009.

¹² “William and Mary President Resigns After Scandals,” *Christian Newswire* article posted on Virtue Online, February 12, 2008, <http://www.virtueonline.org/portal/modules/news/article.php?storyid=7708>, accessed January 2009.

¹³ Glyn Hughes, “Creating an Inclusive Community: Lessons from William & Mary,” February 15, 2008, post on blog “Common Ground,” University of Richmond Web site, <http://blog.richmond.edu/commonground/2008/02/15/creating-an-inclusive-campus-community-lessons-from-william-mary/>

¹⁴ “Statement from Gene Nichol,” Office of University Relations, William & Mary Web site, <http://web.wm.edu/news/archive/index.php?id=8672>, accessed January 2009.