



Letter & Program Rationale

from Joerg Rieger

When Barbara Wendland, author and director of the Cook Foundation, agreed to support our vision of a new program in religion and justice, a new world of opportunities opened up. At Vanderbilt University Divinity School, we share Barbara's concern for religion that is engaged in making a positive difference in the world, and this has long been the goal of my own academic work as well. The focus of the Wendland-Cook Program on ecological devastation and economic inequalities deepens this concern, with close links to other programs at Vanderbilt Divinity School that deal with gender and sexuality as well as race and ethnicity. The following text is the founding document of the program as it was ratified by the steering committee and the school. It describes the pillars of a developing program in conversation with religious communities, social movements, and academic study.

We are grateful for your interest and hope you will join us,

Joerg Rieger

Distinguished Professor of Theology | Cal Turner Chancellor's Chair in Wesleyan Studies | Director of the Wendland-Cook Program in Religion and Justice | Vanderbilt Divinity School and Graduate Department of Religion | Affiliated Faculty Turner Family Center for Social Ventures | Owen Graduate School of Management | Vanderbilt University

VISION STATEMENT

The Wendland-Cook Program seeks to inform and support commitments to justice and deep solidarity. Its concerns for religion and economic and ecological justice are expressed in the study and promotion of the flourishing of all, of thriving relationships, of the employment of diversity for the good of the community, and of the agency and the work of all people and the planet.

MISSION STATEMENT

The Wendland-Cook Program in Religion and Justice is concerned with the relation of religion and matters of economic and ecological justice in their widest sense as fundamental building blocks for life on the planet. It also engages related intersectional concerns of racial, ethnic, gender, sexual, and interreligious justice. The mission of the Program is to investigate, educate, and organize. The Program investigates matters of economic and ecological justice and their broad implications for religious communities and the wider public as integral part of theological and religious reflection. The Program educates the academy, students, religious communities,



activist communities, and the broader public on matters of religion and justice. The Program supports organizing more just relationships, drawing on and developing further long-standing commitments of religious and activist communities.

RATIONALE AND COMMITMENTS

In the Hebrew traditions, which have deeply influenced Christianity and Islam, justice is not an abstract idea but tied to the life of specific communities. To be just means to restore and to build community at all levels, personal, public, political, and economic. Religion is tied to all of these levels and cannot be confined to solitary exercises. Justice in these traditions also entails taking the sides of those who experience injustice, as embodied by the divine in the shared Abrahamic traditions of the Exodus and the prophets and expressed in the life and ministry of Jesus.

This Program is strategically located in the Southern region of the United States, where religion continues to play a strong role but where Christianity has often accommodated itself to the status quo and neglected alternative visions of faith. The Program pursues fresh engagements with the resources of Christianity, historical and contemporary, local, national, and international, in close conversation with other religious traditions.

The program investigates matters of economic and ecological justice and their broad implications for religious communities and the wider public as integral part of theological and religious reflection. Research is the foundation of the work of the program because economic and ecological relationships as well as their intersectional relations with race, gender, and sexuality continue to be underexplored even though they play an essential role in the formation and re-formation of religious communities.

The program educates the academy, students, religious communities, activist communities, and the broader public on matters of religion and justice through university course offerings, continuing education events, workshops, trainings, and national and international academic conferences. It also educates by disseminating its findings through academic publications, popular media such as blogs and newsletters, and various means of popular education.

The program supports its constituencies in their work of organizing more just relationships, drawing on and developing further long-standing commitments of religious and activist communities. In the Christian traditions, organizing broadens the horizons of what has traditionally been called ministry and discipleship, in many other religious traditions organizing broadens inherent concerns of community and solidarity, and in activist communities organizing broadens the concerns for advocacy and mobilizing.