

**Warren Wilson College**  
**Church and Interfaith Relations Council**  
*Rationale for Proposal*

Warren Wilson College celebrates its century-plus history as a Presbyterian-related college and maintains a covenant relationship with the Presbyterian Church (USA). Today, the College is recognized and respected among a select group of higher education institutions and ranked high on lists of recommended colleges. It also stands as an ecumenical and interfaith educational center that reflects cultural and faith diversity and is characterized not only by its dedication to environmental responsibility, but also by its reputation as a good neighbor to communities in western North Carolina.

Since its founding as the Asheville Farm School by the PC USA's Board of Home Missions, the College has grown rich in its diversity of culture, ethnicity and religious expression. The academic offerings have been transformative. These changes reflect an evolution of a multifaceted college experience, providing opportunities for uncommon growth, and presenting a myriad of venues in which our community can become more open to the world beyond.

In its relationship with the Presbyterian Church, the College is committed to being honest as well as supportive. We do not apologize for having a Presbyterian Church on campus. However, we respect every member of the community, regardless of religious beliefs or affiliations, with openness and hospitality. We provide faculty from diverse faith and cultural perspectives whose commitment to academic excellence demonstrates our respect for each other's God-given humanity and their own unique spiritual quests and commitments. We endeavor to educate students in the context of a global society, providing opportunities for exchange with students from other parts of the world.

Warren Wilson College, in its Triad of *academics, work and service* is a scholars' loom that weaves facts and our intelligence into a fabric designed to contribute fresh beauty and interpretations into the worlds we enter. It is a "womb" that nurtures mature graduates not merely with words but with the concepts of *awareness, responsibility, and sustainability*. We ground the education we offer woven within a tapestry of cross-cultural experience, practical work and service opportunities. Our nationally recognized leadership in environmentally sustainable living produces people who see that they can make a difference.

**Defining "Church-related Higher Education"**

*A Christian or church-related college or university...is defined as an academic institution of higher education that intentionally cultivates a cooperative and collaborative connection with the Presbyterian church (U.S.A.) and that seeks to reflect Christian values and convictions in its common life.*

Adopted by the 206<sup>th</sup> General Assembly in 1994, "*On Being Faithful—The Continuing Mission of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) in Higher Education*"

**Healthy Church-relatedness**

When addressing the presidents gathered for the annual Association of Presbyterian Colleges and Universities retreat, longtime friend, adjunct faculty and former trustee, John Kuykendall stated,

*The most significant—and for some perhaps the most challenging—value in our heritage is an acknowledgment of the innate communion which exists between faith and learning. The encounter of faith with knowledge yields results which are rarely pat or predictable;*

*and the trend in more recent generations seems to have favored evading or abandoning the challenge of trying to hold faith and learning together.”*

... and further,

*Despite occasional apt analogies and correlations to other sorts of human structures and initiatives, and certainly valuable lessons to be learned from some of them, it is still a crucial fact that a college is and must be a college. It is not a church, nor is it a commonwealth, nor yet, God save the mark, a corporation. It is not really a family (much as some might wish it so), nor a club, nor a sports team, nor an army; not even an NGO or an NPO.*

*A genuine Presbyterian college is none of the above. It is a college—a church-related college—a Presbyterian church-related college: an academic community dedicated to the privilege of doing business with education in the context of Christian faith, and as such it occupies an essential and necessary place in the panorama of human orders and institutions.*

*....Students in our little corner of American higher education are and should be both challenged and encouraged to accept the precious opportunity to discover the conjunction between their deepest loves and the world's deepest needs. And every one of us here knows that at the end of the day this is what our institutions are all about: the making of lives rather than the making of livings: the preparation of young women and men “to walk the earth” as those who are learning what it means to be called to be fully human.*

Former president of Columbia Theological Seminary and friend of the College, Doug Oldenburg, remarked to the same body, but in a different year,

*Church-related liberal arts colleges should promote moral seriousness and sensitivity. They should strive to nurture persons of competence and character, capability and conscience.*

Understandably, healthy church-relatedness cannot be confined to a “check list.” It involves the entire ethos of the school: its spirit, its commitments, its vision and values, and its sustaining relationships.

### **Reformed Faith in Education**

One of the foundational reformed “habits of the mind” is a spirit of openness to truth wherever it may be found. An organizing principle of the Reformed tradition is that we are “*reformed, and always being reformed.*” The intention is to always be open to new truths—or fresh understanding of eternal truths—that challenge current understandings. This openness is reflected in the faculty and variety of academic pursuits that characterize Warren Wilson College.

As theologically-thinking leaders within the church, we hold a world view that understands ourselves charged by the Creator to be responsible stewards of the earth and all its components, including the human component in its infinite variety. The Church Relations Council believes that the College’s commitment to environmental stewardship and education is but one more natural fulfillment of the founding principles brought to the school by its Presbyterian founders. Additionally, we are pleased that the Advancement office and the Director of Church Relations partners with the Environmental Leadership Center to inspire, educate and resource congregations towards environmental sustainability, helping them to fulfill the mandate placed upon them by the 1990 General Assembly’s call for ecological responsibility.

Another value in which the council sees strong roots from the church is in Warren Wilson’s commitment to community engagement and service. It has always been a part of understanding how best

to put an education into the service of the common good. That understanding was forged out of principles central to the Reformed tradition, and given opportunity to shape, guide and support the Asheville Farm School for Boys and its succeeding identities along the way to becoming Warren Wilson College. What the College is today is not a happy accident; it is an unfolding realization of a Presbyterian vision born out of a Biblical, faith-centered tradition of understanding human community.

Keeping these protestant values relevant for the world in which they are needed, Warren Wilson College has continued to adapt its educational program to the issues facing the world over time. Church Relations Council Vice Chair, Rev. Harold Johnson observes,

“Within a world made smaller by technology and travel, we find ourselves within a nation that has become richer in its variety of ethnicity, culture and religious expression. Our ability to resource the rich variety of religious communities that are represented in our faculty and student body also enables us to offer regional focus outreach, environmental and sustainability experiences. The “Portfolio of Experience” exemplified by the Environmental Leadership Center reflects but a sample of engagement possibilities with a variety of communities of faith, that their own educational efforts may be enriched by Warren Wilson College’s style of teaching and experience-based internships. Facilitating such academics, work and service means enabling students and others to engage in the best and most necessary work for our age.

### **The Church Relations Council**

The mission of the Church Relations Council is to establish, enhance and sustain cordial and mutually supportive relationships between Warren Wilson College and the Presbyterian Church (USA). Part of this task includes upholding and reminding the College of its founding principles. Another role with which the council is charged is to carry the Warren Wilson story into each member’s region and context; increasing visibility, recruiting promising students and making known the College’s needs for continuing support by congregations, presbyteries and individual members of the PC (USA) as well as recruiting and bringing promising students.

Because of the College’s strength in shaping young persons to become servants of others and of our common welfare, Warren Wilson’s alumni tend to give more sacrificially than profusely. Given this, our charge as the Church Relations Council is to urge continuing financial support from the church and to look for and initiate opportunities to offer the College as a resource for the church in places where it has need, reaching beyond traditional understandings of the relationship, and showing that the Church’s “progeny” is now a valued partner.

As the Church Relations Council, we believe that church-related liberal arts colleges should focus on the big questions of the meaning of life. Warren Wilson College understands this principle well and has sought increasingly over the years to pursue those meanings beyond traditional educational role models. Our student body and faculty reflect the economic spectrum and include an interweaving of cultural, social and spiritual experiences. This is expressed in our music, our theater and art. We interweave the unmistakable wail of bagpipes at commencement, the power of the Celtic tunes, and the ballads and gospel hymns of Appalachia with the African and Folk traditions that express and enrich human life. It is found in tying together economics, pre-med and pre-law and humanities, business and environmental studies, global, gender and women’s studies with peace and justice studies, history and political sciences, religions anthropology and social studies—and the myriad of other opportunities.

### **Our Covenant Relationships in Context**

Warren Wilson College takes seriously its historic relationship to the Presbyterian Church. It recognizes and affirms its role in the formative endeavor of spiritual, intellectual and moral development.

By engaging students both inside and outside the classroom, and by providing them with a nurturing community and an environment in which these values are lived out, we acknowledge the innate communion which exists between faith and learning. Warren Wilson College seeks to equip students with the tools that will help them build a mature and credible faith for an increasingly complex world. We provide within the Triad of learning a laboratory wherein academic and intellectual boundaries are expanded, incorporating the values of lifelong learning and service to others both within and beyond the campus community. We live in an ecologically threatened world, requiring thoughtful, scientifically sound and sustainable ways of life.

### **Looking Forward: Our Covenant Aims**

Harold Johnson, Vice Chair of the Church Relations Council, observes:

*“Inasmuch as Warren Wilson College began as a Presbyterian Church-related institution and has continued so over its 115 years history, the present Church Relations Council and its predecessors have been populated totally by clergy and laity of the Presbyterian Church who are given to thought and convictions of faith shaped by Reformed Christian theology and understanding. Unequivocally and joyously, we Presbyterians can and do celebrate those aspects of our denomination’s heritage and life perspective which have contributed most strongly to the unique and vital institution that WWC has become, and were most instrumental in creating the Triad of academics, work and service, as well as establishing the rare curriculum for peace studies...”*

*Both WWC and the PC(USA) have come through a world of change over the past fifty years which has shrunken the globe and brought the United States into a new world of human community. Within a world made smaller by technology and travel, we find ourselves within a nation that has become richer in its variety of ethnicity, culture and religious expression. Whereas the College was begun amid an American culture dominated by white Christian males, we have become a community diverse and eclectic in make-up.”*

### **Covenant Aims for Church and Interfaith Relations:**

Provide opportunities for students to learn leadership and community engagement through service with and to congregations

Encourage forums and educational opportunities for exploring issues facing society in the context of faith.

Support international and multicultural learning opportunities and recruitment.

Engage and support spiritual life staff, faculty and student leaders in providing an atmosphere of free and open inquiry into all aspects of knowledge, confident in the growth that can emerge as we engage in an ever-broadening understanding of the multi-faceted world in which we are called to life and service.

*Provision of forums and educational opportunities (in partnership with such educational centers as e. g. Montreat Conference Center.) for the exploration of & discussion of issues facing society by churches and faith communities.*

*Engage supporting church and interfaith partners in providing an atmosphere of free and open inquiry into all aspects of knowledge, confident in the growth that can emerge as we engage in an ever-broadening understanding of the multi-faceted world in which we are called to life and service. Note: This entails the initiation of opportunities to “offer the College as a resource for the church in places where it has need, reaching beyond traditional understandings of the relationship, and showing that the Church’s “progeny” is now a valued partner.*

Warren Wilson College  
Church and Interfaith Relations Council  
Proposal to Board of Trustees  
October, 2009

*The Church Relations Council recommends to the Board of Trustees the establishment of or transition to a religiously diverse Church and Interfaith Relations Council, comprised of persons representative of America's varied faith communities including Presbyterians so as to reflect and establish further the college's relations with people of faith. Representatives of Christian, Jewish, Muslim, Hindu, and other faith communities will be welcomed to the table of such a body. In doing this, we see a significant opportunity to gain relationships far beyond the PC(USA) and to include other faith constituencies who appreciate the uniqueness of Warren Wilson College and who wish to establish, enhance and sustain cordial and supportive relationships with the school in the service of its mission.*

*Note: The proposed name of the new Council involves only the insertion of and Interfaith to the original name, thus retaining the "Relations" that are sought and our has been our task among the PCUSA, and now other church and interfaith partners. This will entail itemizing a new set of responsibilities which reflect and broaden those previously assigned the Church Relations Council. In addition, we envision a new educational partnership (as in the Environmental Walkabouts and sustainability education and advocacy work camps and teach ins) that will significantly raise our visibility and resource-sharing in a new number of faith communities.*