

A Statement and Action Regarding the Pew Nameplates

Approved by the Session of Nassau Presbyterian Church

Nassau Presbyterian Church's mission statement affirms its following guiding principles:

1. Our community welcomes the breadth of humanity;
2. People of all ages can find a place here to seek abundant life and nurture faith;
3. We engage with the world, yearn to do what is just and fair, encourage what is kind and helpful, and seek to walk humbly before God and alongside our neighbors.

Based upon these principles, and after careful consideration, on March 16, 2023, the Session met and approved by an overwhelming majority vote the motion of the Mission and Outreach Committee to remove the nameplates of Woodrow Wilson and Grover Cleveland on two pews in the Sanctuary and the nameplate on one pew outside of Niles Chapel which came from St. Andrews Presbyterian Church. The nameplates were installed on the two pews in the Sanctuary in 1923, long after either individual attended services in the church.

It was decided that only things that are part of our worship life are appropriate for a permanent place in our Sanctuary and that controversy about the roles that others have played in our history should not distract us from our life together as a faith community. Wilson and Cleveland actively engaged in racist policies against African Americans and other under-represented citizens and residents of the United States.

The decision to remove these nameplates is also in line with decisions of Princeton University Board of Trustees approval in June 2020 to remove Woodrow Wilson's name from its School of International Affairs and Public Policy. As explained by the Princeton University President in his letter supporting this action:

Wilson's racism was significant and consequential even by the standards of his own time. He segregated the federal civil service after it had been racially integrated for decades, thereby taking America backward in its pursuit of justice. He not only acquiesced in but added to the persistent practice of racism in this country, a practice that continues to do harm today. Wilson's segregationist policies make him an especially inappropriate namesake for a public policy school.

Princeton Theological Seminary also removed the name of a slave-holder and anti-abolitionist from the Chapel in January 2022.

Cleveland, similarly, used his place of power in the Presidency of the United States to implement racist policies from lack of enforcement of the 15th amendment, which guarantees voting rights to African Americans, and to the enactment of the Scott and Dawes Acts, which oppressed Chinese immigrants and Native Americans respectively.

Nassau Presbyterian is committed to ongoing efforts to repair the historical racial inequities which the predecessors of Nassau Presbyterian perpetrated or acquiesced in, and to build strong bridges with communities of color and other underrepresented people. We practice the Reformed

worship tradition of confession, which requires deep truth telling of the brokenness of our world as well as affirming God's call to "do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly." Our confession has led and leads us to action that includes, but is not limited to, the year of celebration with Witherspoon Street Presbyterian Church of the 250th anniversary of the Presbyterian Church in Princeton in 2005-2006, participating in the Presbytery of New Brunswick and the Synod of the Northeast's formal apology to Witherspoon Street Presbyterian Church in 2015, the work of the Witherspoon Street Church and Nassau Church joint partnership team including the Bending the Moral Arc Courageous Conversations initiative, the Mass Incarceration Task Force, and the Anti-Racism discussions among the Session members conducted in 2021 and 2022.

In our commitment to hospitality and justice, we are aware that this is only one small action of acknowledging the complex and troubled history of Nassau Presbyterian Church's predecessors with respect to Black congregants, who were initially segregated in the balcony and then excluded from worshipping at the church, leading to the establishment of the Witherspoon Street Presbyterian Church. We also understand how the presence of these pew nameplates of Wilson and Cleveland in 2023 remain a jarring and painful reminder of this history of discrimination, segregation and exclusion.

We continue in our shared worship life and love of our neighbors, following Isaiah's claim "you shall be called the repairer of the breach, the restorer of streets to live in" (58:12) and Jesus who "has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us" (Ephesians 2:14).

The nameplates will be carefully removed in the summer of 2023. There is no significant repair work expected upon removal and any work needed to repair pews will be done shortly thereafter.

The nameplates will be added to the archival collection at Princeton Theological Seminary along with a hard copy of this statement and the motion and rationale approved by the Session. In addition, to ensure full transparency and to facilitate broad communication, the above statement will be posted on the church website and referenced in displays where appropriate in the church that celebrate the joint history of Nassau Presbyterian Church and Witherspoon Street Presbyterian Church.

Discussed and approved at the March 16, 2023, Session Meeting of Nassau Presbyterian Church.