

April 18, 2022

Professor Joseph Kuilema
Department of Sociology & Social Work

Dear Joe,

The Professional Status Committee (PSC) has considered your reappointment dossier, the recommendation from the faculty of your department, the recommendation from the dean of Humanities, Arts, & Social Sciences, and additional evidence that has been under consideration since December 2021. I must tell you that the PSC decided not to recommend your reappointment to the faculty of Calvin University. Your contract will conclude in August 2022. (The final paycheck will be disbursed on August 15, 2022.)

In order to help you understand the content of the conversation occasioned by your review, I want to share with you the two enclosed memos. The first memo is the summary of your reappointment dossier; the second memo is a summary of the PSC's final discussion regarding your reappointment.

You are entitled, per the Handbook for Teaching Faculty, to appeal this decision to the president. If you choose to do this, I ask that you do this within 10 business days of receipt of this communication (May 2, 2022).

I know this is not the outcome you were hoping for, Joe. Please let me know if you have questions or wish to discuss.

Sincerely,



Noah J. Toly, Ph.D.
Provost

cc: Benita Wolters-Fredlund, dean
Jon Hill, chair
Rachel Venema, program director
file

Dean's Dossier Summary (Revised)

To: Professional Status Committee and President Le Roy
From: Benita Wolters-Fredlund, Dean, School of Humanities, Arts, and Social Sciences
Date: March 22, 2022
Re: Reappointment of Joseph Kuilema

History

Prof. Kuilema began teaching at Calvin in 2008 and had three successful pre-tenure reviews before earning a doctorate in 2016. His bid for tenure in Fall 2017 was supported by his department, his dean, the PSC, and the Academic Affairs Committee of the Board of Trustees, but was ultimately denied by the full Board of Trustees, who cited concerns around his tone and strategy with regard to controversial theological topics and LGBTQ+ advocacy in particular. In the wake of this decision, the provost recommended him for a two-year appointment (FY2019 and FY2020). This was followed, at the recommendation of his Dean and the Provost, by another two-year appointment (FY 2021 and FY 2022). In June 2021, Provost Brandsen authorized that Prof. Kuilema be given a two-year renewable term appointment pending a full review in fall 2021. After reviewing Prof. Kuilema's dossier in October and November 2021, I recommended that he be given a two-year, renewable-term appointment. The PSC voted to affirm this recommendation on December 2, 2021.

On December 10, 2021, Provost Toly received photos that appeared to show Prof. Kuilema officiating a same-sex wedding. Using the provision outlined in Faculty Handbook section 3.6.2.4,¹ Provost Toly extended the timeline of the reappointment process and prepared to bring the case back to the PSC for reconsideration. Provost Toly asked Prof. Kuilema to confirm whether or not he had officiated, and, if he had, to explain his rationale for doing so to the PSC. In a written response, Prof. Kuilema confirmed that he had officiated at an LGBTQ+ civil marriage ceremony in October 2021 and gave a 17-page explanation of his rationale for doing so.

In a memo to the PSC on January 5, 2022, the PSC chair President Le Roy laid out a process for carefully reviewing this new material in the case, acknowledging that Prof. Kuilema's dual office-bearing roles (as elder at Sherman Street Church and as university professor) added a layer of complexity and ambiguity to this new material and noting that it "clearly falls into the overlapping space between the church and the university." That process included asking the PSC both to review relevant Synodical documents and to engage in conversations with Sherman Street Church leadership and the Executive Committee of Classis Grand Rapids East. The PSC followed this process over several weeks in January, February, and March of 2022.

As this process was unfolding, on January 19, 2022, Provost Toly learned that one of people who was married by Prof. Kuilema was an employee of the university. In a follow-up meeting, Prof. Kuilema confirmed that he knew that this person was an employee of the university when he officiated (and that he had assumed we knew this fact).

Recommendation

Because of the unique history of this case, I have been obliged to consider a far wider body of evidence than is typical for a reappointment process. In his February 5, 2018 letter to Prof. Kuilema explaining the Board's decision to deny him tenure, Board chair Craig Lubben makes it clear that while Prof. Kuilema has the "freedom to disagree with a position of the CRC," the Board has concerns over how this disagreement has been expressed. As Lubben explains, "before reappointing you with tenure, the Board needs more evidence that you are committed to working within college policies and procedures," referencing the *Handbook for Teaching Faculty, Homosexuality and the Calvin College Community*, and *Confessional Commitments and Academic Freedom* (CCAF) as guides. Lubben voices concerns over Prof. Kuilema's tone and strategy in particular; he quotes a

¹ Section 3.6.2.4 reads, in part, "If negative evidence arises after the PSC's decision but before final action by the board of trustees, the PSC may be reconvened by the provost to examine the new evidence and, if warranted, the committee may change its recommendation to the board of trustees. When new evidence arises during the course of a tenure and/or promotion review, or where circumstances warrant, the provost, in consultation with the PSC, may extend time period and deadlines to ensure a full and fair review process."

section of CCAF to make clear that Prof. Kuilema is expected to use “a strategy that begins by consulting with those in authority” and “a tone of humility that cares enough about the confessions to raise difficult issues and, at the same time, is willing to submit to the judgement of the church.” In her follow-up letter, Provost Brandsen explains that “we all hope you are able to do the things you need to do to earn tenure” and offers advice intended to help Prof. Kuilema “ensure that [his] judgement, tone, and strategy meet the college’s expectations for faculty communication and engagement with difficult issues.”

These letters to Prof. Kuilema clearly establish the expectation that his reappointment is contingent on his ability to provide evidence that during his two-year appointment (which was then stretched to another 2-year appointment) he had used good judgement and abided by university expectations around tone and strategy in relation to his LGBTQ+ advocacy. Thus, in addition to reviewing Prof. Kuilema’s Reformed Christian commitment, teaching, scholarship, and service, which is routine for all reappointments, my appraisal also carries the added burden of evaluating whether Prof. Kuilema has successfully addressed the Board’s concerns in his behavior during the last four years.

As I explain in greater detail below, while there is substantial evidence to suggest that during the last four years Prof. Kuilema worked in good faith to improve his tone and strategy around LGBTQ+ advocacy and regularly sought and took advice from those in authority, his failure to consult with me (his Dean), the Provost, or the President about his decision to officiate at the wedding of a Calvin employee was problematic. Moreover, given both the university’s and the CRC’s stated policies, positions, and pastoral advice on LGBTQ+ matters, I consider the decision to officiate itself to be a serious lapse in judgement. Consequently, I do not feel I can report in good conscience that he has lived up to the expectations set for him by the Board and Provost Brandsen in February 2018. Thus, despite Prof. Kuilema’s stellar record in the areas of Reformed Christian commitment, teaching, scholarship, and service, and in contradiction with the unanimous recommendation of the tenured faculty in the Sociology and Social Work Department, I am unable to recommend that Prof. Kuilema be reappointed.

Rationale – Reformed Christian Commitment, Teaching, Scholarship, Service

Reformed Christian Commitment. Prof. Kuilema is a member of Sherman Street Church, where he served as an elder and member of the Pastoral Support Committee. Prof. Kuilema was raised in the Reformed tradition and writes that he is “grateful for the creeds and confessions that guide [his] work and life.” At the same time, he has been transparent about the fact that he would like to see both the church and Calvin deepen their commitments to diversity, equity, and inclusion. He has written pieces of public scholarship inviting us to repent from instances of racism in our Christian and Reformed past, and, believing that references to “chastity” in Lords Day 41 of the Heidelberg Catechism do not exclude monogamous same-sex unions, has worked in his home church council to move towards declaring their congregation affirming and inclusive to LGBTQ+ people. To be clear, when Prof. Kuilema signed the Covenant for Faculty Members he did so in good faith, believing that his views were consistent with the creeds and confessions therein. When he works on these potentially controversial issues he does so in the spirit of continuing to reform a tradition that he is deeply imbedded in and committed to. In doing so, he joins a long list of current and former Calvin faculty who have worked to respectfully challenge a tradition they love and consider their spiritual home. Calvin’s *Confessional Commitments and Academic Freedom* document supports such work when “nurtured by high-trust methods of communication and accountability,” and encourages faculty to bring efforts for change to their local congregations.

It is worth noting that Prof. Kuilema’s dossier includes letters from 7 departmental colleagues and 14 non-departmental colleagues (drawn from 13 departments) who enthusiastically support his reappointment, almost all of whom name as a key reason for their support his deep knowledge of, passion about, and commitment to Reformed theology and to Calvin’s mission. Some examples of the articulation of this support include:

- “Joe is relentless in his integration of faith and his profession in every way,”
- “His understanding of Reformed theology is profound, and he pushes all of us to understand and apply our faith to current social issues and the role of believers in the world more rigorously,”
- “Joe is not only knowledgeable ‘about’ the Reformed tradition, but his life is also lived within the Reformed Christian tradition. He lives his life as a tool to be used to further God’s Kingdom here on earth,”

- “His defense of his views is always expressed in terms of his serious and heartfelt commitment to Reformed theology. He puts most other faculty members to shame in this regard. In this way, he is helping to keep the Reformed tradition vibrant at an institution where the tendency is too often to reduce it to little more than a few well-worn talking points.” and
- “[Prof. Kuilema] embodies [our] mission more passionately than anyone I know.”

Teaching. Prof. Kuilema is deeply appreciated by his students, who describe learning from him as a transformational experience. He receives high student evaluation scores, meeting or exceeding departmental and university-wide averages for most categories; he also won the 2019 Professor of the Year Award voted on by students. Students highlight as particular strengths his enthusiastic and intellectually robust lectures that make use of audio-visual supplements, and his use of guest lecturers and group discussion. They consistently use words like “engaging,” “amazing,” and “excellent,” to describe his teaching. They also emphasize how consistently faith is embedded in his classes, remarking, for example, that “Christian themes were intertwined with every topic that was discussed” and “He has a justice-oriented Christian perspective that we need more of.” Alumni are equally positive in their assessment; many identify him as the best teacher they had at Calvin and point to the formative role he played in their lives both inside and outside of the classroom. In one instance, a student was brought back to the faith while taking a class with him. Colleagues also praise his teaching, noting that his courses are popular for all the right reasons: “His lectures are content heavy, his assignments challenging, and his feedback detailed. He does this all in the context of knowing and caring for his students as whole persons, not simply ‘consumers’ of information.” Prof. Kuilema exceeds expectations in this area.

Scholarship. Since his last review, at which time Prof. Kuilema was deemed to have met the scholarship requirements for tenure by his department and by the PSC, he has had two of his publications selected to be chapters in a book of collected essays, published two peer-reviewed articles, seven pieces for a general audience (including works for *The Chimes* and *The Banner*), seven conference presentations, and a handful of workshops and invited talks. His scholarly work is in alignment with the department’s scholarship statement, which encourages an emphasis on the plight of those who are oppressed and the engagement of multiple audiences. He meets expectations in this area.

Service. Colleagues from both inside the Sociology and Social Work department and outside it describe Prof. Kuilema’s service as commendable. In addition to his work advising, mentoring, and welcoming students in the Social Work program (regularly hosting welcome gatherings at his home for new majors), he also embodies an “all-university citizen” approach in the way he so regularly gives his time to cross-departmental initiatives. In recent years Prof. Kuilema has served on the Global Development Studies advisory group and advised for that program, he has led a semester-long off-campus experience in Ghana, and he has taught in the Honors program and the Calvin Prison Initiative (including one instance of teaching an honors course to prisoners). He has been a leader on campus in helping us strive toward our anti-racism goals, not only by addressing issues of race in his coursework and scholarship but also by leading trainings and workshops for departments and faculty, hosting events for UnLearn week, and being interviewed for Prof. Dykstra-Pruim’s *Diversity and Inclusion For All* podcast. He also currently serves as a Core Fellow, helping to develop the Diversity & Difference tag in our new Core curriculum. Finally, Prof. Kuilema goes out of his way to be a welcoming presence to students who are marginalized; students describe him as a safe and welcoming presence on campus. He exceeds expectations in this area.

Rationale – Judgement, Tone, and Strategy

There is considerable evidence to suggest that in the wake of Mr. Lubben’s 2018 letter Prof. Kuilema was actively addressing issues of tone and strategy with regard to his LGBTQ+ advocacy. I saw evidence of him checking in with me and with other colleagues to make sure that he was communicating appropriately and effectively, and, more importantly perhaps, evidence that he often accepted and incorporated feedback given to him. Many of the colleagues who wrote in support of him addressed this issue in their letters as well. Prof. Kuilema’s colleagues, both inside and outside his department, believed that, as his chair put it, “Although there has been hurt and confusion from past events, I can attest that Joe is committed to working within the structures of this institution, no matter how frustrating he finds them sometimes.” Colleagues gave as further evidence of

improved tone and strategy the respectful way he has engaged his detractors. Given this history of careful behavior, I was surprised to learn that he had decided to officiate at the wedding of an employee without consulting me.

In his letter to PSC outlining his rationale for accepting the invitation to officiate at an LGBTQ+ wedding, Prof. Kuilema argued that the wedding he officiated was not a religious ceremony, but a civil one, and since it was not connected to his teaching, scholarship, or service, it should be considered “private citizenship activity” that did not have the same demand for consultation as his professional activities would. Even so, Prof. Kuilema did consult with his chair and program director as well as with his fellow elders, his pastors, and his chair of council, and explained his rationale to them. While I do not believe these consultations met the high bar set for Calvin faculty working in controversial areas or the specific expectations set for Prof. Kuilema by the Board in 2018, it should be noted that in each of these consultations he was supported in his decision to officiate at the wedding.

One of the difficult problems in evaluating Prof. Kuilema’s decisions and behavior in this case is that the advice he received in these consultations seems to be in conflict with the official pastoral advice endorsed by Synod 2016 when it adopted the minority report of the Committee on Pastoral Guidance on Same-Sex Marriage (also cited in a *Church Order* supplement on marriage), as well as the university policies that align with the denomination’s position. This has raised the thorny question about who a Calvin professor is accountable to on such matters and in what context. It is far outside the scope of this dossier summary to try to settle this complex question. Suffice it to say that the PSC’s discussions with Sherman Street leadership and the executive of Classis Grand Rapids East have made it clear that this is a point about which reasonable, faithful people in the denomination may disagree.

However, while this question of authority is uncertain and nuanced in a case where the people being married are not affiliated with the CRC or with Calvin, there is far more certainty and less nuance in the present case, where one of the people being married was a Calvin employee. This is because both employees were clearly and unambiguously accountable to Calvin’s staff handbook, which only condones sexual relations within the confines of a marriage between one man and one woman. Prof. Kuilema’s act of officiating a fellow employee’s LGBTQ+ wedding strongly suggests that he condones behavior out of step with stated policies and could furthermore easily be interpreted by outsiders as Calvin condoning such behavior, regardless of Prof. Kuilema’s intent. In short, because an employee was involved, Prof. Kuilema’s actions threatened Calvin’s institutional integrity and reputation in a way that might not have been the case if an employee were not involved.

The fact that one employee was officiating for another and that both are accountable to Calvin’s staff handbook policies, as well as the fact that LGBTQ+ issues are currently highly controversial in CRC circles, should have been considerations in Prof. Kuilema’s strategizing around who to consult about his decision to officiate. Not only should he have brought this question above the level of program director and chair, he should have taken care to consult with people who held a different opinion than him on the core theological issue.

All of this assumes that Prof. Kuilema would have heeded negative advice on this matter; he has been transparent in multiple follow-up conversations with me and others that if I had counseled him against officiating he would have done it anyway. This is because he felt that the request he received to officiate was a test from God and that as a matter of personal integrity he had to accept. While I admire his conviction, knowing that he would not have taken my advice seriously on this important matter I do not see how either he or I can claim that in the future he would be able to live up to the expectation, expressed in CCAF and referenced by the Board chair in his 2018 letter, that he use “a strategy that begins by consulting with those in authority.”

Closing Thoughts

There are many other aspects of Prof. Kuilema’s decision and rationale in this case that are open to discussion and debate. In conversations and written exchanges with Prof. Kuilema and his colleagues, and in discussions with the PSC, we have collectively wrestled with the different status of civil vs. religious marriages, the weight of

Synodical pastoral advice, the role of dissent in prompting institutional change, the difference between dissenting in belief vs. action, the potentially inappropriate reach of university policies into personal and family lives, the distinction between policies about sex vs. marriage, and more. While space does not permit me to engage these complex and important questions here, I will say that I feel deep regret about the fact that if my recommendation is adopted Prof. Kuilema will no longer be engaging in discussing and debating them “in house” with us, since I believe his passionate and faithful voice on these issues has been a blessing to our community.

This sentiment was echoed in the letters of support he received for his reappointment file. Many of his colleagues have pointed to the fact that we have professors with a wide range of perspectives along the conservative-progressive spectrum as a signature quality of Calvin’s ethos and education: “I believe that Calvin remains uniquely positioned among Christian colleges and universities to foster a healthy community of discourse and a vibrant learning environment, in large part because of the presence of thoughtful and expert faculty members such as Joe.” In a similar vein, one of Prof. Kuilema’s conservative colleagues writes the following:

On a host of important and contested issues Joe and I see things rather differently. Nevertheless, I believe we both share a commitment to Calvin being the sort of place where Christians can disagree on important matters. . . . To be clear, I would not want Calvin to change in some of the ways Joe thinks it should. But I think if Calvin is confident enough to move forward in a contested cultural moment while holding to key convictions rooted in scripture and Christian tradition, then Calvin should be confident enough to keep a place for those who we have invited to be here for years and, on some issues at least though not the whole, act as the “loyal opposition....” Even though I think he’s wrong (and he me), he has an integrity that speaks well of him.

Finally, his colleagues express the view that Calvin is a better place with Prof. Kuilema among us: “we are impoverished without him.”

PSC Discussion Summary (Revised)

To: President LeRoy and members of the Professional Status Committee
From: Benita Wolters-Fredlund, Dean, School of Humanities, Arts, and Social Sciences
Date: April 4, 2022
Re: PSC Discussion of Professor Joseph Kuilema's reappointment

The Professional Status Committee evaluated the reappointment dossier for Professor Joseph Kuilema in light of new information that surfaced in December 2021 and January 2022 that Prof. Kuilema had officiated at the LGBTQ+ wedding of a fellow employee after consulting with his chair, program director, pastors, and church council chair, but without consulting with his Dean, Provost, or President. The PSC also considered reports that summarized discussions that had taken place with a contingent of the PSC and Sherman Street CRC leadership and the executive of Classis Grand Rapids East about Prof. Kuilema's consultations with his local consistory and the role of Synodical and pastoral advice more generally. While the PSC's previous positive evaluation of Prof. Kuilema's Reformed Christian commitment, teaching, scholarship, and service did not change in view of this new information, the committee decided that this information provided evidence that Prof. Kuilema had not met the high standard for consultation set for all faculty, or those communicated specifically to him by the Board and Provost Brandsen in 2018, and that, as a result, they could not recommend his reappointment.

In their discussion of this case, PSC members affirmed the right of all faculty, including Prof. Kuilema, to disagree in principle with Calvin policies and denominational pastoral advice on LGBTQ+ matters, as long as such disagreement is done according to guidelines laid out in *Confessional Commitments and Academic Freedom, Handbook for Teaching Faculty*, and *Homosexuality and the Calvin College Community*. These documents emphasize high-trust communication patterns, the principle that good decisions are made in community with others, and the expectation that before faculty engage in conduct that may cause public controversy, they consult with their divisional vice president. In light of these expectations, as well as the clear expectations set for Prof. Kuilema by the Board and Provost Brandsen in 2018, the PSC was troubled by Prof. Kuilema's lack of transparency with the university about his decision to officiate at an LGBTQ+ wedding in October 2021. Members of the PSC felt that such a decision should have been made with more forthright communication and consultation with Calvin administrative leadership, including Prof. Kuilema's Dean and Provost. Members were also troubled by a lack of adherence to the commitments Prof. Kuilema made as a Calvin faculty member to live within institutional guidelines, noting that many other faculty who would like to see institutional and denomination change around LGBTQ+ affirmation shape their advocacy within the bounds of these expectations and guidelines.

Prof. Kuilema's many positive contributions to the community made this difficult decision a heavy one. The PSC ultimately decided that since that Prof. Kuilema's post-2018 appointments were *de facto* a probationary period during which his ability to adhere to the university's guidance and conditions with regard to his LGBTQ+ advocacy were under scrutiny, his behavior and decisions around officiating an LGBTQ+ wedding in October 2021 represented a failure to meet the expectations placed on him during this period.