

Defining Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion in the Orthodox Christian Context

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Diversity

Diversity at Saint Sava Serbian Orthodox School of Theology (further: SOSOT) honors the various cultural, theological, and personal backgrounds that enrich our Orthodox Christian community. While grounded in the traditions of the Serbian Orthodox Church, SOSOT welcomes and respects students from different ethnic, cultural, and national backgrounds who share a commitment to the Orthodox faith or seek to understand it more deeply.

As St. Paul expressed, “There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus.” (Galatians 3:28). This verse underscores our commitment to inclusion and respect for all backgrounds within the Body of Christ. Furthermore, following principles affirmed in the Council of Chalcedon, SOSOT respects the universality of the Church, welcoming participation from various Orthodox jurisdictions, thereby embracing unity in diversity.

Diversity at our School includes:

- Cultural and Ethnic Heritage: Acknowledging the unique contributions of Serbian and Orthodox Christian traditions, while also embracing the rich diversity within the global Orthodox Christian community.
- Vocations within the Church: Recognizing the diversity of roles within Orthodox ministry, including clergy, iconographers, choir directors, educators, and laypersons.

Equity

Equity at SOSOT is the commitment to providing all students with fair opportunities to pursue a rigorous theological education that prepares them for service within the Church. In alignment with Orthodox values, equity emphasizes accessibility and individualized support, recognizing the unique needs and callings of each student.

Scripture teaches that all people are made in God’s image: “*So God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.*” (Genesis 1:27). This foundational belief guides our commitment to ensuring

all students are treated with respect and dignity, supporting equitable access to resources and educational opportunities.

Our approach to equity includes:

- Access to Education: Ensuring financial aid and scholarships are available to support students called to ministry, particularly those from underserved communities within the Orthodox world. In addition to financial aid, SOSOT offers mentorship and pastoral guidance to students from underrepresented Orthodox jurisdictions. These resources aim to support students in their academic, spiritual, and vocational development, ensuring that their unique cultural and ecclesiastical backgrounds are recognized and valued.
- Human and Spiritual Development: Addressing the unique needs of each student, including support for spiritual growth, personal development, and pastoral training tailored to their background and future role in the Church.
- Religious Freedom and Conscience: Upholding the right of all members to practice their faith fully within the Orthodox Christian framework, and ensuring that policies reflect respect for the beliefs and conscience of each individual.

Inclusion

Inclusion at SOSOT reflects the Orthodox understanding of community (*koinonia*), where each member is respected and valued as part of the Body of Christ. As St. Paul noted, “For as the body is one and has many members, but all the members of that one body, being many, are one body, so also is Christ.” (1 Corinthians 12:12). This scripture supports the inclusive environment we cultivate, recognizing each person’s role in creating a vibrant community.

Inclusion at SOSOT includes:

- Orthodox Christian Community: Embracing all canonical Orthodox Christian backgrounds and traditions within the institution, fostering a welcoming environment inclusive of various Orthodox jurisdictions and practices.
- Support for Non-Orthodox Students: Providing an inclusive and respectful environment for students from other Christian backgrounds who are drawn to explore or study Orthodox theology, while upholding the Orthodox identity and mission of the School.
- Freedom of Expression within Orthodox Tradition: Encouraging open discussion and inquiry on theological, spiritual, and cultural matters within

the framework of Orthodox teachings, ensuring that academic freedom is exercised responsibly and in alignment with Orthodox doctrine.

While SOSOT warmly welcomes individuals from diverse Christian backgrounds who seek to explore Orthodox theology, all policies and practices within our institution are guided by Orthodox doctrine and do not endorse views or behaviors that are contrary to the teachings of the Orthodox Church.

Guiding Principles for DEI in an Orthodox Context

- Faithfulness to Orthodox Teaching: DEI policies at SOSOT are developed in accordance with the Holy Canons, Orthodox doctrine, and Church teachings. This means that while SOSOT respects diversity and inclusion, these principles are always harmonized with the teachings of the Church and do not extend to practices or beliefs that contradict Orthodox Christian faith.
- Freedom of Religion and Conscience: As an institution dedicated to religious education, SOSOT upholds the First Amendment right to religious freedom, which includes the right to educate and form students in alignment with Orthodox Christian values. “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof..” This freedom allows SOSOT to implement DEI practices that reflect the mission of the Church while respecting the individual rights of students to practice their faith.
- Human Dignity and Respect: Inspired by the Orthodox belief that all people are created in the image of God, SOSOT’s approach to DEI emphasizes the inherent dignity of each individual. This includes a commitment to charitable love in Truth, respect, and understanding for each member of the community.

Implementing DEI in Accordance with Orthodox Beliefs and Contemporary Higher Education Standards

- Inclusive Admissions and Financial Aid: Ensure that admissions practices are open to all students who are called to serve within the Orthodox Church or wish to learn about it, regardless of ethnic background. Financial aid and scholarship policies should prioritize accessibility for students from diverse

Orthodox jurisdictions, promoting a community that reflects the global nature of Orthodoxy.

- Academic Freedom within Orthodoxy: Foster an environment where students and faculty are free to engage in open, respectful dialogue on theological and spiritual issues within the Orthodox tradition. This includes supporting critical inquiry and discussion that aligns with Orthodox teachings, while maintaining the integrity of Orthodox doctrine. Our commitment to academic freedom within the Orthodox tradition includes fostering an environment where students and faculty can respectfully engage in critical inquiry and dialogue. SOSOT upholds this freedom while maintaining doctrinal integrity, ensuring that discussions and teachings remain within the bounds of Orthodox Christian doctrine.
- Pastoral Sensitivity and Support: Provide pastoral and psychological support that recognizes the unique backgrounds and needs of each student, ensuring that all students feel included and respected within the Orthodox Christian framework. This includes resources for spiritual growth, mental health, and community engagement tailored to their unique vocational paths.
- Commitment to Ethical and Moral Conduct: Maintain policies that prevent discrimination based on race, ethnicity, nationality, or gender, ensuring a safe and supportive environment for all students. At the same time, policies are crafted to respect Orthodox beliefs on moral and theological matters.

PROPOSED

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Statement of DEI for SOSOT

At Saint Sava Serbian Orthodox School of Theology (SOSOT), Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) embody our commitment to the Orthodox Christian values of love, respect, and community. Rooted deeply in Sacred Scripture, Apostolic Tradition, the Canons, and the teachings of the Orthodox Church, we honor the diverse backgrounds and unique callings of each member of our community. SOSOT's approach to DEI emphasizes accessibility, support, and the freedom to practice and learn within an Orthodox Christian framework. While our policies align with contemporary higher education standards, they remain fully harmonized with the Holy Canons, moral principles, and teachings of the Church.

Our approach to DEI upholds the right to religious freedom and reflects our mission to form future leaders for the Orthodox Christian community, ensuring that each student is supported in their academic, spiritual, and pastoral journey in a manner that aligns with Orthodox Christian doctrine. As Christ taught, “*A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; as I have loved you, that you also love one another.*” (John 13:34). Through this commitment to love and respect, SOSOT strives to cultivate a supportive and inclusive community for all, while remaining unwaveringly faithful to the Gospel and to the teachings of the Orthodox Church.

To enact these principles, SOSOT will provide tailored support and mentorship opportunities to students from diverse Orthodox jurisdictions, respecting their unique backgrounds while promoting academic and spiritual growth within an Orthodox framework. Our policies ensure that all students, including those from non-Orthodox Christian backgrounds who are drawn to study Orthodox theology, are treated with dignity and respect. However, we are also committed to upholding the doctrinal integrity of Orthodox teachings, and our DEI policies do not extend to practices or beliefs that contradict the Orthodox Christian faith.