Dear Grace Church School Community,

We write to share some of the work the Board of Trustees and the administration have been doing to clarify and affirm the “Grace Way” of promoting a culture of dignity and belonging within our diverse community. With media stories this past year portraying our school in ways we have often found unrecognizable, we wanted to speak for ourselves to you, our most important constituencies, about Grace’s mission, its principles, and the plans they have inspired us to make. We do so having heard pleas for the school to do a better job of communicating and living its values. And so that is what we have set out to do.

The Grace Way emerges from bedrock commitments of the school. Our Episcopal identity calls us to recognize the inherent and precious value of every individual. It makes us strive to provide an education worthy of that shared humanity, which includes our human fallibility and limitations. It leads us to prize critical thinking, intellectual humility, and the importance of encountering a myriad of views with respect for the dignity of those who hold them. Our mission is to provide an outstanding education, one fueled by pleasure in learning and distinguished by the confident mastery of academic skills and the development of an active ethical consciousness. That mission depends upon our students feeling a deep and abiding sense of belonging. And our history contains a longstanding commitment to the people of our community, whom we strive to treat with kindness, fairness, welcome, and love.

In the past year, there have been many legitimate calls for us to do better at living out these fundamental commitments. We have made some mistakes, which we embrace as opportunities to learn and grow. There have also been misconceptions that have polarized parts of the community and limited our ability to recognize the breadth and depth of durable values we hold in common.

On the pages that follow, we share priorities and plans that the trustees and administration have identified as crucial to realizing our vision of the Grace Way for promoting dignity and belonging. They flow from work launched at a summer retreat, when we discussed the history of the school’s efforts in this area and reviewed two reports commissioned by the Board. The first was an outside assessment of our culture around race and racism. The second was an internal report from a Grace task force charged with identifying gaps that may be hindering our efforts to help every student feel a deep sense of belonging at school. We appreciate the hundreds of community members who contributed to those reports and who offered feedback to us directly. Our efforts will be more effective because of their affirmations, critiques, and recommendations. Ultimately, what we have written represents a shared vision of the Board and administration along with specific steps we believe will help Grace advance its values and mission with the greatest fidelity and effectiveness.

Some may ask why we have paid particular attention to race and racism, given that the Grace Way applies equally to many other facets of our humanity. We emphasize race to meet a moment in the life of our school and our nation, in which community members have asked us to clarify the school’s position on this subject. That emphasis in no way belies our commitment to combating bias in other forms. To the contrary, we believe our efforts in this area will allow us better to honor the diversity of diversities that exists at Grace. We look forward to discussing those efforts with you and to providing updates on our progress.

On behalf of the administration and the Board of Trustees, we share these priorities and plans along with our gratitude for all who helped shape them.

George P. Davison
Head of School

Olivia Douglas
Chair, Board of Trustees
The Grace Way

Priorities and Plans for Nurturing a Culture of Dignity and Belonging

Fall 2021
I. Affirming Our Values

Our Commitment to Academic Excellence

The Grace Way begins with our commitment to providing an excellent education for all of our students. We see belonging as an academic necessity. Students who feel a sense of belonging at school will be more likely to embrace challenges in the curriculum, ask questions in discussions, and engage deeply with our community of teachers and students. That’s a core reason we take seriously any obstacle to belonging at Grace, which includes the impact of systemic racism on our community.

In our academic work and in our community building, we strive to celebrate our common humanity while honoring our differences. We believe no student can hope to thrive in our increasingly diverse society without having the awareness, the language, and the cultural tools to navigate it. To take racial literacy as an example, we believe all students must be equipped to discuss matters of racial identity accurately and compassionately. For younger students, this commitment means developing an age-appropriate vocabulary for discussing race without judgment or shame. For older students, this commitment includes developing the capacity to examine historical and cultural sources with an awareness of voices past generations have overlooked and ignored.

Respect for differing viewpoints is a fundamental commitment of our current mission statement, in which the school celebrates “the ability to express one’s own ideas and to appraise those of others.” The Grace Way seeks to cultivate the broadest possible curiosity in our students along with habits of effective scholarship like prizing intellectual humility, nuance, and candor. We value questioning minds over unwavering adherence to orthodoxy. At the same time, we appreciate the guardrails that our ethical commitments provide to our pursuit of truth, meaning that we will not devote classroom time to pseudoscience or inaccurate history. There is a tension between valuing free and open inquiry as essential element of our program and maintaining a set of bedrock commitments to promote dignity and belonging at Grace. We recognize that tension, and we seek to face it with candor and courage.

Action Item: The Assistant Head of School and the Office of Community Engagement will lead discussions with faculty about ways that—both in and out of the classroom—they can affirm and advance Grace’s commitment to valuing differing thoughtful perspectives on complex questions. They will provide an update to the Education Committee of the Board in the Spring of 2022.

Our Ethical Commitments

The Grace Way aspires to nurture a culture that opposes intolerance, promotes growth, seeks understanding, and lives up to the values inherent in our name. Our Episcopal identity and mission orient the school toward just and sound learning and to a set of ethical aims higher than individual academic achievement. We seek to help each student develop an active ethical consciousness, and we work to cultivate in our community mutual understanding, humility, respect, and kindness. Where there has been hurt, the Grace Way pursues healing and reconciliation. We see restorative practices as helpful tools for building a culture that honors human dignity, that considers the intentions behind actions and also their impact, and that understands accountability as taking truthful responsibility for the outcome of our actions.

Action Item: The Office of Community Engagement will continue to train faculty and administration in restorative practices so that they may be used with greater frequency and
competence as tools for promoting reconciliation and healing within the community. They will prepare a progress report for the Board’s Institutional Culture Committee, including feedback from students who have participated in these restorative practices, to be submitted by May 2022.

**Action Item:** The Academic Administration will review Grace’s program for emotional literacy, resilience, and conflict resolution. They will prepare a report and recommendations for the Institutional Culture Committee by the end of the 2022–23 school year.

*Expressing Our Values Clearly*

**Grace seeks to provide its students with an outstanding education and with the desire to use it to make the world a better place.** The Grace Way entails gaining knowledge about challenges the world is facing and gaining the skills necessary to do something about them. This aim is a fundamental component of the school’s “Commitment to Antiracism, Equity, and Belonging,” which the Board approved in 2018.

In the past few years, there has been a proliferation of different definitions and models for pursuing antiracism and equity. We have not always communicated clearly what we mean by those terms. For us at Grace, antiracism means something basic and fundamental: actively opposing racism in its individual and systemic forms. And at Grace equity means responding to inequalities in society by striving to provide equality of opportunity and access at school.

The Grace Way helps students to study and engage in age-appropriate ways the role of race and racism in shaping our nation’s history and our present society. And it does so without endorsing as definitive the views of any particular author. We recognize the power imbalance between students and teachers, along with the desire that students have to earn their teachers’ approval; as such, we view it as critical that teachers work hard to ensure that students feel a deep sense of belonging within their classrooms and never feel pressured to misrepresent either their views or aspects of their identity.

**Action Item:** The Academic Administration will lead discussions in which faculty identify (1) the sort of questions they want students to be asking themselves as a result of antiracism work in their classroom; and (2) the methods they will use to help students engage those questions authentically, confident that they will not be met with judgment or shame for expressing candid views. These discussions will take place during faculty meetings before the end of January 2022.

**Revising Our Mission**

**Confusion about Grace’s core values suggests a need for a clearer statement of our mission and ideals.** We accept the Task Force’s recommendation that the school would be well served by having a revised mission statement: one that is more concise, clear, and inspiring.

**Action Item:** The Executive Committee of the Board and the Assistant Head will design a process for a mission statement review and revision that would seek input from the broadest range of constituencies within the school. They will submit a proposal for such a process by June 2022 and should aim to have the process completed—and a revised mission statement adopted—by July 2023.
II. Supporting Our Faculty and Staff

Providing Guidance, Support, and Evaluation

The faculty and staff enact and embody the Grace Way of promoting dignity and belonging through the content they teach, the manner in which they teach it, the classroom cultures they create, and the relationships they form—both with students and with one another. Adults who experience a sense of belonging themselves—who feel known and supported—will be able and inclined to support students likewise.

**Action Item:** This year, the school is using a new system for professional support and evaluation, developed jointly by a team of Grace faculty and administration. The administration should use it to provide more effective support of department leaders and faculty, promoting conversations about their courses, their pedagogy, and the ways they seek to foster a sense of belonging in their classrooms. They should work with staff members to provide equivalent support. The administration should provide a report on their progress to the Education Committee of the Board by October 2022.

**Action Item:** The Academic Administration will provide more explicit guidance for promoting belonging in the classroom. They will develop a framework for using the GraceNet pages of MS and HS classes to provide parents with greater visibility into course objectives and assignments, especially as they relate to antiracism. The Academic Administration will work with faculty members to deepen their understanding of best practices—including by developing shared language for qualities of excellence in course design and pedagogy. They should provide a report to the Education Committee of the Board during the 2022–23 school year.

III. Developing the Program

Assessing, Developing, and Communicating about the Curriculum and Program

Great teachers never stop trying to get better, and the faculty at Grace continually work to improve the school’s curriculum and their own teaching practices. They seek out ways to enhance their courses, allowing the curriculum to evolve from year to year. Sometimes that process is gradual. Usually it is accompanied by much research, discussion, study, and care. Always it seeks to better realize the values and mission of the school. This, too, is part of the Grace Way: that it seeks to get better at promoting dignity and belonging, assuming that its approach can always benefit from further refinement.

Grace’s commitment to providing an outstanding education demands that students learn in age-appropriate ways about how race and racism (and anti-Black racism in particular) have shaped American history and our society. We work to ensure that our curriculum helps our youngest students to imagine their ways into the lives of others as well as having a clear sense of their own identities. And we strive to ensure that our oldest students graduate with the knowledge and skills needed to be engaged citizens of a diverse and imperfect society. Though we offer several voluntary student spaces for discussing matters of identity and race—e.g., affinity and alliance groups, planning committees for annual events like the MLK Symposium—students at Grace cannot opt out of the study of identity and race.

**Action Item:** The administration will support department leaders in continually assessing and developing the curriculum so that, in age-appropriate ways, students develop a healthy sense of self,
an appreciation of civic engagement, an accurate and thorough understanding of history, and facility discussing matters of identity. After this year’s pause to work on the NYSAIS decennial accreditation, we will resume our regular cycle of annual reports to the Board via the Education Committee and the Institutional Culture Committee.

**Action Item:** Affinity spaces for students at Grace will always be voluntary. The division heads and the Office of Community Engagement will communicate annually to parents about the role of affinity and alliance groups in different divisions and how they can promote student experiences of belonging.

**Action Item:** We have charged the administration with communicating changes in the curriculum and schedule to students and parents at the start of the school year, providing a forum for questions so that rumors about them do not become sources of anxiety and mistrust. This will begin at the start of the 2021–22 school year, using curriculum nights to demonstrate the school’s commitment to providing visibility into how the Grace Way shows up in our classrooms.

### IV. Increasing Our Diversity and Tracking Our Demographics

Diversity alone is not sufficient for ensuring healthy experiences of belonging, but it is a vital and necessary precondition. With that in mind, we seek to increase our efforts both to measure our racial diversity and to enhance it.

**Action Item:** The Institutional Culture Committee will develop effective metrics for tracking changes in the demographic composition of the student body and the faculty and staff. The goal should be to use straightforward and understandable data, avoiding vague or inaccurate euphemisms and respecting the way individuals choose to identify. They should report the results of their work to the Board by May 2022.

**Action Item:** The Board has charged the administration and admissions offices to redouble their efforts to enhance the racial diversity of the student body and faculty and staff, and we have committed to providing support for those efforts. We ask that they report annually to the full Board of Trustees about the outcome of their efforts, their assessment of progress, and their strategies for improvement.

### V. Communicating Our Vision and Listening to the Community

Though grounded in the school’s durable values, the Grace Way seeks to be responsive to the evolving hopes and needs of our students, faculty, staff, families, alumni, and neighbors. We recognize the vital importance of communicating our values clearly and listening carefully to the broadest range of our community members. Each of us has a role to play in helping others experience a sense of belonging at Grace, and our efforts will, in turn, deepen our own sense of belonging and connection to the school.

**Action Item:** The Institutional Culture Committee and the Office of Community Engagement will work to evaluate, consolidate, and explain the structures Grace uses to promote belonging, remaining mindful of the school’s tendency to use acronyms that community members have found opaque. They should report their recommendations to the Board by May 2022.
**Action Item:** The Office of Community Engagement will continue to develop programming for parents that can engage them in the Grace Way of promoting a culture of dignity and belonging. They will report to the Board’s Institutional Culture Committee about their parent initiatives on an annual basis.

**Action Item:** We have charged the Institutional Culture Committee and the administration with evaluating ways to provide community members effective avenues for expressing concerns. The Board affirms the Task Force’s recommendation not to adopt a web portal for registering anonymous complaints. We charge the Board’s metrics committee with evaluating the Task Force’s recommendation that we conduct a short annual climate survey of students, parents, and the faculty and staff—asking questions about belonging and tracking responses year over year. They should decide whether to do so by March 2022, so that such a survey could be conducted during the 2022–23 school year. Meanwhile, the Board and administration commit to seeking out ongoing feedback throughout the year.

**Conclusion**

The priorities and plans above represent steps that the Board and administration have already resolved to take. There will be more to come, and we will provide updates on these initiatives and create opportunities for the community to participate in and provide further feedback about our efforts. We will continue to look to and learn from a diverse array of scholars, writers, and colleagues from peer schools, whose heterodox thinking on these complex questions has challenged us and helped us to grow. Yet in the end the school’s approach to nurturing a culture of dignity and belonging will be its own. It will be the Grace Way.