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“CHANGING THE WORLD THROUGH OUR FAITHFUL PRESENCE”

If you want to know the true “State of the College,” look around this sanctuary and observe the collective strength of talented and dedicated colleagues. In recent years, when faced with economic difficulties, when confronted with literal floods, when challenged by shifting regional demographics, when circumstances have called us to expand our educational vision—this community has rallied together, exhibiting courage and confidence. Many of the achievements we celebrate are the result of creative partnerships. For example, the career center and the offices of alumni and parent relations and development combined their efforts to plan “Into the City,” trips to urban centers that offer Messiah students opportunities to network and gain professional insights from industry leaders. Last year, Student volunteers worked with staff members in dining and grounds services to compost upwards of 700 pounds of organic waste from campus eateries—some of which was used for the Grantham Community Garden.¹ School deans and faculty members collaborated to translate departmental strengths into new undergraduate majors, including Chinese business, Chinese studies, computer and information science, dance, digital media, ethnic and areas studies, as well as masters programs in Education, Higher Education and Youth and Young Adult Ministries. Thank you for your dedication and cooperation.

This past summer has been historic for our nation. In July, a heat wave enveloped the country breaking more than 1,000 high-temperature records² and inspiring headlines such as “Heat Wave 2011: Hot ‘Dome’ Traps Much of U.S. in Pressure Cooker.”³ The soaring mercury combined with the heated rhetoric emanating from Washington D.C., Harrisburg, television pundits and social networking sites has created a heavy, almost oppressive climate.

Most recently, we watched our nation slide to the brink of economic crisis and, for the first time in history, risk a default on our debt, primarily due to broken, angry political discourse. In a similar way, the Harrisburg region is being shaken by economic turmoil and governmental impasse. The divisive rhetoric of extremists in all political parties and vitriol from those outside the political process have led to discord, polarization and a pervasive sense of hopelessness. As a region and as a nation, we appear to be unable and unwilling to commit ourselves to the common good.

Amid the oppressive heat of this present moment, the Messiah College community has the privilege of demonstrating an alternate way of learning, serving and communicating. Like a cool breeze on a hot, humid day, our discourse must be refreshing and sustaining—a discourse rooted in our core commitments that confidently allow us to build relationships even in the midst of disagreement, a discourse that promotes mutual respect, civility and hospitality. This type of discourse is essential to the strength of our democracy and it is vital to the ethos of a Christian college, particularly one with our theological roots.

At Messiah, we seek to humbly follow the example of Christ whose presence in the world welcomed others into authentic dialogue and provided a pathway not only for salvation, but also

¹ Craig Dalen and Beth Lorow, Site Marketing Sign, 2011, Lottie Nelson and The Union Cafe, Grantham, PA.

² Keen, Judy. "Record heat stretches from Rockies to East Coast - USATODAY.com." *USA Today*. 18 July 2011. 17 Aug. 2011.

³ Tammy Webber, "Heat Wave 2011: Hot 'Dome' Traps Much Of U.S. In Pressure Cooker (VIDEO)," *The Huffington Post*, 20 July 2011, 17 Aug. 2011.

for personal transformation. The strength of Christ's presence was most compelling when the heated debates of His cultural context were most divisive.

FAITHFUL PRESENCE

In describing a vision for Christians to engage the world, sociologist James Davison Hunter offers the compelling concept of **faithful presence** in his recent book, *To Change the World: The Irony, Tragedy, and Possibility of Christianity in the Late Modern World*. Hunter's book has been selected as a launching point for campus community discussions centered on the theme, "To Change the World." While we will likely disagree with some aspects of his thesis, Hunter's thoughtful exposition of what it means for Christians to be a faithful presence in the world is a very timely message. Through a full slate of upcoming events, including a campus visit by Hunter, we will be engaging in meaningful dialogue about the challenges of cultural change in our present context. Many Christians mistakenly focus on changing culture through the acquisition and wielding of power. By contrast, Hunter argues that if there is hope for human flourishing in the contemporary world "it begins when the Word of Shalom becomes flesh in us." He writes, "When the Word of all flourishing—defined by the love of Christ—becomes flesh in us, in our relationships with others, within the tasks we are given, and within our sphere of influence—absence gives way to presence, and the word we speak to each other and to the world becomes authentic and trustworthy."⁴

At Messiah College, we are called to be a community whose faithful presence inspires and cultivates purposeful change in our world. As a community, we invite the "Word of shalom to become flesh in us" by affirming the gift of our institutional mission and by incarnating the gift of our mission in service to others.

AFFIRMING THE GIFT OF OUR INSTITUTIONAL MISSION

By affirming the gift of our institutional mission, we can be fully present to one another as we engage the world through the lens of that distinct mission. Messiah College is a voluntary, covenantal community bound together by Christian faith convictions rooted in respect for the authority of Scripture, the historic teaching of the Church and the discernment of the Church community. My hope and prayer for the Messiah College community during this new academic year—regardless of the difficulties that come before us—is that all of our private and public conversations will be characterized by Christ's humility and love. Our unique institutional mission and identity is precious and it must be carefully preserved and thoughtfully nurtured. Let's do something a little different this morning – please stand as we join our voices in unison and read the mission and identity statement.

Messiah College is a Christian college of the liberal and applied arts and sciences. The College is committed to an embracing evangelical spirit rooted in the Anabaptist, Pietist, and Wesleyan traditions of the Christian Church.

Our mission is to educate men and women toward maturity of intellect, character and Christian faith in preparation for lives of service, leadership and reconciliation in church and society.

I am very encouraged by the many ways Messiah employees affirm and advance our mission on a daily basis. In a recent article, John Fea, associate professor of American history, examined what a sense of academic rootedness might look like for faculty and staff of the contemporary academy. In contrast to the prevailing "independent contractor" mindset of the day, Professor Fea asks, "*What if we participated in the world from the context of where we are situated, whether*

⁴ James Davison Hunter, *To change the world: the irony, tragedy, and possibility of Christianity in the late modern world* (New York: Oxford UP, 2010) 252.

*that is a geographical place, a religious tradition or an understanding of ambition rooted in Christian vocation?*⁵”

He describes a vision of faithful presence and academic rigor consistent with Messiah College’s mission—an educational community that honors and learns from its historic tradition, while simultaneously welcoming and learning from individuals who represent other Christian traditions. Based on his personal experience at Messiah, Professor Fea explains that *“The Anabaptist flavor of the place has shaped the way I think about and teach American history, a subject that by its very nature raises questions of nationalism, war, and justice. I have become a more thoughtful Christian and scholar by imbibing as much as I can from the religious convictions that inform the place where I teach. **There is a level of intellectual engagement that I’m not sure I would find at a non-church-related school.**”*⁶

Professor of American Religious Studies, David Weaver-Zercher, offered a similar description of Messiah, writing *“Indeed, [Messiah] College has consciously chosen a middle way. . . . rootedness in a particular tradition, yet (we hope) humble acknowledgement that no one theological tradition has the corner on truth.”*⁷ He refers to the result as an *“ecumenically zesty mix of Anabaptists, Wesleyans, Catholics, Evangelicals, Episcopalians, Pentecostals, and persons from the Reformed tradition who talk with one another daily about teaching, scholarship, and the purpose of Christian higher education.”*⁸

Even as we cherish the breadth of our embrace, we also underscore the importance of our institutional core commitments which are articulated in the College’s foundational documents. Our current institutional strategic plan identifies the need for ongoing mission-related employee education. In 2009 the provost led an engaging series of trustee and employee presentations that focused on Messiah College’s core and privileged beliefs. Next spring, the provost will lead a series of presentations designed to increase our understanding of the role of Messiah’s foundational documents, including the Community Covenant, in the life of our educational community.

Messiah College’s distinctively Christian mission and core commitments call us to pursue academic rigor—not in spite of, but precisely because of our faith.

According to Hunter, one of the key expressions of faithful presence is to be “fully present and committed to our tasks.”⁹ The question of how well we are fulfilling our tasks can be considered through informative signposts including assessment measures - as well as examples of academic excellence manifested in the lives of faculty, students and alumni.

Messiah College recently received the results from the Collegiate Learning Assessment, which was administered to samples of first-year and senior Messiah College students during the 2010-2011 academic year. The CLA measures an institution's contributions to a student’s development of key higher order competencies.

- Messiah College first-year and senior students’ performance on the CLA tasks was very positive. Our seniors scored above the 75th percentile of all participating

⁵ John Fea, "Does the Way of Improvement Lead Home? Rooted Cosmopolitanism and the Church-related College," *The Cresset* LXXIV (2011): 20.

⁶ Ibid. 22.

⁷ Weaver-Zercher, David L. "Preface." *Minding the Church: Scholarship in the Anabaptist Tradition : Essays in Honor of E. Morris Sider*. By E. Morris Sider and David Weaver-Zercher. Telford, PA: Pandora, U.S., 2002. 15. Print.

⁸ Ibid. 15-16.

⁹ James Davison Hunter, *To change the world: the irony, tragedy, and possibility of Christianity in the late modern world* (New York: Oxford UP, 2010) 246.

institutions and Messiah College's total score was higher than 88 percent of all participating institutions.¹⁰

- One area in which we want to strengthen our performance is on the task labeled "critique-an-argument."¹¹ The provost is already working with colleagues to implement educator development sessions that will emphasize teaching and learning theory and practice, particularly in relationship to critical analysis of arguments and the impact of technology on student learning styles. Effective teaching and learning is central to the fulfillment of our educational mission and deserves focused attention.

Assessment results provide a salient, but only partial picture of academic quality. Consider the accomplishments of our faculty scholars, such as Crystal Downing, professor of English and film studies, who combine outstanding intellectual scholarship with a deep Christian faith commitment. Professor Downing has established herself as one of "the finest writers in theo-poetics."¹² In the introduction to her forthcoming book *Changing Signs of Truth* she suggests that "believers might operate on the edge between cultural captivity and cultural irrelevance. It is not about employing the trendy signs of culture to make Christianity seem relevant. It is about demonstrating that Christianity always has relevance—no matter the time, no matter the culture."¹³ While her scholarship has been internationally recognized, Professor Downing's interests extend beyond the academy to the broader Christian community to contemplate, energize and re-envision their language and "signs" of faith. As a result, she has presented her scholarship to a diverse array of laypeople in venues from academic halls to the stage of the Cornerstone music festival. Crystal Downing is one example among many in our community whose scholarship not only invigorates classroom teaching but advances intellectual discourse within the academy and the Church.

The influence of an academically rigorous education is also evident in the lives of many Messiah students and alumni, like Emily Howell, who graduated in 2010 with a major in engineering and was awarded a prestigious and highly competitive National Science Foundation Graduate Research Fellowship. Today, she is a doctoral student in biomedical engineering at Cornell University.

Emily's faithful presence is evident in her dedication to her academic studies. She says, "*Messiah College taught me the real value of whatever academic rigors I pursue; . . . No one can question the quality of academics I received, but somehow Messiah College avoids applying the 'pressure to succeed' that is so pervasive . . . The biggest influence Messiah College and the Collaboratory have had on me is to free me from the entanglements of typical academic ambition, shifting my focus to people. . . with souls and hurts and joys.*"

Crystal and Emily are two examples of the many employees, students and alumni whose achievements bear witness to the quality and depth of a Messiah College education.

Being attentive to our institutional mission also requires us to situate ourselves in the rich tradition of the liberal and applied arts and sciences. Throughout the past year, a plethora of books, articles and surveys have promoted and debated the merits and value of a college degree and the traditional liberal arts and sciences. Earlier this year, the topic of academic quality (or, rather, a lack thereof) in colleges and universities made national headlines with the publication of

¹⁰ Adapted from Messiah College Office of Institutional Research, *Spring 2011 Collegiate Learning Assessment Executive Summary*, Rep. (Messiah College, 2011), 2-3.

¹¹ *Ibid*, 2-3.

¹² Scott Holland, "Preface to the Special Edition on Theo-poetics," *CrossCurrents* (March 2010).

¹³ Crystal L. Downing, *Changing Signs of Truth: A Christian Introduction to the Semiotics of Communication* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2012).

the book *Academically Adrift*. Authors Arum and Roksa challenge the overall quality of students' learning in American colleges and universities, citing data from a nationwide sampling of college students who took the Collegiate Learning Assessment (CLA) exam.¹⁴

Troubled economic times always intensify conversations about the value of financial investments, including the funding of college education. A recent Pew Study described the complex attitudes Americans possess about the value of higher education. Fifty seven percent of respondents indicated that they do not believe colleges and universities provide a good value for students and families.¹⁵ **Yet, the vast majority of college graduates surveyed (84 percent) reported “that college has been a good value for them personally.”**¹⁶ In a Chronicle of Higher Education article, Eric Hoover attributes this discrepancy, in part, to the liberal arts based benefits of higher education - benefits that are *“intangible, immeasurable, and untethered to narrow questions about the outcomes of a particular degree.”*¹⁷

At the same time, it is important to note that a college degree does yield tangible economic benefits for graduates. The College Board's "Education Pays" report found that the median earnings of college graduates working full-time in 2008 was \$20,000 more than the median earnings of their peers with a high school degree.¹⁸ Even factoring in the effects of our recent economic recession, the rate of unemployment among college graduates ages 25 and older was five points lower than the unemployment rate for high school graduates in 2009.¹⁹

In light of our nation's ongoing debate about the value of an undergraduate education, authors Staley and Trinkle predict that *“All higher education institutions will start to develop new metrics and new forms of proof of the value added from their degrees.”*²⁰ At Messiah College, the Middle States Self-Study Review steering team and related working groups are gathering and analyzing institutional data which will help to inform the adoption of new outcome-related metrics and provide valuable input to the College's upcoming institutional strategic planning process.

Messiah's holistic approach to the liberal and applied arts and sciences offers the “value-added” distinction of educating students' toward maturity of “intellect, character and Christian faith.” Richard Katz, a higher education consultant, argues that the liberal arts must be rooted in an “ethical context.” He contends, *“In many ways, the recent economic failures are educational failures to the extent that very bright and well-educated people signed off on financial instruments they neither understood nor felt obliged to understand as long as they made money.”*²¹

Across all sectors of society, Messiah alumni are influencing their professional communities for the greater good. Carl Lundblad is one alumnus whose career has included positions such as a legislative aide for a U.S. Senator and most recently, executive vice president, general counsel and secretary of Tower Bancorp, Inc. Carl credits Messiah College for encouraging him to thoughtfully consider the relationship between his academic studies and Christian faith which led

¹⁴ Richard Arum and Josipa Roksa, *Academically adrift: limited learning on college campuses* (Chicago: University of Chicago P, 2011).

¹⁵ Pew Social Trends Staff, "Is College Worth It? | Pew Social & Demographic Trends," *Pew Social & Demographic Trends - Public Opinion Polling, Survey Research, & Demographic Data Analysis*, 15 May 2011, Pew Research Center, 17 Aug. 2011 <pewsocialtrends.org>.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Eric Hoover, "It's More Than Just the Degree, Graduates Say." *Chronicle.com*, 15 May 2011, The Chronicle of Higher Education, 17 Aug. 2011.

¹⁸ Sandy Baum, Jennifer Ma, and Kathleen Payea, *Education Pays 2010: The Benefits of Higher Education for Individuals and Society*, Rep. (New York: College Board, 2010).

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ David J. Stanley and Dennis A. Trinkle, "The Changing Landscape of Higher Education" *Educause Review*, July-Aug. 2011, 17 Aug. 2011.

²¹ Richard N. Katz, "Scholars, Scholarship, and the Scholarly Enterprise in the Digital Age," *EDUCAUSE Review* 45 (2011): *EDUCAUSE*, Mar.-Apr. 2011, 30 June 2011.

him to develop core personal and professional values. Drawing on his Messiah education, Carl identifies the most rewarding aspect of his general counsel role... *“It is the opportunity to positively impact the corporate culture and strategy of the organization in a manner that helps achieve the company’s objectives and benefits our employees, customers, shareholders, and communities.”* Messiah College’s holistic approach to education is not only **valuable** for our graduates in today’s competitive marketplace, it is also **invaluable** for the common good of our society.

INCARNATING THE GIFT OF OUR MISSION BY SERVING THE WORLD

The mission we affirm will only be advanced when all the members of the Messiah College community are deeply committed to incarnating that mission. I encourage each person present—whether you teach, administrate, tend grounds, clean buildings, raise funds—whatever role you fulfill—be attentive to living out the College’s mission in your sphere of influence. This type of reflection and action is essential as we conclude the final year of the College’s strategic plan and develop a new plan for 2012-2016. David Walker, our vice president for finance and strategic planning, will be providing leadership to the process of developing a strategic plan that will guide our institutional priorities, goals and actions. (*Note: Invite David to stand*)

Affirming our mission as a gift should inspire us to incarnate that gift by serving. Sister Joan Chittister writes, *“Good work is our gift to the future. It is what we leave behind—our persistence, our precision, our commitment, our fidelity to the smallest...of tasks—that will change the mind of generations to come about our sacred obligation to bear our share of the holy making enterprise that is work.”*²² And the work that is completed by each individual gathered in this room is work that is both sacred and significant.

One of the dynamic ways we are actively living out our institutional mission is through our campus sustainability efforts, led by an enthusiastic team of faculty, staff and students.

Sustainability Coordinator Craig Dalen articulates the motivation for this effort: *“Broadly speaking, sustainability encompasses our desire as Christians to be in right relationships with God, with one another, and with Creation... with the goal of being “ecologically viable, economically strong, and socially just.”*

Our commitment to the triple bottom line—to the ecological, economic and social implications of a decision—prompted Messiah College to invest in the largest solar-thermal system in the region, a wonderful example of partnership that has included trustees, administrators, faculty, staff and students.

The campus Sustainability Committee, with the support of local farmers, has also launched the sunFLOWER POWER pilot program at Orchard Hill—a marvelous example of the type of innovative collaboration we have been encouraging on campus. The five acre field is projected to yield five tons of sunflower seeds, which will be pressed into high-quality sunflower oil for use by Dining Services. At a later date, the Collaboratory’s biodiesel team will transform the cooking oil into alternative fuel for use in campus vehicles.

Other campus examples of innovation include the partnership of Library educators and dining services staff members who combined their efforts to open Café Diem which provides a hospitable space for meaningful engagement and cooperative learning. A campus task force is working on the design and future installation of a student Learning Commons. This centralized hub will bring together the resources of the library, media services, the Writing Center, the

²² Joan Chittister, *The monastery of the heart: an invitation to a meaningful life* ([Katonah, NY]: BlueBridge, 2011) 113.

Learning Center, disabilities services and learning technology services to provide all students with critical educational support.

In the year ahead, we will continue to explore and design educational programs that are innovative in both content and delivery. To achieve that end, information technology services has been reorganized to offer enhanced resources for effective teaching and increased student learning. Neil Weaver has been appointed to serve as “Director of Innovation Consulting” and financial resources have been allocated to assist educators with the strategic use of technology to fulfill educational and administrative goals. For example, faculty and students in the department of history are using iPads and social media forums to publicly disseminate historical information they have gathered from their excavations in Pennsylvania and Cyprus. Undergraduate and graduate faculty are continuing to discover the potential and promise (and, on occasion, frustration) of the Sakai Learning Management System. The residence life department is now using iPads to increase their mobility and meeting productivity.

As a campus, we are seeking to better understand how to use social media tools to communicate Messiah’s distinctives and to enrich the educational experience of our students. Last spring, key administrators and staff members received educational training about the most popular forms of social media and we have made significant progress with our institutional presence on these sites. Tomorrow’s Community of Educators retreat will focus attention on how to harness forums such as *Facebook* and *Twitter* to accomplish educational objectives.

In all of our endeavors, as we seek to fulfill our educational mission and successfully innovate to maintain our institutional strength, we know that fiscal stewardship is crucial. We must aggressively seek additional revenue sources and prioritize and reallocate existing resources when necessary. FY11 was a very successful fundraising year and we are grateful to the Development team who helped us exceed our goals! But, we must bear in mind that much of the funding we received is designated for Centennial Campaign projects. The ongoing financial pressures brought on by the global economic crisis, mercurial stock market and decreased institutional net tuition revenue (due to affordability challenges for families) are real and they require us to cautiously steward resources and control expenses. Strategies we are employing to increase our financial strength include the establishment of an internal endowment team to better manage our investment assets in a volatile market and the continued implementation of new graduate programs and retention strategies for undergraduate students so that we might meet or exceed future net tuition revenue targets.

Perhaps you are wondering about enrollment. As of today, the undergraduate enrollment headcount is 20 above our goal of 705 due to strong transfer student enrollment and retention. In addition, last year our graduate enrollment was 124, this year it is 172.

In addition to promoting sustainability, nurturing innovation, and exercising fiscal stewardship, we must incarnate our institutional mission in the world by promoting inclusive excellence. According to Bernardo Michael, special assistant to the president and provost for diversity affairs, this calls for “*a comprehensive institution-wide commitment to diversity, inclusion, and equity as pathways to educational excellence. Our shared responsibility is to prepare our students for all of the possibilities and challenges of the 21st century world, a century in which minorities are projected to become the majority in the United States as early as 2041.*”²³

²³ Updated demographic information from Sabrina Tavernise, "In Census, Young Americans Increasingly Diverse," *New York Times* 5 Feb. 2011, New York ed., sec. A:10, [Nytimes.com](http://nytimes.com), 4 Feb. 2011, Arthur Ochs Sulzberger, Jr., 12 July 2011.

The responsibility of fully realizing *inclusive excellence* rests with every individual and department at Messiah College. We *all* need to actively participate in the initiatives outlined in the institutional Diversity Plan so that we can achieve our goal of being an academic community committed to educational excellence and characterized by hospitality.

As a part of the Diversity Plan, we remain deeply committed to engaging the world from where we are situated. The Committee for Economic Development reported in 2006 that “*fewer than ten percent of [our nation’s] college students enroll in a foreign language and only one percent of undergraduates study abroad.*”²⁴ At Messiah we intentionally support and sponsor a robust study abroad program. Open Doors ranks Messiah College as seventh in the nation for sending students abroad among colleges offering bachelor’s degree. At Messiah, we also require *all of our students* to complete foreign language studies as a fundamental component of their general education program.

While we believe our students should be prepared to serve a global world, we also believe that the global world needs to be better represented in our campus community. We are actively seeking to recruit an increasingly diverse group of students and employees. Currently, under-represented racial/ethnic cultural populations and international students at Messiah College comprise 11 percent of our student population and 7 percent of our employee population.²⁵ As a community, we must work together to increase those percentages. In order to prioritize diversity recruiting, our human resources department is going beyond traditional approaches by building networks with key contacts in doctoral programs, churches, community organizations and national conferences.

The enrollment management team has revised the international student recruitment plan. New approaches we are attempting include the identification and recruitment of international high school and community college students who are already studying in the United States, and sponsoring Messiah advertisements in international church-related publications and websites. As a follow up to my Spring 2011 Pacific Rim recruitment trip, we are partnering with current Messiah parents in that region, networking with high school counselors and church leaders, advertising in publications, such as the Asian Beacon, and negotiating articulation agreements with Malaysian higher educational institutions. In addition, we are drawing on the expertise of an accomplished Chinese educator who will be visiting our campus this fall to offer counsel about current possibilities for partnerships and recruitment in mainland China.

To help unify Messiah College’s approach to international engagement under the guidance of the Diversity Plan, a working group for Global Engagement at Messiah (GEM), has been created to assess the ways we are currently facilitating global engagement and offer recommendations for new synergies and opportunities. The Global Engagement at Messiah working group identifies the College’s unique obligation and opportunity, “*With our Christian heritage which prioritizes God’s kingdom above human kingdoms, we can truly promote a global citizenship which seeks reconciliation, justice, and sustainable livelihoods for all peoples. This is why we like the term ‘global engagement.’ We believe it includes learning/education, curricular and co-curricular; service and action; and a sense of partnership.*”

Central to our efforts of *incarnating our mission in the world* by living out our faithful presence as a community, is our steadfast dedication to the practice of hospitality. The world needs Messiah graduates who incarnate the “Word of shalom” to a hurting world. Our graduates will only be educated toward that end if their mentors – all of us gathered here –embody that

²⁴ Education for Global Leadership: Executive Summary, Rep., 9 Feb. 2007, Committee for Economic Development (CED), 4 Aug. 2011 <<http://www.actfl.org/files/public/InternationalStudiesForeignLangExecutiveSummary.pdf>>.

²⁵ Messiah College 2010-2011 Factbook

generous spirit. Hunter calls faithful presence, “*a theology of engagement in and with the world around us. It is a theology of commitment, a theology of promise.*”²⁶

At Messiah College, we embrace a theology of promise, as demonstrated by the overwhelming majority of our students who engaged in some form of community service during their college years. Our students’ commitment to serving the needs of others provides a sharp contrast to popular perceptions about college students. During the 2011 Commencement season, New York Times columnist David Brooks wrote, “*Today’s grads are . . . told to pursue happiness and joy and they “enter a cultural climate that preaches the self as the center of life.*”²⁷” Brooks offered an alternative to graduates when he echoed Christ’s words: “*The purpose in life is not to find yourself. It’s to lose yourself.*”²⁸” Our commitment to Christ, to others, to academic excellence and to serving the common good are the distinctives of a Messiah College education.

Agaba Bisengo, an alumnus – mentored by many of you – is one example of a faithful presence – a woman who incarnates our mission, who brings shalom to everyone in her sphere of influence. As a child, Agaba was cared for by her grandmother inside the borders of Ugandan refugee camps. By age eight, she was responsible for the daily tending of 16 cows. After the horrific Rwandan Genocide, Agaba and her grandmother returned to that ravaged country, where Agaba’s parents had died as a result of the atrocities. In 1996, Agaba arrived in the United States and later enrolled at Messiah College. Agaba was an inspiring presence on our campus, working two or three jobs to support herself and providing leadership to student organizations. In her senior year, she led a group of Messiah College students who traveled to Rwanda to participate in the internationally sponsored event “100 Days of Healing,” a restorative response to the devastating 100 days of genocide that had previously destroyed her nation.

After graduation, Agaba earned an M.B.A. in organizational leadership. Today, she serves as a language translator for non-profit agencies that assist individuals seeking political asylum. For Agaba, living as a faithful presence means believing that all of her experiences have enabled her to understand who God is and who God created her to be. Seeing her vocation as her duty, she says, “*I do everything because it is the reason I was put on this earth, and I do it with joy and a peaceful mind.*” As a devoted follower of Christ, her goal is to make a difference in the lives of children bound by the chains of poverty. Messiah College students and alumni who are serving and leading communities around the globe incarnate our institutional mission and enhance our communal faithful presence.

Recently, I was reminded of the distinctiveness of our mission when I viewed stained glass windows created by my good friend, Colonel Walter Tibbetts, who lives in nearby Carlisle. As I toured his studio, he explained that each separately designed piece of glass is joined together by foil that binds the collection of pieces into a magnificent composition—a faithful presence that conveys and interprets its surroundings. I also learned that light is essential to the dramatic effect of stained glass because light enables a person to observe different shades and textures as well as the overall brilliance of the art. At Messiah College, we have selected stained glass as a fitting metaphor for our institutional mission and identity. The striking and illuminating presence that shines through our community is the result of the shared insight, expertise and values that flow from our commitment to be Christ-centered and academically excellent. Each member of the Messiah community represents a unique shade or texture joined together by shared commitments that allow us to incarnate a mission that shapes every facet of our students’ development -- their intellect, character and Christian faith. Indeed, our institutional core commitments fulfill a role

²⁶ James Davison Hunter, *To change the world: the irony, tragedy, and possibility of Christianity in the late modern world* (New York: Oxford UP, 2010) 243.

²⁷ David Brooks, "It's Not About You," *The New York Times* 31 May 2011, New York Edition ed., sec. A:23, *New York Times*, 30 May 2011, 13 June 2011 <<http://www.nytimes.com/2011/05/31/opinion/31brooks.html>>.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

similar to the one that foil fulfills for stained glass. The foil unites the different textures and colors of the stained glass into a holistic work of art that illuminates creativity and beauty. Similarly, our core commitments unite us together into a community that illuminates faith and hope.

As we begin this new academic year, we proceed with the hope that the light of God's presence will lead us. And hope is exactly what the broader world needs to witness in our community.

Together, may we reflect and act on what it means to be a faithful presence in our work, and in our spheres of personal influence. When we affirm and incarnate Messiah College's mission, we become co-creators in translating the "Word of Shalom" into hope for human flourishing. In a world parched by the absence of civility, we seek to offer a counter-cultural alternative, the illuminating and faithful presence of a Christ-centered academic community. Together, we are called to change the world through daily acts of service, leadership and reconciliation. Together, we are called to offer a refreshing and restorative purpose, for learning, living and loving. May we be found to be faithful to that calling!