

## Messiah University: A New Season of Challenge and Possibility

### State of the University 2020

When we gathered together to launch a new academic year last August, we were anticipating a year marked by memorable celebrations as we transitioned to becoming Messiah University, defined by a shared vision of providing Christ-centered education for adults across the life span. We anticipated a year that included a compelling line-up of speakers, concerts, athletics, art exhibits and other enriching experiences.

Of course, we also understood the demographic trends and financial difficulties facing higher education, including Messiah, and we knew that institutional prioritization decisions would require careful research, analysis and discernment. Together, we worked to address our challenges. Then, just as campus task forces were prepared to announce the specific prioritization recommendations, we were confronted with the risks, uncertainties and complications of a global pandemic!

What was once inconceivable has become today's reality, and our institutional response, while necessary, has been challenging and exhausting. This morning, we acknowledge our communal grief for the abrupt and disappointing conclusion to the spring semester; the loss of the opportunity to say in-person goodbyes to the class of 2020 as well as valued colleagues, the elimination of some cherished programs, reduction of operating budgets, and personnel furloughs. And now, we are beginning a new academic year amidst significant uncertainty as we lean into a fall that is markedly unlike any we have experienced in years past.

You may be experiencing anxiety and fatigue as you navigate the personal implications of this pandemic. Maybe you've witnessed someone suffer from COVID-19 or worried as a

loved one bravely serves on the frontlines. Many of you are struggling with decisions about day care and school for your children and the impact of a disrupted academic year on your personal and professional lives. But even in the midst of these trials—as Christians, we must not be overcome by the burdens and tragedies of this present moment. Our losses and disappointments exist simultaneously in tension alongside the faithfulness of God as expressed by the promises of Scripture. These types of tensions are familiar at Messiah University—a place where we purposely pair seemingly contradictory concepts (like faith and intellect) and challenge students to reconcile them as compatible ones.

As we begin this academic year, we must not forget our blessings as we embark on the opportunity to demonstrate exceptional care for our students and each other. We are blessed by continuing friendships, reuniting with talented and curious students and leading lives of purpose as we pursue our vocation. These gifts are worth treasuring, nurturing and protecting. In this spirit, we are embracing the Messiah University Promise, which emphasizes how we will live together in community and follow protocols to protect each other’s health and safety. I am grateful for the dedicated and compassionate Messiah University employee community. You have labored tirelessly for more than five months to prepare for our students to engage in deep transformational learning. Thank you for who you are, what you have done and what you will do!

### **Our Shared Commitment to the Future of Messiah University**

In last year’s presidential address I invoked a metaphor from the natural world that I want to revisit again. You may recall that I compared Messiah to a tree — one with deep roots (our Christian educational mission), a broad trunk (our history), an expansive canopy (our educational programs), flourishing leaves (our students and alumni), and a new graft (new programming for

adult degree seekers) — nurtured and maintained by skilled arborists (each of you). The natural world continues to inspire me as I think about Messiah University’s future.

It is easy to forget that the majestic trees that beautify our campus started as small seeds. Seeds overcome incredible adversity to break through the soil by conquering forces such as weather, erosion and burrowing, hungry animals. But, like the Messiah community in these unprecedented times, often seeds relentlessly adapt to changing conditions and creatively pursue the means to survive and thrive. Parker Palmer reminds us, “Possibility gets planted in us, even in the hardest of times” (Palmer 166). This morning, we must embrace the possibilities for Messiah, our students and our extended community in these very hard times.

### **As Messiah University We Will...**

On July 1, we officially transitioned to become Messiah University! This long-awaited possibility has been realized without the festive celebration we had planned, but we remain enthusiastic about the recruitment and enrollment possibilities afforded by university status. Just two weeks ago, the first cohort of Messiah University nursing doctoral students graduated with the DNP degree, the first of many new triumphs! This change of status, these new graduates, our welcome of life-long learners, and our embrace of new ways of educating all our students signify important transformational changes in our life together. And yet these changes are also marked by persistence and consistency, emerging from the same institutional DNA that has defined us from our founding. We will persist in fulfilling our enduring mission to develop the intellect, character and Christian faith of all of our students as we educate them for lives of service, leadership and reconciliation. Daily accounts of the division and disregard for basic decency and long-held principles of democracy permeate our national context and remind us of our nation’s need for Messiah graduates—resilient individuals who are intellectually and spiritually prepared

to lead and serve, possess a strong sense of purpose and are guided by values that “keep them on course regardless of the chaos, confusion or challenges they face” (Marston 83).

Messiah University will persist in promoting academic quality and value both the liberal arts and the applied arts and sciences as essential for learners of all ages. The global pandemic has magnified the need for empathetic experts in every academic discipline and profession. A recent opinion piece in *The New York Times* declared, “We need doctors right now...to evaluate the coronavirus’ assault, assess the body’s response and figure out where, in that potentially deadly tumble of events, there’s a chance to intervene...” The article continues, “We [also] need writers, philosophers, [and] historians. They’ll be the ones to chart the social, cultural and political challenges of this pandemic. In terms of restoring faith in the American project and reseeded common ground, they’re beyond essential” (Bruni). The COVID-19 pandemic is not only a public health emergency; it also presents an economic and social crisis that requires the knowledge and tireless skill of intellectual thought leaders and well-trained professionals educated in the liberal and applied arts and sciences.

Messiah University will persist in pursuing inclusive excellence and seek to be a community that contributes to the common good. COVID-19 may be overwhelming in its impact but it is certainly not the only national crisis we are enduring. The ongoing systematic oppression and targeted violence toward people of color and our hesitancy as a nation to confront white privilege should prick our hearts and consciences and compel us to action. To not stand in solidarity with our brothers and sisters of color denies their God-breathed humanity, and disregards the biblical commands to love God and neighbor and to pursue the ministry of reconciliation.

Messiah University must be a transformative environment for campus and community dialogue about racism as we seek to listen, understand and pursue justice. Michael Roth, president of Wesleyan University, recently wrote: “Colleges and universities don’t just bundle different functions; they bundle different kinds of people together too. This lived experience of diversity is unlike the rest of our very segregated society. And it offers the kind of serendipitous encounters that lead to transformative learning” (Roth). As a Christian educational community, we must reflect and lament, as we labor to become more of the beloved community we are called to be. This present moment is a salient one and we must facilitate honest conversation that leads to change.

We are on a journey toward inclusive excellence and we are making progress.

- Last year, Messiah staff and administrative employees and the Board of Trustees participated in cultural intelligence education provided by Dr. Sandra Upton of the Cultural Intelligence Center. The Community of Educators will participate in this program this fall.
- We increased compositional diversity across campus – 18% of employees and 18.4% of students represent ethnically diverse populations.
- The Office of Diversity Affairs will be instituting an Inclusive Excellence Ambassador Program, a professional development opportunity for interested employees to become campus change-agents by learning to serve as a liaison between their department and the diversity affairs office.
- The 2020 common reading for all first-year students and faculty is *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks*, a non-fiction account of a black woman whose cells were taken without her knowledge (nor was she compensated) to further medical

research. This required curricular reading will ignite important campus conversations about racism, income inequality, human rights, health care access and medical ethics.

As we welcome the essential contribution of diverse perspectives and traditions within the context of Messiah's distinct Christian identity and educational mission, we cling to the imago dei – all of humanity reflects God's timeless signature. As Dr. Todd Allen, our Vice President for Diversity Affairs, writes, "Engaging diversity is an avenue to realizing God's vision for the body of Christ in our world. In this, we are called to practice the ministry of reconciliation, together bringing hope and healing, offering a radical model for the world to celebrate and embrace" (Allen).

An ongoing priority for Messiah University must be to effectively and engagingly communicate the Messiah story including the stories and accomplishments of individual community members. Recently, we refreshed our See Anew brand platform, adopted a new university logo and strengthened our institutional messaging and visuals. But, our brand is most evident through our people; Messiah students, alumni and employees who have been faithfully contributing to human flourishing for more than 110 years. In the midst of the current COVID-19 crisis – alumni Kris Sledge and Chad Frey are providing leadership and support to establish volunteer-staffed community classrooms where Harrisburg School District students will spend their mornings at sites that offer learning support and access to technology. The efforts of these resourceful and compassionate alumni illustrate our institutional identity line of "Sharpening Intellect, Deepening Christian Faith and Inspiring Action."

The distinctive of Messiah's "brand" of quality Christian higher education sets us apart from other institutions. At Messiah, whether in physical or remote classrooms, students are

invited into a community of learning about the magnificence and diversity of God's creation, as expressed in each person. The sacred bond of community is conjured by the imagery of a vibrant stained glass window which reveals how the importance each person, like an individual piece of stained glass, contributes to the beauty and wholeness of the image.

During these distressing times of a global pandemic, civil discord, economic turbulence and political polarization, we have the responsibility of tending to the holistic education of all of our students as we prepare them for lives of service, leadership and reconciliation. To fulfill that privilege in our current context, Messiah's institutional culture must be characterized by adaptability and creativity.

### **Creating a Culture of Adaptability**

In mid-March, our campus faced the unexpected need to quickly adapt to providing undergraduate education via technology-based platforms. Out of desperate necessity, dedicated faculty, with the extraordinary assistance of Educational Technology Services, pivoted to delivering education in a manner that was unfamiliar to many. Every employee group was affected by the rapid change brought about by COVID-19. It was inspiring to observe Messiah employees stretching beyond their comfort zones and personal preferences to ensure that our students' educational, physical, mental and spiritual needs were met. For example, colleagues in the Career and Professional Development Center immediately worked to equip students—especially graduating seniors—with virtual resources and connections for their job searches, despite the significant limitations imposed by social distancing and stay-at-home orders.

As a community, we proved that we could adapt out of necessity. As the disruptions of COVID-19 accelerate, a fellow college president predicts a decade's worth of change for higher

education in just the next six to 18 months (Weinberg). A sustainable culture of adaptability will be essential for Messiah to remain relevant in the immediate and long-term future.

*The Washington Post* recently interviewed business leaders, professional counselors and university professors who agreed that adaptability is an organization's most essential skill in this COVID-19 world (Heath). Our swift and successful pivot to undergraduate online instruction demonstrated that we had "the capacity to cope with and capitalize on change, and the ability to recover when unforeseen events altered life plans" (Heath). There are two aspects of adaptability we must practice and exemplify for our students.

First, a culture of adaptability depends on each person's willingness to learn and mature in his or her field of specialty. We each need to increase our own learning and skills so that we can more competently and confidently adapt to changing circumstances and the needs of different student populations (Council). We must pursue knowledge and allow credible information to broaden—and even change—our thinking and practices as we adapt to complicated situations with wisdom and agility.

Second, we must always examine opportunities and challenges through the lens of our institutional values and mission. Presently, we are engaging in this practice by designing and implementing new educational programs and certificates that align with our mission and values, address societal needs and contribute to long-term financial sustainability.

Let's return to our tree metaphor. An excellent example of adaptation exists in the forest behind our Grantham campus. Professor David Foster, my favorite "tree whisperer," tells me that we have several majestic white oak trees that exhibit adaptation. They spent most of their early life as widely branched trees in a virtually open field. However, as the decades passed, the forest

filled in around the oaks, and the trees responded to their changing environment by self-pruning their lower branches and changing their architecture to acclimate to life in a more crowded forest. While those trees adapted and survived, some trees were not able to adapt and sadly succumbed to environmental elements.

Successfully addressing enrollment and financial challenges in this highly competitive external environment requires us to carefully adapt our structures, systems, processes and programs to ensure a healthy future for Messiah University. Just as pruning is a critical element of tree care, continued financial pruning toward our FY24 prioritization goal is necessary for Messiah’s viability and vitality. Imagine the environmental stressors and climate changes that trees withstand. They survive because they tenaciously pursue their goals—sunlight and water—and adapt their structure, as needed, to achieve efficiency and sustainability. If we are committed to our mission, and willing to adapt our structures and programs toward sustainability, Messiah University will thrive in spite of challenging circumstances.

### **Creating a Culture of Creativity**

In addition to adaptability, we must demonstrate creativity as we navigate our increasingly complicated context. Our 160-plus-page fall 2020 reopening plan—with a primary focus on health and safety—illustrates the broad-based creativity and effective problem solving skills of campus leaders. This Messiah University Return Plan (fondly known as the “MURP”), prepared by an incredibly dedicated campus team and authored by Amanda Coffey, will guide us as we cultivate the creative energy and innovative spirit necessary for a successful academic year.

During the sixteen years of my presidency, I have witnessed that every Messiah employee, indeed, every individual, is inherently creative. Madeleine L'Engle beautifully explains, "God is constantly creating, in us, through us, with us, and to co-create with God is our human calling" (L'Engle 88). Our expressions of creativity will differ, and at Messiah there is space and the need for each of us to utilize our creative and rational abilities in support of our mission. Creativity and rationality are complementary and critical to the flourishing of an educational institution.

In recent months, I have had a front row seat to observe the "geyser" of human ingenuity, creativity and enterprise at Messiah (Hayman). Dedicated employees began utilizing technology in new and inspiring ways, including the example of faculty who seized the moment to introduce telemedicine best practices to students studying counseling. Many of you found creative means to tangibly demonstrate care for students who have needed to remain on campus (shopping for them, sharing home-baked goods, etc...); you found ways to complete critical tasks even within the limitations of physical distancing; you recruited new students without the benefit of in-person tours and face-to-face conversation; and you assumed additional responsibilities alongside your existing duties.

As we employ our creative imaginations, Messiah University will undoubtedly experience change and transformation. Just as trees have "evolved some ingenious ways of using their environment to help them disperse and germinate," so we, too, will "see anew" and find that change is necessary and even desirable for our future (Puplett). Our best creative thinking will be required as we restructure academic schools; research, discuss and formulate a new general education program; complete the construction of the Admissions and Welcome Center and campus green; and develop the vision statement, themes, goals and action steps of Messiah

University's inaugural strategic plan. You will be receiving an invitation to virtually participate in a strategic planning engagement opportunity in early September – we need your input! In addition, we must continue to pursue pedagogical creativity to ensure that students are effectively learning—whatever the mode or format. And, of course, we will need considerable ingenuity to build and maintain a rich sense of community amidst the physical constraints of COVID-19. Indeed, this pandemic has poignantly reminded me of an eternal theological truth – we are created to be incarnational beings who need each other's physical presence.

As we model adaptability and creativity, we will educate our students to develop these practices. Researchers have discovered that many aging ginkgo trees produce as many seeds and leaves and are just as resourceful as younger trees. Ginkgoes, which can live to be more than 1,000 years old, remind us of our ability and need to adapt and to exercise creativity to ensure the longevity of Messiah University (Klein). Similarly, we must nurture the inspired imaginations and intellectual capacities of our students so they become thoughtful and creative problem solvers who are able to competently adapt to the complexities and crises of life.

### **A Hope-Filled Future for Messiah University**

No doubt, our current context seems daunting, but today we take heart as people empowered by God to simultaneously hold loss and hope, rationality and creativity, uncertainty and confidence as we labor together to make this academic year less about merely enduring and more about embracing this Kairos moment to educationally transform the lives of our students.

Recently, I participated in a webinar discussion about courageous and redemptive leadership. PRAXIS leader and author Andy Crouch offered this word of encouragement: There

is “one thing we can trust about the future—God will rescue and redeem all we have done and all we have not done to serve the persons entrusted to us.” As we step into a new academic year, one that will surely look different than any other, let’s embrace the need to think, educate and live as people of hope, knowing that our students have been entrusted to us by God.

In late July, Messiah senior and Martin’s Scholar Christian Valen sent me a copy of a reflection he authored about the COVID-19 pandemic. Allow me to share a portion of this reflection.

“Recently I spent time with some old friends....reminiscing about the past and lamenting over how our lives have been turned upside-down by COVID-19. A collage of memories began to race through my mind. I thought of all the amazing professors who taught me in the last three years. They challenged me, mentored me and instilled in me a sense of purpose. I thought of all the spiritually edifying events I shared with my peers (chapel, Sunday mornings, AROMA, “devo” with my teammates). I remembered what my soccer coach would often say, “Stay focused on the things you can control, and don’t be distracted by the things you cannot control. Keep pressing forward no matter what.”

As horrible as this virus is, how we weather the storms of life shows what we have built our lives on. What a safe, nurturing place Messiah has been for me in laying a solid foundation to grow and mature. I experienced a profound sense of gratitude – Messiah... has been preparing me all along for such a time as this. My collective experience at Messiah... has helped me develop patience, faith, fortitude and humility.”

Christian clearly articulates the influential role Messiah University has had on his holistic development and he is just one example of thousands of students whose lives are influenced by

you. Even in the midst of a global pandemic – when we feel stretched beyond our limits – we experience hope because of the purposeful and lasting impact of our educational mission.

Hebrews 10:23-24 exhorts, “Let us hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who has promised is faithful. And let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds.” May unswerving faith and hope be our earnest prayer and may Messiah University be known for its unwavering commitment to deep learning, generous love and the practice of good deeds. May our common efforts bring honor and glory to the One who remains faithful – even in the hardest of times.

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