

**Continuing the Journey Toward Reconciliation, the Common Good, and Learning for Life  
2022 State of the University**

Since the ninth century, people have traversed the Camino de Santiago, a network of rolling footpaths meandering through Portugal, France and Spain. Hundreds of thousands of modern-day pilgrims and adventurers journey the narrow, dirt paths. Pilgrims representing different cultures sometimes travel alone and sometimes in community; they share the common goal of reaching the Santiago de Compostela, the revered Spanish cathedral that houses the remains of the Apostle James, according to tradition.

This summer, 40 Messiah University students along with Director of Choral Activities Joy Meade, Assistant Dean Timothy Dixon and Dean Peter Powers, celebrated their arrival at the foot of the cathedral after walking 65 miles along the Camino. Our Messiah pilgrims started each day's 10-18-mile trek in the early morning hours. They spent three days walking in rain—including one day in a relentless downpour. Their feet became blistered and raw. (Will I ever erase the image Pete shared on Facebook of his blistered feet, minus a few toenails, from my mind? I can only hope!) The journey required physical stamina, mental fortitude and spiritual discipline in order to reach their destination.

Joy Meade notes, "One of the outcomes of this journey was the power of just putting one foot in front of the other. We learned that we could do a lot in our weakness and when we were hurting. Many of us felt like we achieved more than we thought was possible."

In some ways, our students' and colleagues' walk along the Camino parallels the challenge of our individual and collective journeys as Messiah University employees. We, too, are pilgrims on a journey, committed to educating our students toward maturity of intellect, character and Christian faith

in preparation for lives of service, leadership and reconciliation. Mileposts help to guide us along the way, but our destination lies ahead of us. We need strategic vision, intellectual depth and unwavering faith to keep moving forward.

Think of all that we have encountered during the past few years: a global pandemic that has claimed the lives of millions and disrupted nearly every aspect of daily life; widespread misinformation that disregarded the validity of science and polarized responses to COVID-19 facts and vaccines; persistent attempts to undermine American democracy and overturn legitimate election results; ongoing racial tension and violence; mass shootings at schools, supermarkets and community celebrations; and headline after headline about Church leaders misusing their power, covering up abuse and sanctioning racism. On campus, we've bid farewell to colleagues; walked alongside students struggling with physical and mental health issues; adapted to challenging new technologies; and pursued the goals of our institutional strategic plan—even though it has often taken much of our energy just to put one foot in front of the other. While these events and difficulties have produced weariness, they also reflect our collective endurance and faithfulness on this journey. Thank you for laboring and caring for our students and each other. “Together at Messiah” is more than a slogan!

One of the songs performed by the Concert Choir along the Camino was the spiritual *My Feet Are Tired But My Soul Is Resting*:

*My feet are tired, but my soul is resting.*

*I'm walking for the glory of the Lord. Hallelujah.*

*My feet are worn, but my soul is shining.*

*I'm walking for the glory of the Lord. Hallelujah.*

Listen as our Concert Choir sings the last refrain:

*(My feet cry out, but my soul is singing.*

*I'm walking for the glory of the Lord. Hallelujah.)*

Our journey as Messiah employees is often exhausting; however, it is also exhilarating and delivers in its own way a form of praise like that of this song. Although you may be weary this morning, I hope you can still seize the joy of this current moment, value the companionship of your fellow travelers, appreciate the resources that support your efforts and embrace the vision for transformational Christ-centered education. It is not overstating the claim to say that we, too, are “walking for the glory of the Lord” as we seek to fulfill our institutional mission.

This morning, let's consider the mileposts along our path that serve the purpose of indicating progress while simultaneously offering future direction. First, we must review the situational context for our journey prior to examining how we best equip ourselves and our community to overcome the obstacles that might impede our progress.

### Understanding the Context

An important part of undertaking a journey is understanding the environmental conditions and preparing for them. Just as our faculty and students anticipated the terrain and weather along the Camino in order to pack appropriate gear, so we, too, as modern-day pilgrims must seek to understand and contextualize this present moment. In a frequently cited article for *The Atlantic*, social psychologist and author Jonathan Haidt parallels today's contentious, divided populace to the Biblical account of Babel (Haidt). Noah's descendants—despite receiving God's command to spread out and fill the land (Gen. 9:1, 7) constructed a city and built a massive tower to make a name for themselves. God was not pleased

with their ambitions. He confused their language so they could not understand each other and “scattered them abroad over the face of all the earth” (Gen. 11:7-9).

Haidt references this Old Testament account of people once together and then in chaos to illustrate the fractured state of contemporary America. Like the people at Babel, we are “disoriented, unable to speak the same language or recognize the same truth ... cut off from one another and from the past,” according to Haidt. He argues that this fracturing is due largely to how social media “amplifies political polarization; foments populism; and is associated with the spread of misinformation” (Haidt 56, 58). We have witnessed how the virality of social media channels—combined with trials like the aforementioned pandemic, ongoing racial tensions, mass shootings and political polarization—amplifies the danger of online echo chambers that rapidly spread misinformation with little to no consequence for the perpetrators.

How shall we live and fulfill Messiah’s mission in these post-Babel days? Haidt concludes, “It is a time of confusion and loss. But it is also a time to reflect, listen and build” (Haidt 66). Just as a pilgrim on the Camino would not ignore a foreboding weather forecast, we must not ignore the conditions that negatively affect our students and ourselves.

In this Babel-like moment, I am confident that Messiah University can counter contemporary societal divides by maintaining a posture of gracious Christianity, rooted in intellectual and spiritual humility as we model servant leadership and responsible citizenship. Our journey is not easy, but we move towards an inspiring and meaningful destination—to incarnate a distinct educational community that nurtures critical thinking, honest dialogue and true belonging for all students and employees. We are dedicated to educational excellence directed toward student learning with an explicit Christian commitment. We understand the distinctive value of offering a Christian paradigm for how to think and act in a complex, multicultural and pluralistic world.

We are encouraged by signs that others embrace our mission and seek to accompany us on the journey: strong undergraduate and graduate enrollment for FY23 and the successful completion of the \$75 million fundraising Campaign for Messiah University are indicative of the interest in and support of Messiah's explicit promise to provide educational rigor in the context of Christian community.

In July, I shared lunch and conversation with Rachel Jackson, one of our new graduates of the Master of Music in Conducting program. Rachel lives in Sacramento and is a minister of music at a Presbyterian church. She told me that her decision to enroll at Messiah was based on two criteria—the excellent academic preparation of our graduate music faculty and the University's commitment to kind conversation and gracious Christianity. Reconciliation and community are Messiah distinctives which are valued by both undergraduate and graduate students.

#### Equipping Ourselves and Our Students for the Journey

A Messiah education equips students of all ages to navigate life's tensions by bringing together seemingly incompatible people and ideas. Embracing this paradigm, as articulated in the ligatures displayed across campus, is at the core of our identity as we invite students (and ourselves) to reimagine—or see anew—how seemingly opposite ideas can co-exist, opposites such as wisdom and expertise or humility and aspiration. Most universities boast of the wisdom and expertise of their faculty, staff and students, and clearly those qualities should be evident and valued. But as a Christian educational institution we understand the need for humility to co-exist alongside expertise and scholarship, particularly in these fractured times.

How we understand and accept people who hold different values and opinions truly matters. “Humility affords space for what Theologian Miroslav Volf labeled ‘double vision’—or the practice of ‘seeing with the eyes of the others, accepting their perspective and discovering the new significance of

one’s own basic commitment” (Brown). By humbly approaching each other and our students, we may gain new insights that refine or alter our existing perspectives. Personal postures of humility multiplied across the Messiah community will lead to a campus ethos of honor and respect across difference—ours will be an ethos that serves as a positive and compelling witness to God’s grace and love for humankind.

Because social media platforms are an inescapable part of 21<sup>st</sup> century life, sharing our journey with others requires us to carefully and thoughtfully represent ourselves, Messiah University and our Christian faith when we step into digital spaces. Messiah’s current general education requirements, which preceded the development of social media platforms, are currently under review and revision by a cross-disciplinary educator task force led by Dr. Kate Oswald-Wilkins. The task force has worked to define what digital competency and digital citizenship require of both content producers and consumers as depicted on your screen. Our students and we ourselves need to become responsible users and ethical consumers of digital media.

Social media has certainly altered the landscape of American life during the past 20 years. In the late 1990s, Neil Postman, the New York University communications scholar and author of *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, delivered a lecture on campus. During dinner with Dr. Postman, he made a statement which is even more prescient in our contemporary world of *technology glut*: “It’s not what we fear that will destroy us, it’s what we love.” The overwhelming love for technology and its pervasive use is the reality for our students and ourselves. And let’s face it—there are many ways that technology enhances our lives. But, there is a dangerous dark side that we must address within the objectives of a Messiah education and the guiding principles for our community life.

It is widely reported that a surge in rates of anxiety, depression and self-harm among American teens began in the early 2010s. While there isn’t a singular reason for this alarming development, Facebook and Twitter did introduce the ability to “like,” “retweet” and “share” at this same time, driving

adolescents (and many adults too!) to become more adept at performing rather than connecting online (Haidt 65, 57). While we do not possess the power to change Facebook’s algorithms or make Twitter a less hostile space, we can—and must—prepare our students to cautiously, competently and compassionately engage with social media.

We have also learned that smart phone and social media usage is a major contributing factor to the mental health decline experienced by many university students (Garcia-Navarro). In recent years, Messiah has experienced increased student demand for mental and physical health services. To address this need we have contracted with a telehealth service provider and added counseling personnel. Federal COVID-relief funding for student assistance and financial gifts from supportive Messiah trustees and friends are making it possible to renovate and add additional space to the Engle Center for Counseling and Health Services, with construction scheduled to begin in late spring 2023. Employee mental health and wellbeing is also a concern. Recently, information was communicated about our new and improved Employee Assistance Program, which includes access to telehealth services.

While we are taking significant steps to respond to the mental health crisis to which social media has contributed, it is also imperative that we as employees carefully manage our personal social media accounts. Responsible usage of online platforms should be exhibited by every Messiah employee in support of our students and the faithful witness of our institution. Consider adopting these social media practices:

- Refuse to sow discord.
- Refrain from responding in anger or on impulse.
- Reach out privately to people to continue conversations.

Now let’s focus our attention on the mileposts that help direct us on our journey.

Milepost: Reckoning and Reconciliation

An essential element of our journey is toward a communal vision of biblical reconciliation. Last year, we sponsored events and pursued many conversations around a campus theme of “Reconciliation: God’s Language to Heal a Broken World.” Together, we learned that the journey is ongoing and imperfect. There were (and are) times of deepened understanding and honest questioning, but there were (and are) also times of resistance and unwillingness to embrace necessary change. Reconciliation toward God and each other requires us to individually and collectively take a step forward each day.

Let’s review the components of the reconciliation process we outlined last year:

- Love well – God first and then each other
- Attend to – the pain and injustice experienced by others
- Listen first – to understand
- Lament – individually and communally
- Seek truth – and share truth
- Extend – and accept forgiveness

Reconciliation is central to the Messiah journey so we will continue to invest in employee and student development-related opportunities. Twenty Messiah employees and students participated in the “Return to the Roots of the Civil Rights” tour this past June. Although I participated in the tour six years ago, my understanding of the need for reckoning as a prequel to reconciliation became much clearer to me during this year’s tour. As I stood in silence at Equal Justice Initiative’s powerful Legacy Memorial which tells the horror of America’s history of racist lynching and mass incarceration, I realized the need to honestly acknowledge and address the truth of America’s painful past and the continuing horrors of racial violence. Messiah University is called to be a community that listens, learns and laments so that

we may journey forward. We will only be able to progress if we have the courage to confront our collective past and present.

Allow me to offer an inspiring example of two individuals going forward together. One of the places we visited on the tour was the town of Selma—site of the 1965 Voting Rights March which resulted in the Bloody Sunday massacre. We were privileged to hear from two sisters who marched as youngsters aged 11 and 15. Following their presentation, our tour group boarded the bus and drove a few blocks to where we disembarked to make the sacred walk across the Edmund Pettus Bridge in honor of those who had gone before us. Jeremy Lippert, a Messiah safety officer, was on the tour and so was Miss Nancy, a Pittsburgh native who labors every day cooking for the children at a neighborhood community center. The weather was oppressively hot and the experience of standing in a hallowed space where individuals were met with horrific violence as they advocated for their constitutional voting rights proved to be overwhelming. As Nancy stepped off the bus, she was overcome with emotion—standing still with tears streaming down her face. Jeremy approached her, gently took her arm and said, “Come on, Miss Nancy, we’ll do this together.” And they did.

An institutional highlight of last year’s Reconciliation events was the Alumni of Color reunion. More than 100 alumni representing different decades returned to campus to participate in panel discussions, worship opportunities, social gatherings and times of candid, truth-filled discussion. I led a public “Q&A” session with our alums and listened to their stories of pain and marginalization. It was vitally important to provide time and space to not only listen but also to lament. A 90s alum, prior to leaving campus, expressed this sentiment: “Thank you for this weekend. I feel heard. I feel as if I finally belong.” Every Messiah student and employee should experience true belonging and genuine reconciliation as valued members of our community, and it is our shared responsibility to make that happen. Results of the 2017 Campus Climate Survey and employee focus groups indicate that we have

more work to do. Personal communication and actions, programming content and educational objectives must reflect Messiah's commitment to reconciliation. We look forward to courageous dialogue and thoughtful action which will assist us in moving forward to fulfill the goals of the 2023 Diversity Strategic Plan.

Milepost: Promoting the Common Good

Another important milepost identifies Messiah's commitment to promoting the common good as an essential element of our Christian witness. From the early decades of Messiah's founding, the expectation of "love thy neighbor" has included tangible actions by the University as evidenced in the care for refugees and others who were displaced. In 1911, M. P. Krikorian fled the Armenian genocide and arrived in Grantham; the Sakimura family was relocated to Messiah after being unjustly imprisoned in an American internment camp; in the 70s and 80s, Vietnamese and Laotian refugees were hired to work in dining and campus events; and this year, Messiah worked with a refugee resettlement organization to provide lodging and support for an Afghan family now living in the University's Bertram House. Vice President for Human Resources and Compliance Amanda Coffey coordinated the efforts of many of you to provide a welcoming home for this family displaced by war. Thank you for donating goods and funds, cleaning, painting and extending hospitality. During a time of deepening public distrust of the Church and Christian faith, Messiah seeks to be an alternative witness by demonstrating what it means to be a loving neighbor and faithful witness to the good news of the Gospel.

After being very limited in off-campus service opportunities due to the COVID pandemic, I am proud of how our students, under the coordination of the Agapé Center for Local and Global Engagement, enthusiastically stepped back into serving at 10 local partnership locations, donating their time and skills to meet the needs of individuals in our geographic region. Additionally, through three

domestic service trips and two international trips, the compassionate service of Messiah students and staff was realized far beyond the greater Harrisburg region.

The mileposts that direct our commitments to reconciliation and promoting the common good will continuously help us review our efforts and point us toward next steps. Our work in these distinct spaces will never be finished—not as individuals or as a community—so we must persist, always leaning into the reflecting, listening and building that Haidt prescribed for this post-Babel age. By doing so, we will educate resilient individuals who are intellectually and spiritually prepared to lead and to serve, who possess a strong sense of purpose and who are guided by values that keep them on course regardless of chaos, confusion or challenges.

#### Milepost: Education for Learners of All Ages

A third milepost on Messiah University’s path is our commitment to learning for life and the program and partnership development required to fulfill the educational and professional needs of learners of all ages. In recent years, we have redefined the term “Messiah student” to include individuals at different ages and stages of life. This commitment to learning for life not only contributes to Messiah’s financial vitality but is consistent with our mission to provide holistic educational experiences for a myriad of deserving audiences.

In this current moment, it is essential for Messiah to provide educational opportunities that equip all learners to embrace an understanding of the liberal arts—to develop critical thinking, empathy and truth-telling rooted in the knowledge of the humanities, sciences and social sciences, arts and the broader historical, and technological contexts that influence society. Howard Zinn wrote, “To be hopeful in bad times is not just foolishly romantic. It is based on the fact that human history is a history not only of cruelty but also of compassion, sacrifice, courage, kindness. What we choose to emphasize in this

complex history will determine our lives. If we see only the worst, it destroys our capacity to do something. If we remember those times and places—and there are so many—where people have behaved magnificently, this gives us the energy to act, and at least the possibility of sending this spinning top of a world in a different direction” (Zinn 208). Whether students look to Messiah for dual enrollment, an undergraduate degree, a graduate degree, certificates or professional development, we are committed to providing educational quality in every learning context, resulting in alumni who will send this spinning top of a world in positive directions. In March we will experience a reaccreditation site visit from Middle States. I am confident they will affirm that Messiah is meeting the standards necessary to ensure that all of our students are receiving a quality educational experience.

Theme 4 of Messiah’s institutional strategic plan emphasizes the need to develop an array of institutional partnerships that will benefit learners of different ages in different contexts. These partnerships are important to our financial plan which requires us to increase net tuition revenue, expand opportunities to increase non-tuition revenue and seek creative ways to reduce expenses so that Messiah will continue to thrive.

Under the leadership of Dr. Rob Pepper, associate provost of graduate and professional studies and director of university partnerships, some exciting progress has already been achieved toward this goal. The Bridge Center for Continuing Education at Messiah University is designed to offer non-credit bearing learning opportunities that meet the educational and training needs of adult learners. Through a variety of formats—face to face, online, hybrid, webinar, one-time and weekend—The Bridge Center will provide continuing education consistent with Messiah’s mission and strategic plan and generate additional revenue. This initiative will increase awareness of Messiah University and offer employees (who volunteer to participate) and alumni a vehicle for sharing their expertise.

One partnership that has been finalized is an agreement between Messiah and North American Integration of Manual Therapy, LLC (NAIOMT) to provide continuing education for health care professionals. These sessions will be held at Messiah's Winding Hill location and will feature nationally recognized content experts as guest faculty. In addition, Messiah and NAIOMT will be forming a joint Accredited Orthopedic Clinical Residency Program. Finally, a Doctor of Health Science (DsC) degree is being designed by Messiah educators and NAIOMT with the goal of presenting the proposal to campus governance bodies in 2023 and implementation planned for FY24.

Beginning in 2023, Messiah and Phoenix Physical Therapy and Health Services are initiating a partnership that will allow Phoenix to operate an interprofessional clinic at Messiah's Winding Hill location. This partnership will serve community needs while simultaneously providing valuable opportunities for undergraduate and graduate students to engage in clinician-related research.

Dr. Pepper and Dr. Jenn Fisler, dean of the graduate school, are also providing creative oversight to the development of a continuing education training program for the house parents and early childhood education staff at the Milton Hershey School. A model for partnering with regional Christian high schools to increase dual enrollment opportunities (we have high yield of recruiting undergraduate students who were previously dual enrolled) is being finalized with two schools already identified as Spring 2023 partners. And just last evening,

In addition, we continue to develop undergraduate academic programs and specialized certificates that respond to societal needs and equip students to lead and serve. In collaboration with Baltimore Urban Studies program, Messiah is now offering a public health minor with a "study away," experiential learning component. Additionally, undergraduates can now attain certificates in financial planning and hospitality and tourism, to complement their academic major.

As we seek to provide an enriching and relevant education for all students, the previously mentioned general education revision will make a significant contribution to the undergraduate experience of future Messiah graduates. Certainly, much has changed for our students and our world since Messiah's General Education Program was instituted in 1992. To truly appreciate this span of time, look at the montage of iconic images from 1992 currently being displayed on screen. Messiah's general education task force is working with critical themes to guide the reorientation of the General Education Program so that our students will be intellectually and spiritually prepared to live as faithful, informed servant leaders who demonstrate all the attributes of good citizenship – communal, political, digital and ecological. A completed program proposal will be ready for governance review and approval in spring 2023 with continued planning in FY24 and final implementation in August 2024.

As we pursue these new opportunities, Messiah University strengthens its reputation as a faith-based, educational community committed to reconciliation, the common good and learning opportunities for students of all ages. *New York Times* columnist David Brooks recently offered this powerful endorsement of institutions like Messiah: “You have what the world is hungering for—a spiritual vocabulary, a spiritual focus, an actual way to orient your life to a higher good ... there is just such power in the 2000-year Christian tradition and the demonstration of a sincere and beautiful faith” (Brooks). “Together at Messiah” we are fulfilling a vital role in shaping church and society. Our journey is ongoing and often fraught with obstacles and even mistakes. But, we carry on to lovingly serve our students and bring honor to the Messiah.

### Conclusion

Our Messiah University Camino pilgrims completed their journey, celebrating on the plaza before performing one final concert at the cathedral. They were weary and sore but joy-filled and inspired. Dean Powers shared this meaningful account,

September 20, 2022

*Today we walked into the main square of Santiago de Compostela, bordered on all sides by the buildings of church and state, dominated by the sublime architecture of the cathedral itself. One of our students, as it happens one of the last into the square, burst into tears as she walked toward the center where we were gathering for the requisite selfies and group shots. Tears of joy.*

*She had sometimes struggled throughout the hike, sometimes, not always, trailing behind the pack, like many of us limping through blisters, sore muscles, and a lack of sleep. I'm sure that more than once she thought she would not make it, was tempted to stop short. There would have been no shame in it. Many do. Stop short. But she persisted.*

*She may not know it, but she was my best teacher on this pilgrimage. She broke into tears at the joy of arrival. Not winning. On her pilgrimage, on all our pilgrimages, it is not winning that matters. Not being the fastest or the first. The most fit or the best prepared. It is the arrival that matters. One foot after another for 65 miles, it is the arrival that matters. And the joy.*

This academic year and the years ahead will not be easy—our journey will require each of us to persist – persist as we educate our students toward maturity of intellect, character and Christian faith – as we inspire them to love our churches—our communities—our nation—our world. That is our destination! May there be joy as we continue to journey, occasionally stumbling but always moving forward—together, confident in God's never ending faithfulness to Messiah University!

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