

MESSIAH COLLEGE
STATE OF THE COLLEGE – 2008
“Courage for the Present – Hope for the Future”
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Introduction:

The countless ways this community has sought to honor our institutional mission and fulfill our promise during the past year was evident in the video we just viewed. This morning, as we gather together to officially launch a new academic year, I want to express my sincere gratitude to each one of you for your individual contribution to our common vocation.

I could not be more proud of the many ways this community has collaborated together to accomplish our mission. One of the most dramatic exhibitions of your dedication was the great success of the Compassion Forum. Images of presidential candidates speaking on our campus underscore exciting progress in meeting the institutional goal of increasing Messiah’s regional and national visibility. Hosting the Compassion Forum, which was broadcast to millions of viewers on CNN, enabled us to introduce our institution to new audiences in many varied contexts. Thank you for all that you did to demonstrate to the world Messiah’s commitment to gracious Christianity, hospitable conversation, educational dialogue, and institutional excellence. One of my most treasured email messages about the Forum came from the great grand-daughter of Messiah College’s founding president, S. R. Smith. She wrote:

“I just felt moved to say hello after listening to tapes of presidential candidates speaking at Messiah College, and to tell you how very moved I am to hear an African American (sic) presidential candidate speaking out against torture while sitting in the school founded by my great grandfather, Sam Smith.”

While the Compassion Forum may have been our most visible communal achievement, throughout the year, each one of you enhanced the Messiah experience for our students by performing your duties with competence and care. Helen Keller reflected on the importance of meeting our daily responsibilities:

“I long to accomplish great and noble tasks, but it is my chief duty to accomplish humble tasks as though they were great and noble. The world is moved along, not only by the mighty shoves of its heroes, but also by the aggregate of the tiny pushes of each honest worker.”

Thank you for the “tiny pushes” you provide each day, which, when combined in the aggregate, strategically propel our institution forward!

This morning we have the opportunity to pause from the busyness of this season to share together in heartfelt worship, celebrate our common faith, and recommit to our common calling.

We can be encouraged and draw strength from this common calling as we face the challenges and opportunities each new year brings and the broader competitive challenges confronting higher education in the United States and at Messiah College, specifically. We stand ready to meet those challenges because of our confidence in the strength of our community and the steadfast faithfulness of our God.

After two decades of unparalleled growth in higher education, private colleges, including Messiah, are being forced to confront the need to change as resources become increasingly limited and the competition to enroll students increases in its intensity. To respond appropriately, we will need to take intentional action to fortify the quality of our education and fulfill our mission with excellence.

I have entitled today’s address *“Courage for the Present – Hope for the Future”* to highlight our corporate strength, define the challenges, and direct our vision to a promising future. To frame our discussion, we need to consider the etymology of the terms “courage” and “hope.”

The definition of courage comes from an old French word for heart, “cuer.” We develop courage for things that matter to us, for what affects us at our deepest level. Courage means being stouthearted, unflinching, and undaunted. Courage means we affirm the wonder of life despite the knowledge of our human limitations and frailty.

As we encounter obstacles, we need to acknowledge that learning from each other will require the courage to humbly listen to each other. We need to be authentic in our communication as we converse, debate, plan, and implement change.

The definition of hope also influences our communal perspective. Hope suggests desiring something with the expectation of fulfillment. Hope connotes confidence, assurance, even optimism, for the future.

As a Christ-centered academic community, we embrace a theology of hope because we believe in the transforming power of the Resurrection, we experience God’s faithfulness in our daily lives, and we embrace the Scriptural promise of the psalmist who wrote that the “*Lord sits enthroned above the flood*” of the chaos of our daily lives.

As we approach the celebration of Messiah’s centennial year in 2009-2010, I have been reading historical accounts of courageous decisions that advanced the College’s mission and helped to ensure a hope-filled future. Here are just a few:

- In 1909, Brethren in Christ church leaders chose to nurture the life of both the spirit and the mind when they established Messiah Bible School and Missionary Training Home in S. R. Smith’s Harrisburg residence.
- By the 1920s, college leaders expanded the educational curriculum, and Messiah Bible School became the second junior college in Pennsylvania.
- In 1963, college administrators secured full accreditation for Messiah College, and in 1968 Messiah launched a satellite campus affiliated with Temple University in Philadelphia: the first partnership of its kind between a private Christian college and state-affiliated university.
- In 1972, President D. Ray Hostetter guided the College to a more inclusive ethos by working with leaders of the Brethren in Christ Church and the College to establish a Church-College covenant to replace denominational ownership. This courageous decision allowed Messiah College to have a much greater expanse of influence within the broader evangelical community while maintaining a commitment to the theological distinctives of the founding denomination.
 - These distinctives include holiness, discipleship, community, justice, and peacemaking, which continue to inform our educational mission. Today, the College is enriched by a respectful and cooperative relationship with the Brethren in Christ Church, one based on mutual trust and accountability.
- During the 1980s and 1990s, College leaders advanced a curricular and cocurricular blending of the liberal arts and sciences, professional studies, and contextual learning. A distinctive emphasis on holistic education led to Messiah’s maturation as a leading faith based comprehensive baccalaureate institution.
- In the late 1990s, President Rodney J. Sawatsky and a Trustee/Faculty committee drafted a compelling mission and identity statement that articulated the College’s theological heritage and educational purpose. This statement honors the College’s specific religious

particularities and simultaneously welcomes individuals from all Christian traditions to become valued members of the Messiah community.

Now, we find ourselves at another pivotal moment in the College's history. The challenges we face call for an outpouring of courage. We must take action so that our institution is not marginalized or weakened as we endeavor to be a beacon of hope in our society. We must be unified in our steadfast commitment to fulfill an educational mission that is transformative, relevant, and resilient for the 21st century. Why? Because our world needs Messiah College graduates!

Although I have described challenges in previous addresses, allow me to draw your attention to a few of the most pressing ones:

We must strive to be *adaptable* as we confront the challenge of preparing students for a knowledge-based global society that is technologically advanced beyond many of us who are currently teaching and/or administrating. The significant pressure to respond to the educational needs of our "high tech" students is forcing us to alter pedagogy and to reframe learning in the context of a classroom without boundaries.

To fully understand the extent to which technology has shaped this generation, let us review the characteristics of our incoming first-year students, as published in the annual, light-hearted "Beloit's Mindset List" for the class of 2012.

The two million first-year students (known as "millennials") in the United States, born in 1990, "have grown up in an era where computers and rapid communication are the norm, and colleges no longer trumpet the fact that residence halls are 'wired' and equipped with the latest hardware. These students will hardly recognize the availability of telephones in their rooms since they have seldom utilized landlines during their adolescence. They will continue to live on their cell phones and communicate via texting. Roommates, few of whom have ever shared a bedroom, have already checked out each other on Facebook where they have shared their most personal thoughts with the whole world.

It is a multicultural, politically correct and 'green' generation that has hardly noticed the threats to their privacy and has never feared the Russians and the Warsaw Pact.

- Since they were in diapers, karaoke machines have been annoying people at parties.
- WWW has never stood for World Wide Wrestling.
- IBM has never made typewriters.
- GPS satellite navigation systems have always been available.
- Gas stations have never fixed flats, but most serve cappuccino.
- Caller ID has always been available on phones.
- Iced tea has always come in cans and bottles."

Although their technological knowledge is expansive, the numerical ranks of young adults are dwindling in some sectors. We must respond to the decreasing number of high school graduates in the Northeastern region of the United States who seek a traditional residential college experience. This fact has significant implications for our recruiting and program offerings.

In communicating to prospective students, we must also consider the evolving ways in which young adults characterize their Christian faith and the theological language and categories with which they resonate, particularly in the United States.

Recent studies illuminate this shift. The Barna Institute's study, published as a volume entitled, *UnChristian*, and researcher Christian Smith's study of adolescents' views toward faith and spirituality

suggest that college-aged young people are concerned about the negative labels and judgmental terminology often associated with Christianity and that they possess very amorphous reasons for their beliefs. These millennials also indicate that they are keenly interested in shaping a personal Christian faith that, while rooted in exclusive truth, still acknowledges the common good that is found in other world views.

As a College with an “embracing evangelical spirit,” we can look to our mission as a guide in partnering with students as they form a deeply held Christian faith that seeks truth, respects people from various backgrounds, and eludes rigid categories.

Affordability is another pressing concern that will call for our most innovative and astute thinking. A volatile national economy has made it even more difficult for families to afford a quality private Christian education, such as the one Messiah College offers. (According to enrollment management consulting firm *Noel Levitz*, a family has to earn about \$160,000 per year to have an expected family contribution that will cover the entire cost of one year at Messiah College, an income level that is within the top 10% of families in the country.) Questions about maintaining our current position regarding tuition pricing, financial aid, and accessibility will need to be carefully reviewed as we seek to meet ambitious enrollment targets.

At the same time, we continue to experience the ripple effects of a public outcry for higher education to demonstrate accountability in learning outcomes and fiscal responsibilities. Public pressure has led to decreases in the federal and state government’s support for programs and students in addition to creating public relations dilemmas for all colleges and universities.

To fulfill our mission, we must strive to live out our unique institutional identity as a profoundly Christian college that inspires and educates students for lives of service, leadership, and reconciliation in the 21st century. In this quest, we seek to avoid the current impoverished polemic of the Church and the broader society. We commit to pursuing a “middle way,” by modeling biblical hospitality in the pursuit of understanding others even as we boldly proclaim our shared convictions.

To address the complexity of the challenges before us, we will need to practice the virtue of courage inspired by hope. But, in the process, we should heed H. L. Mencken’s word of caution, “*For every problem there is a simple answer and it’s wrong.*” The answers are surely going to be as complex as the problems!

As we cooperate to respond to challenges, we embrace a hope-filled future. This hope is reflected in our tripartite centennial theme: our Shared Faith, Bold Vision, and Enduring Promise.

Shared Faith

As proclaimed in the centennial theme, our deep and abiding commitment to orthodox Christian faith enables us to pursue wisdom, knowledge, and understanding.

In order to continue to be a transformative presence in the church and society, we intentionally root ourselves in the institutional values of our theological heritage, while declaring a hospitable message of embrace. As our colleague David Weaver Zercher noted,

“Messiah offers on one campus what many Christian faculty members find only at occasional conferences: 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.”

In recent years, however, an increasingly loud constituent voice has been calling for clarity about the content of the College's core commitments and the depth with which we adhere to them. In order to emphasize the seriousness with which we hold to our mission and identity, the Provost and I have convened a series of campus conversations on the topic. Messiah's core commitments are confidently proclaimed in our Mission and Identity statement, the Apostles' Creed, the College's Confession of Faith, and our Foundational Values. We need to reflect on these statements and their implications for the way we live and the approach we take to educating our students. These foundational statements provide critical points of connection to each other and to our higher calling.

Our campus conversations are not intended to redefine or alter our commitments. The purpose of this ongoing dialogue is to allow us to listen and learn so that our mutual understanding and appreciation for these core commitments will be deepened and enriched.

The creation of space for these conversations is as important as the content of the dialogue. Harvard professor Margaret Wheatley argued for the necessity of intentionally opening ourselves to conversation:

“We slow down so we have time to think and reflect. Listening is one of the skills required for good conversation. Slowing down is a second. Most of us work in places where we don't have time to sit together and think. We rush in and out of meetings where we make hurried, not thoughtful, decisions. Conversation creates the conditions for us to rediscover the joy of thinking together.”

When we engage in conversation, we become visible to each other and acknowledge each other as equals. While dialogue about our most profound beliefs and moral commitments always carries intrinsic risk, it will be both formative and informative for our campus and extended community. With you, I look forward to rediscovering the joy of thinking together.

Our shared faith and religious heritage compels us to envision a bold course as we advance our mission within the evolving contexts of church and society.

BOLD VISION

During our recent strategic planning process, I offered this vision statement for Messiah's second centennial:

As we celebrate our second century, Messiah College will be an educationally excellent, faithfully Christian college that promotes rigorous intellectual and spiritual development, passionate engagement with local and global communities, and lifelong commitments of service to God and others.

Messiah will be known as a leading comprehensive Christian college of the liberal and applied arts and sciences whose character is defined by its theological roots and a hospitable spirit. Such character is evidenced by the plurality of racial, ethnic, cultural and Christian faith traditions represented by students and employees, and the respect for those traditions that is nurtured by our educational program and community ethos.

Our commitment to promoting academic quality and to nurturing our Christian identity makes it possible to effectively respond to important changes in the Church and in the broader American culture.

Messiah College is poised to respond to a “sea change” that is spreading through the evangelical community and the broader American culture. Influential church leaders are calling for an end to the culture wars and the polarization of American political, social, and religious dialogue. In the June 30, 2008, issue of the *New Yorker*, Frances Fitzgerald described the ways prominent Christians such as Rick

Warren, Joel Hunter, and Rich Cizik are speaking less of Christians as an embattled subculture and dwelling more on Christians' responsibilities not only to hold fast to convictions but also to act as a positive influence for societal and cultural change. These religious leaders and their constituents articulate a commitment to life issues that embraces concern not only for the unborn, but also for victims of war, poverty, and human rights violations. They welcome civil dialogue and support their rhetoric with thoughtful action, which includes crossing previously held boundaries to form alliances that promote the common good. Professor Charles Marsh of the University of Virginia drew a comparison of our present national context to the meditations of Dietrich Bonhoeffer when he wrote *"the misuse of the language of faith had corrupted the word; any hope for renewal would need to begin with the humble recognition that God was most certainly tired of all our talk."* At Messiah, we seek to join with other Christians to translate the words of our beliefs into compassionate action. A commitment to both conversation *and* meaningful deeds clearly resonates with our institutional ethos. This commitment should create opportunities for us to lead discussions of regional and national importance, as well as inspire our efforts to successfully recruit "millennials," whose Christian convictions lead them to care deeply about a breadth of compassion issues.

Just as we are well positioned to provide a thoughtful response to the movement toward a more hospitable Christian culture, we must also work to be prepared to embrace the increasing racial and ethnic diversity of our nation. By 2042, it is estimated that more than 50 percent of the population of the United States will be non-white. This rich diversity reveals itself in our current pool of college students. Nationally, 20% of millennials have an immigrant parent. We understand increasing our diversity to be at the very core of our educational mission and integral to becoming a community that reflects the beauty and variety of God's Kingdom, a community that celebrates each person and learns together what it fully means to be created in God's image.

In the near future, the Campus Climate Task Force will be communicating their recommendations for actions we must take to transform our campus community into one that is truly welcoming for all of our employees and students. The campus diversity plan that is currently being written for Messiah College will be essential to ensuring that our education is of the highest academic quality. Implementing the campus diversity plan is essential to our long term institutional viability.

Speaking of diversity, we have very positive news to report in the midst of a challenging enrollment year. The number of students from underrepresented groups in the first year class has increased from 47 to 63, which is nearly 9% of our first year class compared to 6.5% in 2007. In addition, the number of our international students has doubled from 11 to 22. We also had a record high number of deposits, 53%, from students who interviewed for the Martin Multicultural Scholarships. This increase is heartening given our strategic priorities but we must remember that we will not retain diverse students (or employees) unless we live up to our claim to be a campus characterized by hospitality and until we take action to become a more just and inclusive community.

Toward this end, in September, The Ernest L. Boyer, Sr. Center will host a groundbreaking series of conversations and keynote addresses for educators and community leaders entitled "Can We Talk About Race?" We are hopeful that the model for constructive dialogue being developed as the core of this initiative will be adopted in urban centers throughout the country. Of course, our campus will certainly benefit from the outcomes of these dialogues, as well.

As we integrate our shared beliefs and hospitable spirit, one of the significant challenges ahead of us is to identify the language to articulate our shared faith and bold vision in a way that engages a society saturated with information. Patti Crane, (CEO of Crane Metamarketing) who is helping us to communicate our identity by leading our branding initiative, shared some of her initial impressions of Messiah College following her conversation with several campus focus groups:

“We heard people speak gratefully about Messiah College’s deep integrity and the fierce determination to reflect Christian possibility in all its dynamic, risky, life-filled complexity . . . Clearly, Messiah knows how to live outside the categories. The task ahead of us, then, is learning to be heard outside of the categories.”

How do we communicate Messiah’s distinctive approach to intellectual inquiry and faith formation, an approach that refuses to be bound by labels but an approach that is centered in core convictions? I encourage you to actively participate in the research and discussion phases of the branding initiative during the upcoming academic year. Your input will be essential to finding the language to courageously express the essence of Messiah College as we embark on our second centennial.

ENDURING PROMISE

Rooted in shared faith and propelled by a bold vision, we must do all that we can to ensure Messiah’s enduring promise. To be good stewards of all that has been entrusted to us, we need to consider three strategic areas: enrollment, finances, and programming.

As we reflect upon this past year’s enrollment cycle, one word sums it up: “atypical.” Early last fall, we experienced transitions in leadership and two counselor positions within the Enrollment Management department. Throughout the winter months, we attracted a record number of applications and a strong number of deposits that we hoped would enable us to achieve our ambitious goal of 735 FY students. Throughout the spring, our admissions colleagues and many others devoted significant time and effort to enrolling the FY 08 fall class. At the present time, we are projecting an enrollment of 713 first year students (22 students shy of our goal) and 83 transfers. Retention is tracking slightly stronger than last year’s 85.6%. Our research suggests that prospective students who chose not to attend Messiah College cited affordability as the primary reason. In addition to pursuing the financial goals outlined in our strategic plan—limiting tuition/fee increases and controlling institutional costs—we will be undertaking a two-year comprehensive tuition/pricing/financial aid review to explore possible strategies of re-designing the structure of our tuition pricing and financial aid.

Despite the challenges related to the changing demographics of high school students and affordability, I am optimistic about achieving future enrollment goals. We have visionary leaders and dedicated colleagues in the Enrollment Management, and we are implementing a number of positive changes to ensure greater success, including:

- New communications technology will allow us to customize electronic communications and improve our communication flow with potential recruits.
- Recruitment territories have been restructured to allow counselors to spend more time with prospective students in high potential areas.
- The Church Relations plan is being fully implemented with a goal of the Director of Volunteer and Church Relations and admissions counselors visiting 100 churches during this upcoming year (churches that reflect the denominational diversity of our campus community).
- Equally important, we have an ambitious goal of hosting 1,000 young people from church youth groups on campus during the academic year.
- We will be recruiting student ambassador volunteers to share information and their own experiences of Messiah with their home churches.

We can all play a helpful role in recruiting students to Messiah College, from providing referral names, to welcoming campus visitors, to phoning admitted students; we all need to participate in the student recruitment effort! There are approximately 500 of us gathered in this sanctuary. Imagine the impact if each one of us identified a potential student recruit for next year!

A second area of strategic importance to the well-being of Messiah College is our continued financial strength. At this time, we are awaiting the final FY08 audited statements. Although we will have a small decline in total net assets (approximately 25 million dollars) because of the turbulent year for investment markets, it appears we will have a \$900,000 operating budget surplus. This surplus is primarily the result of excellent stewardship across the campus, net tuition from our online Summer School initiative, and an unrestricted bequest.

As indicated in our strategic plan, in order to realize our goal of institutional financial strength, we need to generate annual surpluses of 2 million dollars to assure we have the necessary funding for much needed capital projects and deferred maintenance. In addition to practicing careful stewardship of our existing resources, we have already initiated some new programs to create additional revenue streams that will help us achieve our financial goals. Strategic programmatic steps that advance our educational mission and result in increased revenue help to ensure the College's enduring promise.

We remain committed to educational excellence as evidenced by our ongoing commitment to program review, support for faculty and student scholarship, opportunities for professional development, and the pursuit of outside accreditation for certain undergraduate programs. In this time of financial challenge, we need to continually evaluate our programs to maximize the use of our limited resources to successfully fulfill our educational mission. Program review and prioritization are essential to maintaining the quality and excellence of Messiah's educational program!

To ensure our institutional strength, we need to implement educational initiatives that will support and complement our core undergraduate program. These initiatives will allow us to fulfill our educational mission in new contexts while generating much needed revenue.

As I mentioned earlier in this address, our Summer School online pilot initiative was very successful, and a thorough academic assessment is currently being conducted. In the year ahead, we will be discussing a variety of topics regarding educational programming with relevant campus governing bodies, including how online education might be used to complement and enrich (neither substitute nor replace) the traditional educational experience of our students.

The Provost continues to work with the School Deans and academic departments to design and implement graduate programs consistent with our institutional mission and marketable in our geographic region. The Pennsylvania Department of Education has positively responded to Messiah's initial outline for the development of graduate programs in Art Education, Music (conducting) and Counseling. Throughout this upcoming academic year, the proposed curriculum and policies for these programs will be processed and approved through campus governance channels with the goal of launching our first masters programs in the summer/fall of 2009. Additional graduate programs under consideration include education and business with an emphasis on leadership and non-profit management.

As we refine these programs and focus our energy on addressing the challenges and opportunities before us, I remain *encouraged* and *hopeful* about Messiah College's enduring promise. I need only to look at each of you gathered in this sanctuary to recognize the vast resources of creativity represented in our community. In all of our disciplines—from the arts to engineering, from chemistry to philosophy, from education to English—we recognize that challenges and limitations often stir our imaginations and generate our most innovative solutions. The centennial theme reminds us that Messiah College's heritage is replete with stories of our community's transformation of limitations and challenges into catalysts for growth, development, and the advancement of our mission.

Conclusion

Our shared faith, bold vision, and enduring promise will enable us to courageously embrace the present challenges and opportunities as we eagerly anticipate a hope-filled future.

Today, at the dawn of our second centennial, we begin a new academic year dedicated to serving together as a Christ-centered community and committed to academic inquiry that is distinguished by hospitality and realized in conversation and action. By our very presence here this morning, we recommit our lives to our sacred calling as we experience what Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggeman described as amazement: “*the capacity to be amazed at the unending power that can be generated by the meeting and trading of lives.*” May the 2008-2009 academic year be an amazing one for the Messiah College community as we nurture our shared faith, proclaim our bold vision, and fulfill our enduring promise to give our heads, hearts and hands in service to God and to others.

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