

State of the University 2021
August 17, 2021

Messiah University: Journeying Toward Reconciliation Together

What a joy to be gathered together to celebrate Community Day and the launch of a new academic year. I have missed our in-person times of fellowship and worship, and today—as I look out across the beautiful, masked faces of colleagues seated in this magnificent space—I am grateful for the gift of the Messiah University community and the faithfulness of a steadfast God. Completing the past academic year required the resilience, adaptability and flexibility of every student and employee, and I am thankful—and inspired—by how you rallied to fulfill our institutional mission in the midst of complicated, difficult and frustrating realities. Thank you for all you did and all you will continue to do as we seek to educate in the midst of a global pandemic.

While we were navigating the uncertainties of this past academic year, we were also diligently working to ensure a positive and prosperous future for Messiah University as we fulfill our mission in the midst of a chaotic and changing world. Most importantly, we articulated that vision through the new “University Rising” strategic plan (21-24). The goals outlined in the plan spring forth from our shared vision for Messiah University to expand its influence as an institution of educational excellence committed to Christ-centered learning for life where

students are mentored toward mature intellect, professional competence, personal integrity and hospitable, Christian faith expressed in love of God and neighbor. At the conclusion of this Community Day service, copies of the strategic plan will be distributed during our fellowship time, along with Year of Reconciliation shirts. Please read and review the strategic plan (which is also posted on the [strategic planning website](#)) and contact me if you have questions or comments. In addition, Vice President of Finance David Walker and I plan to host an October employee forum on Messiah's financial plan for the next three years.

Strategic planning helps ensure our flourishing in the midst of challenging circumstances; even more importantly, it is designed to ensure that we continue to fulfill our mission priorities to both church and society. Today's State of the University address gives renewed attention to one specific part of that mission: our commitment to reconciliation. During this time of increasing division and vitriolic polarization within our nation and the Church, we must remember and affirm Messiah University's calling to be an educational community that equips students to serve, lead and reconcile.

Reconciliation is a journey of listening, truth-telling, lamenting and allowing our hearts and minds to connect with people's stories of pain, marginalization and injustice as we pursue transformation that repairs and restores broken relationships and systems. When we are reconciled to God, we are prepared to do as Jesus

instructed and to truly “love our neighbors,” regardless of what seemingly separates us—whether it be ethnicity, age, gender, socioeconomic status, political party, religious affiliation or even personality differences.

At Messiah University, our perspective on reconciliation is shaped by our humble understanding of Scripture and the historic foundation of our institution’s religious roots. Following a comprehensive Campus Climate Study in 2018, it was suggested that in the not-too-distant future Messiah should plan for an academic year dedicated to learning, understanding and practicing reconciliation. We could not have predicted the timely designation of a year-long campus theme designed to help students and employees learn to listen and lament with intentionality; share stories and insights while journeying alongside each other; and work together to heal brokenness in relationships and systems. Even before we heard the names of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor; before a worldwide pandemic elicited hate-filled disagreements about imposed health and safety restrictions and vaccines; before the dramatic escalation of violence against Asian Americans; and before the caustic and contested November election campaigns, Messiah University was poised to lean deeper into its stated value of biblical reconciliation.

Understanding and practicing reconciliation begins with embracing diversity as both a critical aspect of our educational commitment to students’ holistic development *and* as a response to the gospel. To be faithful to our mission, diverse

perspectives and traditions must be understood in the context of Messiah University's distinct identity and particular theological framework. Our Diversity Strategic Plan states that "Diversity is part of what it means to celebrate the goodness of God's creation and to renew our understanding of the reality that all of humanity reflects the signature of God" (Diversity Affairs). By engaging diversity in all areas of institutional life, we realize God's vision for us—the body of Christ—is evident as we bring hope and healing to individuals, communities and societies. The need to fulfill our individual and communal calling to be reconcilers has been consistent throughout Messiah's history but the urgency has increased as a result of our current context.

In preparation for this Year of Reconciliation, a campus task force was formed, led by Dr. Todd Allen and Dr. Kris Hansen-Kieffer, and comprised of employees from across many University departments, as well as a trustee, student and alumni representative. The task force selected a powerful visual image to serve as the logo for our 2021-2022 "Year of Reconciliation." Listen as our colleague, Dr. Obed Mfum-Mensah, Professor of Education, explains this symbol's significance.

Obed Mfum-Mensah "Understanding the Mpatapo Symbol" video

The logo includes a Scripture reference that functions as the cornerstone for Messiah's commitment to reconciliation: 2 Corinthians 5:17-20a, "So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation, that is, in Christ, God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us. Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us."

The ministry of reconciliation to which we are called, alongside all of our students, is not solely a vertical process between us and God *nor* is it solely a horizontal process between us and others. It is both. "There are two movements in this story, and the order is important. The first movement is about God and what God has done in Christ. The second is about the transformation this first movement has enacted in the world and in the lives of people," write Emmanuel Katongole and Chris Rice in *Reconciling All Things* (43).

As Christians, we look to Jesus as our ultimate example. Consider the context in which Jesus lived: born under scandalous circumstances, a refugee fleeing from Herod, a Hebrew descendent with a multicultural and multiracial family tree. He grew up in Galilee, a diverse province with enslaved people, and

He lived among individuals who represented different religions, cultures, languages and social classes (DeYoung 53).

Jesus did not isolate himself among people who looked, sounded and believed like he did. He intentionally touched the sick, befriended the marginalized, spoke against injustice and with his words and actions he reconciled individuals to God and to each other. Jesus' ministry of reconciliation disrupted expectations and destroyed social and religious taboos, requiring the type of sincere conviction and bold courage he exhibited throughout his earthly ministry.

The preeminence of Christ in our lives should inspire and empower us to participate in the sacred ministry of reconciliation. We are required to think, feel and act, and we have clear instruction about how to begin. Jesus declares in Matthew 22, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbor as yourself'" (Matthew 22:37-38). The first step in the journey of reconciliation is to love well—first the Lord and then others—acknowledging that all are lovingly created in God's image.

Nothing surpasses the mandate to be reconciled to God and each other. The Church—as described in the Book of Acts—was born into a society divided by inequities and divisions, much like what we witness in our contemporary world.

Yet, scholar Justo González reminds us that the gift of the Holy Spirit “undermines distinctions of power and hierarchy that might otherwise exist” and serves as an equalizer among all people (Gonzalez 18). It is the Holy Spirit—not any political or social agenda—that unites believers and enables us to repair brokenness.

Hospitality, a vital element of reconciliation, has been an important component of Messiah’s institutional DNA throughout our 112-year history. Two years after Messiah opened its doors, our fledgling campus became the home for a refugee from the Armenian genocide. Our first international student M.P. Krikorian, whose family members had been killed because of their Christian faith, escaped to Messiah where he was able to pursue an education. Then, in 1916, our first African American student, Rachel Flowers, enrolled and, just a few years later, her brother Vincent also completed his studies at Messiah Bible College.

One of my most cherished narratives from Messiah’s history is a story that I shared during our 2009 Centennial Celebration. In the aftermath of World War II, Messiah College President C.N. Hostetter Jr. invited the Sakimura family to live at the Grantham campus, where the father, Harvey, was employed as groundskeeper. The family had endured suffering in an American internment camp, and they anticipated the promise of a new home and steady employment. Relocating to Grantham after the war ended, the Sakimuras presence was not welcomed by members of the local community. Anti-Japanese sentiment continued to be

prominent throughout the United States. Despite receiving many threatening calls and letters, President Hostetter stood firm, continuing Harvey Sakimura's employment, extending care for the family's well-being and providing education for the Sakimura children (Phipps). As we reflect on this story, we must acknowledge the fear and prejudice that led to the unjust internment of innocent Asian Americans during this time of global instability, and we must diligently examine personal and community anxieties that lead to the adoption of evil and oppressive systems which must be ended. But we can also be encouraged by this account because it demonstrates how—in a time of turmoil—the Messiah community embraced and brought healing to a family who had been terribly mistreated and entered into a meaningful long-term relationship with them.

After enduring much physical and emotional pain, the Sakimura family found Messiah to be a gracious and loving community, and they wanted a similar hospitable experience for others, so they established an endowed scholarship with the internment restitution monies they received from the federal government. The Sakimura Family Scholarship Endowment supports Asian American students who attend Messiah University. In recent years, members of the Sakimura family have made multiple visits “home” to Messiah and Grantham. Several of the Sakimuras are buried in Grantham Memorial Park.

I share these examples to demonstrate that Messiah has historically valued hospitality, not to imply that we have always succeeded at making all students and employees feel welcome. But, early examples of hospitality such as these helped to inform the inclusion of reconciliation as one of the three stated outcomes of a Messiah education when a mid-1990s task force of faculty, staff and trustees drafted the current institutional identity and mission statements and the delineation of our core values. Because reconciliation was a central thread of our theological framework and a crucial part of institutional history, it was undisputed to purposefully pair more common educational outcomes such as “service” and “leadership” with reconciliation, a distinctive commitment among higher education institutions.

Since the adoption of our mission statement more than 25 years ago, Messiah has continued to lean into its values by acknowledging and addressing the need for University protocols and practices that lead to greater intercultural understanding and reconciliation. In recent years, we have developed and implemented a diversity strategic plan; appointed a Vice President for Diversity Affairs; adopted harassment protocols; provided inclusive excellence programming for all employees; revised expectations for term tenure review to include inclusive excellence; and offered cultural intelligence training to the board of trustees, University leaders and a breadth of campus departments.

Though we publicly express our commitment to reconciliation and can cite many examples of extending hospitality, we have not always been successful at “living into” our institutional calling and ideal. We know from our Campus Climate Survey that we have important work to do to ensure that all students and employees experience being valued and appreciated.

For Messiah University to fully embrace and visibly demonstrate its continuing commitment to reconciliation, we must be attentive to creating a campus environment of true belonging. At a time when higher education has become disappointingly transactional, viewed as a mere stepping stone in a student’s pursuit of career, Messiah University promises something different—a holistic education that not only effectively prepares students for a career but prioritizes the heart, soul and mind of learners of all ages. As we honor our institutional history and Christian faith, the foundational value of reconciliation must permeate the fabric of the curriculum and co-curriculum across all programs, institutional protocols and practices as well as the way we communicate and demonstrate respect for each other in daily interactions.

As most of you well know, hospitality has been a cornerstone principle of my life, learned at the feet of my immigrant grandmother, and hospitality has been articulated as a significant value at Messiah University, especially during the past two decades. Of course, I must acknowledge that I personally fall short of always

practicing the virtue of hospitality, but it is precisely in the moments when I devote too much attention to completing tasks and not enough attention to listening to others that I realize how much I need God's help to live out the call of reconciliation.

The Campus Climate Survey and recent conversations with colleagues and students have challenged me to consider whether hospitality is a sufficient paradigm. What action steps must we take to ensure that all Messiah community members experience not only an initial welcoming embrace, but true, sustained belonging? The difference is nuanced, but so very consequential. If I am extending hospitality, I, as the host, am still in a position of power or significant influence. If I focus on creating a climate or space favorable to belonging, I am intentionally prioritizing the stories and experiences of my guests by carefully listening, lamenting their pain, responding with compassion, celebrating their joys and affirming their human dignity and worth. During an event last spring sponsored by the Office of Academic Accessibility I had the privilege of talking with some students served by that office. They shared their feelings of often being left out of class discussions and student-led activities. One student said, "Everyone is so nice here but sometimes I feel invisible." We must do better for our students and each other.

Christian educational institutions like Messiah University have powerful opportunities to offer all students a true place of belonging. Theologian Willie James Jennings writes, “Theological education could mark a new path for Western education, one that builds a vision of education that cultivates the new belonging that this world longs to inhabit. But we cannot give witness to that newness if we imagine that our fundamental struggle is one of institutional survival, or the challenge of educational delivery systems, or the alignment of financial modeling with our desired outcomes, or the expansion of pedagogical models. All these matters are important, but they are not where the struggle meets us or from where the vision of our futures will come” (Jennings 154).

At Messiah, we must equip students with cultural intelligence, not just in preparation for their vocations but to prepare them to understand, contextualize and address the challenges and opportunities of learning, living, loving and leading in the 21st century world. An excellent example of this involves the partnership that Dr. Mindy Smith, assistant professor of applied health science, has nurtured with Brethren Housing Association, a Harrisburg organization committed to providing stable housing, supportive services and loving relationships to people experiencing homelessness. In Professor Smith’s Health Promotion Management course, students identify and create relevant programs that focus on nutrition, physical activity opportunities and accessing health resources in Harrisburg. Through

interactions with Brethren Housing Association staff and clients, students explore their personal biases and learn to more accurately identify and address the determinants of health, privilege, discrimination and access in the health fields. No longer are health care access issues mere textbook case studies; rather, they are human dignity issues attached to faces and names personally known by the students. When students witness the challenges and limitations experienced by economically disadvantaged individuals, their perspective is forever changed, and they are motivated to practice reconciliation in their healthcare-related careers.

Educating students toward reconciliation and modeling the process for them is a profound opportunity and serious responsibility. Pope Francis describes institutions like Messiah as “vital reserves of moral energy and civic love” (Pope Francis and Austen Ivereigh 46). Listen as Dr. George Pickens, professor of theology and director of the peace and conflict studies program, shares a meaningful account of reconciliation across different religious traditions.

George Pickens “Interfaith Peacebuilding” Video

Though each person’s reconciliation journey will be unique, there are common steps that guide the process. Consider relationships in your own life that might be broken: perhaps you and a colleague have a long-term conflict that impedes your working relationship; perhaps someone’s political posts on social

media have caused you to draw back from your friendship; or perhaps you have been unwilling to undertake the difficult work of unpacking your particular role in systems and policies that promote inequities. Now is the time to follow the commandment of Matthew 22 to love God and love others by taking these personal steps toward reconciliation.

- We must be attentive to the pain and injustice experienced by others. We cannot merely be bystanders who support the work of reconciliation but don't engage it ourselves. We must acknowledge that people have legitimate, painful histories that deserve our attention and compassion.
- We must listen. We must invite people to tell their stories and then genuinely listen when they do. By listening, we are not compromising any dearly held truths. (Pope Francis and Austen Ivereigh 57). Rather, listening is a spiritual value, according to Krista Tippett, host of the public radio show and podcast "On Being" as well as our Humanities Symposium keynote speaker in February. "Listening is an ordinary, everyday virtue," she says, "but it's an essential way we can reach across the mystery of the other. There aren't many things we do in our lives that are more important" (Tippett).
- We must lament—personally and communally as Christ-followers. The more we engage the pain of this world, the more we should grieve the

world's brokenness. Lament is not despair, but rather a cry to God. When we lament, we recognize that without God intervening, there can be no reconciliation (Katongole and Rice 89). Throughout the upcoming Year of Reconciliation at Messiah University, there will be educational sessions and worship services designed to help participants gain a deeper understanding of lament as we honestly examine our personal and institutional past and seek God's help to enable us to pursue reconciliation.

- We must be truth seekers and truth tellers who acknowledge the legitimate pain and bias experienced by marginalized people, especially if those experiences are vastly different from ours. A recent NPR news report examined how some "news" outlets contribute to a lack of truth telling and polarization by "turning anger into an art form" on Facebook. How articles are headlined and curated on all social media and news platforms effectively manipulate people to click and unequivocally accept the content as verified fact (Parks). As members of an educational community, each one of us has a sincere responsibility to investigate the reliability of online sources and to be certain we are not believing or even worse, spreading false information. We must model integrity, honesty and truth-telling for each other and our students.

- Ultimately, forgiveness must be extended and accepted for complete restoration of broken relationships, which contribute to the restoration of broken systems. The end goal is not merely a truce but a vibrant, genuine friendship (Katongole and Rice 98).

Institutionally, we are facilitating the reconciliation journey by sponsoring individuals to participate in the annual Civil Rights Tour, offering on-campus student, employee and board development opportunities and implementing the action steps of our diversity strategic plan on an annual basis.

The reconciliation journey requires perseverance, and I want to caution us against believing it is just too difficult or not worth such significant effort.

Indifference is the enemy of reconciliation; apathy and unwillingness to pursue deep, authentic relationships with people unlike ourselves will ruin our community, our witness and the Messiah educational experience. Our students will only be able to be educated toward reconciliation if they witness each one of us setting the example. Achieving the human flourishing of others is only possible when we are loving Christ and truly loving our neighbors as ourselves. As faithful followers of Christ we must prayerfully and purposefully seek reconciliation.

We have planted the seeds and are nurturing the growth of this reconciliation story. As I recounted earlier, Messiah University's reconciliation journey began

more than a century ago, and today, we remain actively engaged in the ministry of reconciliation both within our educational community and the greater Central Pennsylvania region. Here are a few examples of the good work presently being done by our employees and students:

- The **Digital Harrisburg Initiative**, a collaboration between Messiah University, Harrisburg University of Science and Technology and community partners, was awarded the Leadership in History Award by the American Association for State and Local History. Students and faculty in the humanities engaged Harrisburg history in reconciliatory ways by collecting oral histories, creating interactive GIS maps about multiethnic neighbors and supporting the creation of the Commonwealth Monument Project, an initiative to commemorate the passage of the 15th and 19th amendments and acknowledge the thriving African American and immigrant community that existed there.
- **Thriving Together: Congregations for Racial Justice** is a Lilly Endowment-funded, multi-faceted, multi-year initiative designed to strengthen Christian congregations so they can help members deepen their relationships with God, build strong relationships with each other and contribute to the flourishing of local and global communities. Dr.

Drew Hart is leading a team of faculty and students to work with 12 local congregations, representing eight denominations, to examine how churches can participate in regional efforts toward building a more just society.

- The innovative **Human Library Project**, a collaborative program between Murray Library and the Office of Diversity Affairs, will continue in the spring of 2022. Participants serve as open books, sharing their personal stories with attendees. The goal is to “build a positive framework for conversations that can challenge stereotypes and prejudices through dialogue” (Seip 8). This initiative received the Campus Road to Reconciliation Award last May.
- In the upcoming **Year of Reconciliation for Messiah University** there will be numerous public events and learning opportunities to further increase our personal and communal understanding of reconciliation and to learn from faithful Christians engaged in this important work. A complete calendar of events can be found on the [Year of Reconciliation website](#).

As an educational institution, we’re accustomed to needing metrics to measure the success of a program or initiative. I appreciate how Todd Allen frames measuring the success of our reconciliation efforts. “We are called to be faithful,

not successful. From this perspective we will not so easily give into the disappointment of failure but will, instead, lean further into the forgiveness, truth-telling and lament that reconciliation requires of us.” In the year ahead, let’s adopt postures of learning and leaning—moving toward people with the goal of listening and serving as faithful ambassadors for Christ.

Imagine the story that Messiah University will communicate to our constituents when they witness us intentionally and whole-heartedly leaning into reconciliation. Messiah University: an educational community marked by stories of how all of our students and employees experience human flourishing. Messiah University: a place of hopeful possibility where people recount their individual stories of transformation and the distinct kind of “heart, spirit and life that inspires and sustains” the difficult ministry of reconciliation (Katongole and Rice 125). Most importantly, the Messiah story will point to and glorify our good and gracious God, who allowed Jesus to bear our sin so that we might experience true reconciliation with our Creator and each other.

In prior State of the University addresses, I have presented a tree metaphor to illustrate how Messiah University is rooted, yet growing and changing by grafting new branches in response to higher education challenges and opportunities such as programs for graduate and adult learners. Allow me to refer to that tree image again for a moment and reflect on the origin of a mature, towering tree. It

started as just one small seed. In *Reconciling All Things*, Katongole and Rice offer this hopeful reminder: “We plant in hope, not certainty. But we plant because we know it is true and right and good. Even as we bend to push the seeds beneath moist soil, we are learning that hope is the patience to work and wait for a future yet seen” (107-108).

As I consider this present moment in history, I know that there is no other educational community with whom I would rather plant the seeds of reconciliation as together we work and wait for a future yet seen. May God find us to be faithful ambassadors of the ministry of reconciliation now and in the years to come!

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