

## **See Gracious Christianity Anew**

*Jon C. Stuckey, Interim President*

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Thank you, Rod. Shari and I so appreciate you and Cathy and your faithful service to your alma mater.

It is a privilege to be here with you this morning. I am grateful for each of you and your commitment to Messiah University. I am also grateful to all who had a hand in preparing this day. At the close of Community Day, there will be a slide of appreciation and recognition. Please pay special attention to these valued colleagues who made this day possible. In addition, I am grateful to those who provided feedback on this presentation, including Karin Bisbee, Carla Gross, all of President's Cabinet, David Weaver-Zercher, and Board Chair Rod Musser. Finally, I am grateful that being married to an English teacher means you shouldn't hear any terrible grammar!

Speaking of President's Cabinet, I am so thankful for these colleagues that have been an enormous support during this time of transition. Messiah's senior leadership is strong and their skill sets deep. Thank you, Todd Allen, Amanda Coffey, Christy Gardner, Gary Nowicki, Kathie Shafer, and Sarah Wade. To this A-team I add Karin Bisbee as she does such a wonderful job supporting the Office of the President and the Board of Trustees. You are all gifts to Messiah and to me personally. Please join me in thanking these colleagues for their stellar work.

We also are privileged to have some of our trustees attending today. In addition to Rod Musser, we have Doneen Dourte, David Millary, Linda Pheasant, Alan Robinson, and Eunice Steinbrecher. Messiah is so blessed to have a dedicated team of a total of 29 volunteer board members leading us at this time. Please join me in thanking those here in attendance and the entirety of our Board leadership for their selfless dedication to our mission.

Community Day has long commemorated the start of a new academic year for Messiah employees. This is the first Community Day since 2003 that Kim Phipps has not been either interim president or president. I am thankful to so many in this room for how well we were able to thank both Kim and Kelly this spring for their transformational leadership and contributions. They have left Messiah stronger than when they arrived, which is perhaps the most admirable outcome of any departing leader.

### **Background**

Before I provide my vision for Messiah during this period of transition, I would like to offer a brief and somewhat circuitous story about how I arrived here. Many of you know me as a fundraiser, but do not know about my background in higher education as a medical research sociologist with an emphasis on gerontology, and my family's connections to Christian higher education. In fact, there has never really been a time in my life when Christian higher education was not near to the center of our family.

My father was a graduate of Bluffton University in Ohio, and my mother a graduate of Wheaton College in Chicago. Christian higher education was important to both of them. In fact, I am privileged to be a third generation Christian college graduate – my maternal grandmother attended Fort Wayne Bible College, which later merged with Taylor University. I have two of her textbooks in my office as a reminder to treasure this legacy. My paternal grandparents were, like my dad, graduates of Bluffton where my grandmother later served on the music faculty and my grandfather became the registrar.

My father had always envisioned teaching college at a Christian school, so from when he was hired in 1969 at Malone University as a history professor, Malone would become very important to me. Malone, like Messiah, comes from a peace tradition denomination, the Evangelical Friends Church, which has roots in Quakerism. My sister succeeded my father after his retirement in 1999 and now serves as the “Emerson Powery of Malone” in that she is the Dean of their equivalent to our School of Arts, Society and Culture!

Malone was a place where I heard about faith and learning integration long before I encountered it as a college student. As a child, I remember hearing about what is now titled the Worldview Forum at Malone where Christians offer presentations on opposing views, but rooted in civil dialog. I also remember how committed my father was to issues of justice and fairness, treating all as if they are, indeed, *Imago Dei*. My father launched one of the first service-learning courses at Malone, which included visiting other cultures. Here is my favorite picture of my dad taken in 1973. He was visiting the Eastern Band of the Cherokee Nation with students, and the way he is reaching out to shake the hands of these young girls has always moved me. The locations of these service trips, which happened during the school year, were often sites of our family vacations the summer prior. I must admit, that visiting North Carolina historical sites instead of the Outer Banks like my friends, was not particularly exciting as a kid. But now, I am so grateful for his commitment to service and to justice. This picture of my father shows him in his academic robe. Since his death in 2004, this is the robe I wear at academic events – the one I will be wearing next week at Convocation.

Another important aspect of my connection to Malone is the international cross-cultural experience provided to my family. My older sisters were already married, but in 1979, my parents, my brother, and I lived in Hong Kong for one year while my father participated in a faculty exchange program with what was then Hong Kong Baptist College. I will admit to being a very angry and tiresome 16-year-old when my parents sprang this on me. Yet, I am so glad they “made” me go. Here I am with my brother on Lantau Island in Hong Kong rocking some seriously long tube socks. Understanding just how large and diverse God’s world is – hearing testimonies of Chinese Christians who lived out their faith despite the challenges they faced in their homeland just a few miles north, and making friends with students literally from all over the world – has remained with me to this day.

After graduating high school and enrolling in Malone, I found being a student was even better than being a faculty kid. While I wasn’t particularly studious, I did enjoy living on campus ... which is where a year later, I met Shari Taylor. Now, I need to mention something about my wife. Many people have come up to me saying congratulations and very nice things about me

being named interim president. However, it has most often been followed-up with... “But Shari!! Shari will be amazing!” I have known my wife for over 40 years. And I can tell you lots of things about our marriage – but perhaps this slide showing a note she left on my car in 1985 after she Saran-wrapped and rubber-banded the entire vehicle says it best. I often say that the Lord has given me life, but Shari helps me breathe.

For those of you who don’t know her, Shari is an educator to her core. As a teacher with credentialing from the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards, she has taught high school English, AP Language, and AP Literature for 38 years. She also taught education, communication, and writing courses at Messiah when we first moved here in 2000. Currently, she is in her final year of teaching at Hershey High School. Also on this slide is a picture of our crew taken just last week during our annual Cape May beach week. Our older daughter, Taylor, is a 2017 Messiah grad, and is married to Justin, also a 2017 Messiah grad. They live outside Washington, DC, and they are expecting our first grandchild, Emma Opal, in October. Our younger daughter, Blake, is a grad of our alma mater, Malone, and lives in New York City. I am grateful Shari, Blake, and my mother-in-law, Kathe Taylor visiting from Florida, are here this morning.

While at Malone, I took a communication course, which many of you know was the first class ever taught by Kim Phipps. She and I bonded over the misuses of communication metaphors and clichés and have been friends ever since. Shari and I have known and loved Kim and Kelly for over 40 years, and we are honored to follow their leadership tenure at Messiah. Finally, it was at Malone that I first developed my own sense of calling toward a life pursuing justice. The Malone choir sang a song entitled Micah 6:8 that essentially repeated the lines, “act justly, love mercy, walk humbly” – this has been my life verse since 1984.

### **Why Gerontology?**

When determining my own vocational path at Malone, it really began with close relationships with my grandparents, particularly my maternal grandparents. Their home, shown here, located in Berne, Indiana, was where I received unconditional love and learned to give unconditional love in return. Here my maternal grandparents are pictured with Shari and me when I received my master’s degree, and here is also a picture of my paternal grandparents from the church directory of First Mennonite Church in Bluffton, Ohio. My close relationships with my grandparents and elderly members of my church led me to develop an early interest in the field of gerontology.

Further, while I was in Washington, DC, during my senior year at Malone, I participated in the Council for Christian Colleges & University’s American Studies Program, and two emerging health care issues were the focus of my internship working for my local Congressman: AIDS and Alzheimer’s disease. Because of my affinity for the elderly, I was drawn into the aging field with a focus on Alzheimer’s research. I began volunteering for my local chapter of the Alzheimer’s Association, which led to participation and advocacy with the Association at the local, state, and national levels over the next twenty years.

After graduating Malone, I entered a pre-doctoral research fellowship program in sociology with an emphasis on gerontology at Case Western Reserve University in Cleveland. Sociology has

greatly informed how I view the world. C. Wright Mills' notion of the sociological imagination, that is, connecting personal experience with larger social forces, brings great perspectives to how people react to the challenges they face. Later, after completing my doctoral degree in 1992, I focused my research portfolio on the social impacts of families caring for someone with dementia, and in particular, Alzheimer's disease. I wrote numerous foundation and federal grants to fund my research and published my findings in various gerontological and sociological journals.

I also became active in the Gerontological Society of America (GSA), eventually becoming a Fellow of the GSA. My good friend and gerontology colleague Raeann Hamon and I served on a graduate student committee together for GSA way back in the 1980s – long before I knew I would be coming to Messiah! In addition to my involvement with GSA and the Alzheimer's Association, I also served on a variety of national boards, including the American Society on Aging, the American Sociological Association, and the National Institute on Aging.

### **My Messiah Journey**

By the year 1999, I was thoroughly entrenched in a social-behavioral research tenure track career in the neurology department at the Case Western Reserve University School of Medicine. I was leading several research projects, was serving in multiple academic roles, and was developing a national and international reputation for my work in the role of religion and spirituality for those living with Alzheimer's disease, either as a diagnosed person or a family caregiver.

And then Kelly Phipps called. Kelly was serving as Director of Development here at Messiah after Kim had been named Academic Dean. Kelly was launching a grants office, and because we had stayed in contact since I first met them both at Malone, he was familiar with my work. Kim and Kelly invited us to campus to meet with them and then President Rodney and Lorna Sawatsky. In the back of my mind, like my father, I had long felt a tug to work at a Christian college. Hearing Rod's vision for Messiah and Kelly's vision for the grants office, Shari and I both felt confirmation in the Lord leading us here.

So in the summer of 2000, Shari left her high school English teaching position in Orrville, Ohio, and I left Case Western Reserve to move to Messiah to start a grants office. Yes, that is me. And since 2003, I have also been Assistant Professor of Sociology at Messiah. For the first 5 years or so, I taught courses in sociology, research methods, and gerontology. However, it became a bit too much for me to handle my administrative responsibilities in addition to teaching, so I had to stop, which was a difficult, but necessary decision.

I was raised within the Evangelical Friends Church and because of its roots in Quakerism I mentioned earlier, I learned from an early age to wait in prayerful quiet for the "inner light" – that is, the Holy Spirit of Christ within – to provide direction and guidance from the Lord. I have found God's voice to be a faithful presence throughout my life. In looking back, I am reminded of a favorite quote from one of my most favorite books, which was given to me by a favorite friend, Chad Frey: *Jayber Crow*, by Wendell Berry.

In the book, Berry writes "Often I have not known where I was going until I was already there... Often I have received better than I have deserved. Often my fairest hopes have rested on bad

mistakes. I am an ignorant pilgrim, crossing a dark valley. And yet for a long time, looking back, I have been unable to shake off the feeling that I have been led – make of that what you will.”<sup>i</sup>

### **See Gracious Christianity Anew**

Over these past 25 years, Messiah has become our home. When the Board of Trustees asked me to step in as interim president this past spring, it was another leading of the Lord that prompted me to say yes. And what a wonderful time to take on this opportunity!

Messiah is in such a strong position – despite the challenges facing higher education right now. And we are in that position because of you, our educators, staff, and administrators. As we saw in the Year in Review video, we have so much for which to be thankful:

- Strong fall undergraduate and graduate enrollment, including this year’s incoming class
- Strong financial management
- Strong giving
- New and exciting programs at both the undergraduate and graduate levels
- Wonderful, talented, and accomplished students, educators, staff, and alumni in the arts and sciences, humanities, professions, athletics, faith formation, and service

Thank you. Thank you for your commitment to the Lord and to Messiah. It is because of the Messiah community that Shari and I have grown to so deeply love this place. I am committed to stewarding our unique position in the Christian college and university landscape. Our wonderful heritage that is now Messiah University – a heritage that includes so many components, including the Messiah Academy, Messiah Bible College, Messiah Junior College, and our sister institution in California with which we merged in the early 1960’s, the former Upland College – these have all led to Messiah’s unique position. One of my favorite memories is hosting the final Upland College reunion in Rancho Cucamonga, California about 10 years ago. Kim Phipps was scheduled to speak, but she was stricken with appendicitis. I had the entire Upland crowd wave get well wishes to Kim. If you look closely, you will see our current Board Chair and Spouse, Rod and Cathy Musser, when they were still living their California dream.

I am devoted to the model of “Gracious Christianity” that has emerged from our heritage and that has informed the ethos of Messiah University for over 20 years. At the heart of “Gracious Christianity” is the dual commandment from Jesus to “love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength” and to “love your neighbor as yourself” (Mark 12:30-31). I served as a pre-publication reader of the book *Gracious Christianity*<sup>ii</sup>, written by Douglas Jacobsen, Distinguished Professor of Church History and Theology Emeritus, and the late Rod Sawatsky, Messiah’s 7<sup>th</sup> President. It has been my prayer for Messiah for nearly as long as I have been here.

The dual commandments to “love the Lord your God” and to “love your neighbor as yourself” are repeated in the parable of the Good Samaritan in Luke 10:25-37. It gives me great joy that the summer reading for our first-year undergraduate students is focused on this powerful parable, as well as reading reflections on the Good Samaritan by the early church leader Origen, Billy Graham, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Amy-Jill Levine. The late Pope Francis often referred to the Good Samaritan, including in the Encyclical Letter *Fratelli Tutti*, underscoring the

interconnectedness of humanity and the call to rebuild our “wounded world.” How great to have incoming students immediately read about what is essentially “Gracious Christianity.”

To reflect a gracious Christian spirit does not mean a person is unable to hold theological convictions firmly, deeply, and even passionately. We must remain committed to the foundational values that are core to our identity and mission, including among others, “unity of faith, learning and life,” “the importance of the person,” and “service and reconciliation.” Rather, to reflect a gracious Christian spirit means that when confronted with someone who differs on those theological convictions, our response is not to be adversarial, hostile, or rude. We are to respond in a manner that mirrors Christ’s love for us. We are to be kind, compassionate, and loving.

Upon graduating from Messiah University – as an undergraduate or graduate – students hopefully have been exposed to an ethos that promotes civil dialog and a greater understanding that the love of God is found not in division or brash certitude, but in a humility that draws others into deeper relationships not only with God, but also with each other – despite whatever differences we may have. In many ways, “Gracious Christianity” can be distilled down to the tagline of the book: “living the love we profess.”

As I was contemplating a theme for my presidency during this period of transition, I was struck by how both Gracious Christianity – a term that corresponds to the Sawatsky presidency – and the See Anew nomenclature – which corresponds to the Phipps presidency – continue to resonate so well with me. At the heart of “See Anew,” as noted on our website, is the stained-glass metaphor: “each student, truly each community member, brings a valuable perspective that is celebrated, appreciated and allowed to remain distinct. In the grace of our shared love of Christ – and in our worship, study and service – we combine our individual contributions into a community that is more beautiful together – like a strong and vibrant stained-glass window. And the insight that is born in everyone is the light that shines through. Together we see anew.”

2 Corinthians 5:17 (NRSV) – “So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!”

Therefore, the theme I am pursuing during this season is “See Gracious Christianity Anew.” I have framed this theme into three main pillars:

- Courage of Conviction with Kindness
- Innovation with Purpose
- Leading by Following

### **Current Annual Plan**

Before providing further detail around the three pillars, I will briefly mention that these pillars will undergird our forthcoming Annual Plan for Messiah. We will continue the themes of the University Rising Strategic Plan, which have served us so well over these past several years.

The vision statement of University Rising remains relevant and inspiring:

*Messiah University will expand its influence as an institution of educational excellence committed to Christ-centered learning for life where students are mentored toward deeper*

*intellect, professional competence, personal integrity and mature faith expressed in love of God and neighbor.*

We remain committed to distinctive teaching and learning, to “See Messiah Anew” across the full learning-for-life spectrum, to a sustainable future, and to transformative connections – the strategic themes that have capably guided us since 2021. More will be shared regarding goals and objectives for our 2025-2026 Annual Plan as we prepare for the October Board meetings.

The conversations and activities around the three pillars of “See Gracious Christianity Anew” will occur alongside our efforts to remain focused on the themes of the “University Rising” Strategic Plan while we simultaneously perform the good pre-work of preparing for our next strategic plan as soon as a permanent president is named. In other words, we are ***not*** in a holding pattern – we are using this time wisely. We will move forward to ensure Messiah continues to flourish.

### ***Courage of Conviction with Kindness***

Returning to the three pillars of “See Gracious Christianity Anew,” we remain committed to our core convictions, but in a spirit of kindness, that is generous, humble, and loving. It is here that Messiah’s unique focus on reconciliation comes into play. Many institutions – secular and faith-based – have mission statements that include an emphasis on service and leadership, Messiah’s included. However, by also placing an emphasis on reconciliation, we speak with a spirit of humility that does not stoke division. We can have honest and civil conversations with those who differ from us – indeed this is critical to model for our students so they are able to emulate a gracious style of dialog when they are confronted with difficult conversations in the future.

The courage of our conviction with kindness is perhaps no more vital than in the area of inclusive excellence. Messiah is clear in its own values about our ethos as a Christian institution of higher education. This includes our stated commitment that “every person is to be respected and valued, regardless of gender, race, nationality, ability, status or position, because each person is created in the image of God.”<sup>iii</sup> We are blessed to welcome one of the largest cohorts of multicultural students and international students this fall, which continues an increasing area of growth in multicultural representation over the past decade. Likewise, we are excited to launch our Next Steps program that serves and equips students with intellectual disabilities as part of our campus community.

In these complicated times of concerns raised about promoting diversity on a university campus, it is helpful to be mindful that Messiah has a long history of being focused on issues surrounding “peaceableness,” reconciliation, diversity, justice, and inclusive excellence literally from the very founding of our institution. In his book *The Heaven and Earth Grocery Store*, noted author James McBride writes “Light is only possible through dialogue between cultures, not through rejection of one or the other.”<sup>iv</sup>

In 2009, members of the Messiah Community composed a seminal white paper reaffirming our long commitment to reconciliation. In it, our colleagues note “Reconciliation is challenging because it is not a quick fix, but rather it is a long-term commitment to discipleship. It requires a faith journey reflected in the rhythms of preparing soil, planting, tending the crops, and gathering

harvest as a continuing cycle. It is shaped and sustained with a desire to celebrate the ‘shalom’ of God, which has not yet been realized.”<sup>v</sup>

These rhythms of reconciliation take many forms, and I hope to hear your stories of the rhythms of reconciliation in your lives. I have two personal examples that pertain to Messiah. First, while a student at Malone, I had the privilege of reading the “Ballad of Birmingham” by Dudley Randall in my American Literature course. It is a moving poem about the 1963 bombing deaths of four young girls at the 16th Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, Alabama. The poem has had a profound impact on me that continues to this day – in large part because I became the father of two daughters. It was such an honor to be with Lisa McNair, sister of Denise who was killed in the church bombing – as well as Minnijean Brown-Tricky, one of the Little Rock Nine – at the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the bombing in 2023 in Birmingham. Shari and I first met Lisa when we had the privilege of participating in Todd Allen’s Civil Rights Bus Tour in 2022. Going back to my Malone days and reading the “Ballad of Birmingham,” if you would have told my 19-year-old self that I would someday meet these remarkable humans because of a special place like Messiah with committed Christians focused on the reconciling love of Christ, it would just have been impossible to imagine.

My second example of rhythms of reconciliation involves the Sakimura family and a dash of humor. Throughout my various roles in Advancement, it has been a pleasure to maintain Messiah’s relationship with the Sakimuras, which includes periodic visits with Alice Sakimura Chong in California. As you may know, Alice’s family lived on our campus in the 1940’s while her father was the head groundskeeper. Here I am with Alice on one of my visits when I had the privilege of being a guest in her home. She prepared a beautiful meal of all types of sushi – cooked and raw. I can’t stand sushi – cooked and certainly not raw! But because I care so deeply for her, I powered through a complete plateful. She was so pleased how I enjoyed her sushi, she brought me another... full... plate. As I told Shari and my girls, you just can’t tell Nana Alice no when she gives you two plates full of love that she prepared for you.

While living in Grantham, Alice’s family was subjected to local anti-Japanese sentiments. Yet, Messiah cared for the Sakimura family, including Alice and her brothers Clarence and Ivan, despite the risks. All three Sakimura siblings graduated from Messiah. Years later, when Ivan was given his portion of the Japanese American Reparations Act, he launched a scholarship at Messiah that awards annual tuition funding to this day. The kindness shown to the Sakimura family during a difficult point in our nation’s history, and their reciprocal kindness is an example of the rhythms of reconciliation. In other words, having the courage of our convictions with kindness. This is inclusive excellence. This is Messiah.

Therefore, we continue the important but difficult work of ensuring the entirety of the Messiah community – students, faculty, staff, trustees – is representative of the Kingdom of God. And we do so in a way that reflects what we have called an “embracing evangelical spirit” at Messiah.

### ***Innovation with Purpose***

Seeing Gracious Christianity Anew also means having a campus that honors the rich heritage of Messiah University yet also recognizes the need for bold innovation in an ever-changing landscape in higher education. In their book, *Dual Transformation*<sup>vi</sup> (2017), Anthony, Gilbert,

and Johnson note that businesses, and to that I add universities, must simultaneously pay attention to current challenges as well as future opportunities to survive. The authors underscore the need for curiosity, experimentation, and the freedom to fail to innovatively adapt to the future. Similarly in higher education, Messiah must not rest on our current foundation of financial and programmatic strength without continually evolving to adapt to changing student demand. In other words, what new offerings should we explore that help us attract a broader swath of students given the decline of the traditional college-aged population in the Northeast U.S.? How can we attract a larger portion of students by offering innovative and new curriculum that places Messiah at the top of the list of schools prospective students wish to attend? Consequently, my vision for Messiah is one where we resource and strengthen programs already in place and look to expand into opportunities and new student population groups that fit well within our educational mission and objectives.

In doing that important work, surely we must face current realities and challenges, including the ubiquitous nature of Artificial Intelligence, or AI. Yet, we do not fear AI. In working with Provost Christy Gardner and the Board of Trustees, we are focused on three areas:

1. How AI is used in the classroom – Assistant Provost David Weaver-Zercher has been leading a task force focused on using AI in teaching, including making sure all course syllabi address AI use. In addition, Murray Library Director, Janet Vogel, and her library colleagues have created a wonderful AI guide for employees. She and Information Literacy Librarian Beth Transue have been holding helpful training sessions for employees this summer on how to use AI, and Allen Snook, Director of Information Security, and Laura Miller, Associate VP for IR and Information Technology, have partnered with them to address cyber security.
2. We will also explore what additional AI certificates and degrees might be offered at Messiah beyond our current graduate certificate in our MBA track, designed for business professionals to utilize AI to streamline operations, improve decision-making, and enhance user experiences – as well as address ethical and legal challenges.
3. Finally, how can AI be leveraged more effectively in running the “business” of Messiah? For example, our stellar teams in Enrollment Management and Marketing and Communications have been using AI in recent years to improve our marketing strategies for engaging prospective students. What other areas could benefit from efficiencies offered by AI? Toward this end, under the leadership of AVP Laura Miller, Messiah is participating in the AI-Ready program of the Council of Independent Colleges and Universities, which is focused on all aspects of running a university, including enrollment, student services, curriculum changes, and expenditures.

Innovation with purpose means our strategy for new ideas is directly linked to the underpinnings of our annual plan and areas identified for future growth. It is important to note that higher education is a unique space. While from the outside, the preference for due process and broad input can seem overwhelming, done with the right governance model, the input of the whole is a vital way to strengthen the overall functioning of the academy. Moreover, the student experience and student outcomes have always been and must always remain central to innovation at Messiah.

Further, beyond innovation, educators and staff must have the appropriate resources to flourish in their endeavors to educate students who are:

- rigorously prepared within their specific disciplines
- grounded in critical thinking and effective writing skills
- capable of difficult conversations around faith and vocation
- witnesses to the love of Christ that draws others near to our Lord

In her recent opinion piece for the *New York Times*<sup>vii</sup>, Jennifer Frey notes that “Liberal learning occurs in dialogue with those who object to us, who offer a different perspective or experience — who read the same book as we do in a completely different light.” She goes on to say “We need to cultivate what (her) college called ‘the virtues of liberal learning.’ For example, we need to cultivate the humility to recognize that we have much to learn from the past and from one another. We need to cultivate a love of truth for its own sake and the courage to speak our minds and to follow the truth wherever it may lead us — even when it leads us into difficult waters where our disagreements are deep and unsettling.”

Of course, at a Christian place like Messiah, our truth is based in the Gospel. Yet, Frey’s words are compelling as we seek to foster the very climate of learning she describes in her article. And how blessed we are at Messiah to have such wonderful educators – and staff – across all disciplines who speak into the lives of our students as we pursue innovation with purpose.

### ***Leading by Following***

Third, See Gracious Christianity Anew means Leading by Following, that is ***Leading by Following*** the Life of ***Jesus***. The late pastor and teacher Tim Keller co-authored a book, *Every Good Endeavor*<sup>viii</sup>, with Katherine Leary Alsdorf. It was given to me by one of our wonderful Trustees and dear friend, Doneen Dourte; the book was a favorite of her beloved, Nevin. The book reads, “In fact, the very definition of a Christian is someone who not only admires Jesus, emulates Jesus, and obeys Jesus, but who rests in the finished work of Christ instead of his or her own.” Keller further notes, “We are to see work as a way of **service to God and our neighbor**, and so we should both choose and conduct our work in accordance with that purpose... The question must now be ‘How, with my existing abilities and opportunities, can I be of greatest service to other people, knowing what I do of God’s will and of human need?’”

Messiah is a community that leads by following Jesus. The blending of vocation, faith, and intellect that is only possible at a Christian university is a vital contribution to Kingdom work. Christ-centered institutions have a singular ability to develop character and faith, foster vibrant academics blended with Christian discipleship, and provide a commitment to career and service, all while recognizing the importance of diverse perspectives in ways that differ from secular education. Messiah University’s Christ-centered educational mission is rooted specifically in the Anabaptist, Pietist, and Wesleyan beliefs of the Brethren in Christ, the BIC.

Shari and I have found a spiritual home within the BIC denomination as members for the past 20 years. In the book *Compelling Convictions*<sup>ix</sup>, edited by Brensinger, Lancaster & Robinson (2024), the various authors clearly articulate what it is about the BIC framework that is, truly, compelling – a framework that holds the Bible as the sacred and authoritative Word of God, that delights in worshipping the Lord, that values being in community as a people of faith, and that

focuses on the importance of pursuing peace and reconciliation. The heritage of Messiah within the BIC has served us well over the years as we have pursued our place in the Christian college landscape and must be stewarded well and strengthened even further. The unique blend of the BIC heritage not only anchors us in our core beliefs, it allows us to be a welcoming place where Christians of all faiths find a home here. We can attract a broader base of students because of the embracing ethos of the BIC, and I am dedicated to maintaining our heritage.

Consequently, an important part of the process of preparing for the next strategic plan is to review and affirm both our current identity and mission statements. Please join me in reading them aloud together.

### ***Identity Statement***

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

### ***Mission Statement***

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

In the following weeks and months, as we do the good work outlined in our forthcoming Annual Plan, we will seek to strengthen our commitments to our identity and mission so that when the time comes, we will be ready to immediately move forward in crafting a strategic plan that is anchored in our heritage and in our ethos of Gracious Christianity.

In thinking back upon the past of Messiah University and on our current shared challenges, joys, and heartaches, I am not fearful to move forward, but confident in our pursuit of the Gospel and of accomplishing our educational mission. I am grateful to the Board of Trustees for the privilege of leading Messiah at this point in our history. And I am so grateful for each of you who make Messiah a place of excellence in our collective pursuit of fulfilling of our Christian mission. I invite you to join me as we work alongside each other in our efforts. As I have seen firsthand in my 25 years here, our distinctive theological heritage makes Messiah a singular, special place that is not replicable elsewhere.

Earlier, we sang CeCe Winans' song the Goodness of God. To See Gracious Christianity Anew gives us a renewed assurance of God's goodness for those who seek His face; for those who follow His path.

In closing, I am compelled to echo this refrain, because I have found it to be true:

*And all my life You have been faithful*

*And all my life You have been so, so good*

*With every breath that I am able*

*(I will) sing of the goodness of God*

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Thank you.

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- <sup>i</sup> (Berry, 2000)
- <sup>ii</sup> (Jacobsen & Sawatsky, 2006)
- <sup>iii</sup> (Foundational Values, 2025)
- <sup>iv</sup> (McBride, 2023)
- <sup>v</sup> (Burnley, Fry, Phipps, Jacobsen, & Weaver-Zercher, 2009)
- <sup>vi</sup> (Anthony, Gilbert, & Johnson, 2017)
- <sup>vii</sup> (Frey, 2025)
- <sup>viii</sup> (Keller & Alsdorf, 2012)
- <sup>ix</sup> (Brensinger, Robinson, & Lancaster, 2024)