

COMMUNITY DAY PRESENTATION

Jon C. Stuckey, President

August 18, 2026

Thank you, Kaleb – it has been such a joy knowing you in your role last year as SGA Vice President and I look forward to working with you again this year now that you are President. Welcome to Community Day 2026! I offer special greetings to members of the Messiah University Board of Trustees, Chair Rod Musser and his wife Cathy, Doneen Dourte, and David Millary. Please join me in thanking our Trustees and spouses for their wonderful service to Messiah University. It is extra special to have Rod's parents, Ray and Fern Musser visiting here from California. They are Messiah graduates, but also have connections to Upland College, our sister school that merged with Messiah in the 1960's. It is so good to see you both here!

I also wish to thank my colleagues on President's Cabinet, many of whom have taken on new responsibilities as I sought to assemble a leadership team that not only had the skillset necessary to continue to move Messiah forward, but also that permitted us to address upcoming budget challenges in a proactive manner. Thank you, Emerson Powery, for your willingness to step in as interim provost and provide such steady and thoughtful leadership over these past months. Thank you, Amanda Coffey and Carla Gross, for both retaining responsibilities but also for adding significant duties related to the retirement of Kathie Shafer and the reimagining of the Operations Division. One side note – this is the first Community Day without Kathie Shafer in 40 years... her legacy will endure and we are so grateful for her impact on Messiah. We wish Dave and her the very best in the next chapter of their life journey.

Thank you, Laura Miller, for stepping into the CFO role after Gary Nowicki's retirement. And thank you Todd Allen, Sarah Wade, and Doug Wood for remaining steady constants in a season of leadership transition – though of the three, Todd Allen wins the longest "steady constant" title! Finally, thanks to Sarah Gustin-Hamrock, Inger Blount, and John Zeigler, for their willingness to participate in a newly created monthly meeting of the President's Leadership Council – which includes Cabinet and these additional three colleagues – this will ensure all aspects of campus leadership are in regular communication.

I wish to thank the Office of the President's stellar administrative support, which includes Karin Bisbee, Kallie Petersen, and the soon-to-be retiring Emily Lint. I am grateful to these colleagues who keep the work of the Office of the President moving forward. And a word of quick gratitude to Staci Davis who has joined the second-floor team to help Amanda Coffey keep an eye on... well, me. Please join me in applause for all of these campus colleagues.

It is good to be together again after what I hope for you was a brilliant summer, whether you were here navigating the demands of summer conferences, teaching in our graduate programs and summer intensives, or away from campus entirely – prayerfully you found moments of laughter, fulfillment and some rejuvenation. I recall the first Community Day that Shari and I attended in August of 2000. Then it was referred to as President's Day. I remember feeling a deep sense of connection as we sat in Hostetter Chapel and worshipped together, prayed together, and heard President Rodney Sawatsky give his "state of the college" address. It was

inspiring and deeply moving for us in that it affirmed our decision to move to Messiah as our initial transition to life in Pennsylvania had been quite difficult. I also remember it was a bit long as there were multiple speakers ... so I do hope to leave you today with a sense of a perfectly timed presentation in terms of content and length!

As Shari mentioned, this summer she has retired from teaching after 39 years and she and I have made our transition to Orchard Hill. We look forward to hosting the campus community at various events this upcoming year, particularly during the holiday season. Thank you to those of you who made our transition run smoothly and who continue to offer support, particularly our Campus and Building Services, Facilities, Grounds and Dining Services teams.

Aside from different opportunities for travel this summer, including visits to Shari's niece in Charleston, SC with the larger Taylor clan (Shari's family), and an opportunity to attend the biennial Brethren in Christ General Assembly in Miami, our time included the usual week at Cape May – a place that my family has visited nearly every summer since we arrived in Grantham 26 years ago. A dear friend converted an old Air Force shack into a little French cottage and has let us use it for all these years. This year was extra special as it was our granddaughter Emma's first time at Cape May. She seemed largely unimpressed, but it remains very special to us that we were able to share it with her.

Going back to the Brethren in Christ General Assembly, it was so very special meeting in Miami where the growing Hispanic BIC community hosted the conference. Not only was it meaningful to worship in both Spanish and English, but so many people came up to Shari and me – alumni and parents – who spoke of the positive impact Messiah has had on their lives. It was such a significant week for us. The next biennial event in 2028 will be held here on campus, which will also be the 250th anniversary of the formation of the Brethren in Christ denomination. We are looking forward to hosting the founding church of Messiah University for this historic milestone. In an important coincidence, 2028 is also the year in which we will review and reaffirm our covenant with the BIC. Our covenant and our heritage within the BIC deeply enrich and inform both our identity and mission statements, which are presented here. Please join me as we verbally affirm these statements out loud together in unison.

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.

I remain so very thankful that Messiah's Board of Trustees overwhelmingly affirmed our identity and mission statements last fall. As I have shared elsewhere, but it bears repeating, after the vote, one of our trustees shared a compelling word picture: These foundational statements are not so much anchors as ballasts. That is, they do not hold us in place to prevent moving forward; rather, they provide stability and balance that allow us to move forward in confidence and in a clear strategic direction. This has certainly been true for our years of growth and maintaining our

reputation as a nationally recognized leading Christian university, and we are confident God will remain faithful as we move toward our next chapter.

The subtitle of Community Day is the “State of the University” address. Nationwide, higher education, and certainly Christian higher education continues to face challenges and pressures from many different streams. As many of you know, we are welcoming students from the University of Valley Forge, which made the difficult decision to close its doors before the start of the fall semester¹. Each day, my email box fills with headlines, articles, and podcast advertisements speaking about the newest challenge, changes from the Department of Education, concerns about AI, students who have historic levels of anxiety, enrollment obstacles, and on and on. And yet, even amid all of these pressures, and as you saw highlighted in our year in review video, the state of Messiah University is strong. We are not oblivious to these challenges – and we are ever mindful that our future is dependent on wise and sometimes difficult choices in the immediate. Yet we remain focused on our mission and the impact it makes on the lives of our students.

In recent months, we have been working together as a community on shaping our next chapter by way of the new strategic plan, entitled *Christ Preeminent: Our Foundation, Our Future, Messiah 2034* to ensure we remain a faithful and vibrant Christian University well into the future. As noted in the preamble of the plan, throughout our history, Messiah has met the changing demands of time with an innovative spirit, moving from a Bible and missionary training school to a junior college and then a four-year liberal arts college, which later added robust programs in the applied arts and sciences. This progression has been guided by the theological depth of the Brethren in Christ tradition and uniquely enriched by an embracing evangelical spirit rooted. This heritage continues to shape our scriptural convictions and our commitments to service, leadership and reconciliation and the maturity of intellect, character and Christian faith in the lives of students.

Today, in addition to our stellar undergraduate programs, Messiah has a thriving School of Graduate and Professional Studies and a residential undergraduate certificate program for students with intellectual disabilities – both examples of widening our educational scope to meet the needs of emerging and diverse learning populations. At the same time, higher education faces significant disruption, including shifting federal policies, political and religious polarization, demographic and enrollment challenges, rising costs and operational pressures. Yet Messiah is uniquely prepared to respond to these realities because of its impactful mission and notable educational approach. Just yesterday, Shari and I had the privilege of hosting the Stepping Forward program funded by a grant from the Parkinson’s Foundation. Special thanks to my valued colleagues Dr. Kris Hansen-Kieffer and Dr. Krystal Robinson-Bert for their work in pairing community members with Parkinson’s with our Occupational Therapy graduate students. Again and again, I heard comments that our students were able to see these folks not as defined by their symptoms but as holistic people working to make a way forward through a very difficult diagnosis with hope and purpose. This is the type of notable educational approach that is a hallmark of Messiah.

At Messiah, all academic programs are taught with an integrative Christian perspective that brings together faith and learning across every discipline. Faculty foster critical intellectual inquiry while forming students spiritually, ethically and professionally. Central to this work is a commitment to vocation: preparing graduates to discern their calling and to live lives of purpose.

Through mentorship, engaged scholarship, research and experiential learning, students are equipped not only for meaningful careers but also for lifelong contributions to church and society. All Messiah employees, educators, staff and administrators—work together to cultivate a supportive and rigorous university environment in which students can belong and thrive.

Our vision for Messiah 2034 is:

That by 2034, the 125th anniversary of our founding, Messiah University will shape the future of Christian higher education by confidently navigating the opportunities and tensions of a rapidly changing landscape. At the same time, we will uphold our distinctive identity by embracing innovation, strategic growth and responsible stewardship to expand its impact and sustain its institutional mission for generations to come.

So – what does all that mean exactly? The strategic plan will advance and organize its vision through the following themes and corresponding areas of focus.

Theme One: Christ-centered, intellectual formation through rigorous academics and transformative teaching.

Focus

Messiah University will cultivate an academically rigorous and spiritually formative learning environment that equips students to think critically, engage faithfully and lead purposefully in a complex, connected and changing world. Through excellence in teaching, robust civil dialogue, global engagement and thoughtful integration of emerging technologies, the University will prepare graduates for meaningful lives of vocation and service.

Theme Two: A university community steeped in belonging, flourishing and meaningful connections.

Focus

Messiah University will foster a Christ-centered community—both in-person and online—where students and employees experience authentic belonging, holistic well-being and lifelong relationships that support personal, spiritual and professional flourishing. The University will intentionally nurture a culture marked by care, respect, rest and shared purpose.

A word about belonging. In her book, *Peril and Promise: College Leadership in Turbulent Times*, former Spelman and Mount Holyoke President Beverly Daniel Tatum notes, “A sense of belonging is an important element of emotional well-being and is one of the best predictors of whether someone will remain in an organization.”ⁱⁱ

With Dean Kate Oswald-Wilkins as the liaison, we have been participating in a Harvard study of cohorts of our students among “mission-driven institutions.” It has been encouraging to learn that Messiah students have expressed certain levels of belonging already and we seek to strengthen these connections even further ... and also beyond the student experience – I want for each of us to feel that we belong as part of the Messiah University community with our shared commitments and values, but unique perspectives.

Theme Three: An innovative culture of creativity, leadership and impact.

Focus

Messiah University will advance a culture of innovation that encourages creativity, adaptability, informed risk taking and faithful leadership in response to emerging educational, societal and workforce needs. The University will strategically and nimbly develop programs, partnerships and practices that expand its impact while preparing graduates to lead with wisdom, integrity and entrepreneurial vision.

Theme Four: Advancing our mission by creating margin and long-term financial sustainability.

Focus

Messiah University will strengthen its long-term vitality through responsible stewardship, strategic investment and sustainable growth that supports the institution's mission for future generations. By building institutional capacity, enhancing operational effectiveness and expanding philanthropic and enrollment opportunities, the University will create the financial flexibility necessary to pursue transformative priorities with agility.

We look forward to building on each of these four strategic themes this fall, beginning with an all-campus In-Service on September 15, to generate the action steps for the identified goals that will help us create a meaningful and effective plan for Messiah's future. We have identified teams for each theme as well as theme team leaders and participants. More information will be shared in the coming weeks as we work toward a final version of the plan to be presented and approved by the Board of Trustees at their winter meetings in January 2027.

The year ahead

I know that as a community, we have experienced much change and transition in the past two years—leadership at the presidential and Cabinet levels, AI, Oracle, programmatic/budget changes. We can exhibit resilience during times of change while still acknowledging that it is difficult and sometimes unsettling. Yet one thing that has remained constant is our commitment to live out our mission as a Christian community.

As I look ahead to the year before us, one of my highest priorities is to further strengthen our university's financial foundation so that we can invest with confidence in our students, our faculty, and our future. That means not only raising dollars, but telling our story, deepening relationships, and inviting others to believe in what we are building together.

I will be spending significant time with alumni, parents, friends, foundations, and philanthropic partners—listening to their hopes for this university, sharing the impact of our work, and inviting them to invest in the opportunities before us. This was my main rationale for creating a Cabinet structure where my highly competent colleagues are able to manage the daily operations of the University, allowing me to be among our donors in *their* spaces. In all my years of fundraising, there is nothing more meaningful – sacred – than spending time in the homes and businesses of alumni and other supporters in the places that God has called them to serve. Fundraising is beyond asking for financial support. It truly is inviting others into a reciprocal relationship where they surely bless us with their gifts, but our mission, our students, our educators, our staff also deeply enrich the lives of our donors.

More than just a cost savings, by not replacing my role exactly as it was in Advancement, I am able to further nurture the donor relationships that I have built over the past 26 years but also

work with John Zeigler and the development team to identify new donors who – with the right attention – will become significant investors in our mission.

We are all part of this process as every conversation with a prospective student, every interaction with an alumnus, every classroom experience, every campus event, and every story of a student whose life has been changed by their Messiah experience contributes to the story we tell our supporters. When we do excellent work and live our mission well, we create something worthy of investment. In the relay of Messiah’s legacy of leadership, I have been passed a baton from 8 other presidents – along with a “Great Cloud of Witnesses” who supported those presidents – a baton that is in the form of a healthy, vibrant University filled with potential.

Last year at this event, I was contemplating a theme for my presidency during a period of transition. If you remember, 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 Gracious Christianity is love of God and love of neighbor. 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.”

The message of “See Anew” is rooted in 2 Corinthians 5:17 (NRSVue) - “So, if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; look, new things have come into being!”

Therefore, throughout this past year I have worked to maintain a focus on “Seeing Gracious Christianity Anew.” I framed this theme into three main pillars:

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

Each of these pillars continue to motivate and inform my vision for Messiah. Indeed, each of the themes of the Messiah 2034 Strategic Plan have links to these pillars. Let me review them briefly.

Courage of Conviction with Kindness

I finally succumbed to the chatter this summer and read *Theo of Golden* by Allen Leviⁱⁱⁱ. I wasn’t sure at first – but then I came upon the section on grief describing how Theo moved on after the death of his daughter. I must say it was one of the most poignant things I have read on grief. I am an “all in” girl dad – and now an “all in” girl Poppy Jack. I cannot fathom such grief, but I found that section to be incredibly compelling about how God is present even in the midst of the most profound sorrow.

He writes: “*There is no virtue in advertising one’s sadness. But there is no wisdom in denying it either. And there is the beautiful possibility that great love can grow out of sadness if it is well-tended.*”

It was almost a year ago that we lost Brendan Heisey. It has been such a difficult journey for this dear family. Yet one of those beautiful possibilities of great love out of great sadness is a bench that was designed and constructed by Brendan's father and brother. It will be installed in front of Kline Hall and dedicated at Homecoming in loving remembrance of Brendan at. It was made possible by generous gifts in Brendan's memory, including gifts from the Class of 2026. God's ability to nurture beauty even amid sadness.

And I certainly found the call in *Theo of Golden* – one be kind and generous – a lovely thing in our current times. In her review of the book, Nancy Mugele notes that kindness is not passive. She continues, “In our fast-paced world, we often treat kindness like a polite afterthought—a ‘have a nice day’ tossed over a shoulder. But in *Golden*, we see that true kindness is active and disruptive. Theo's kindness isn't just about being ‘nice;’ it's about a radical availability to others. It taught me that kindness is a choice to show up in the gaps of someone else's life, even when it's inconvenient. And, not only to show up, but to stay.”^{iv}

I am unsettled that kindness and compassion seem to have lost favor in our current culture. Yet, I am also realistic enough to understand that each epoch of time has witnessed both the kind and the unkind; the selfless and the selfish; the broken and the resilient. What I want for Messiah and what I want for our students is a place that demonstrates the love of Christ that inspires us all to acts of kindness as a powerful witness for the Goodness of God.

I stand behind my claim that Messiah's unique focus on reconciliation has a role to play in this quest for kindness. And as I shared throughout last year, 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, ethnicity, nationality, ability, status or position, because each person is created in the image of God.” We are again blessed to welcome a large cohort of multicultural students, which continues an increasing area of growth in multicultural representation over the past decade. Furthermore, we are delighted to have our second cohort of students in our Next Steps program; thank you Amber and Ava for leading us in the Apostle's Creed today!

I have mentioned before the rhythms of reconciliation that have played out at Messiah over our history. 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. Last year, I sought to be clear that our commitments to inclusive excellence will not waver, and I believe we have responded to societal challenges in a manner consistent with that commitment.

Innovation with Purpose

The second pillar, “Innovation with purpose” means our strategy for new ideas is directly linked to the underpinnings of our strategic 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.

Several aspects of Messiah 2034 offer avenues for innovation that meet the needs and address challenges among our students and employees. Yet, these avenues are consistent with our educational goals and mission even as we move forward in new ways.

Leading by Following Jesus

Finally, See Gracious Christianity Anew means leading by following the life of Jesus. Messiah is a community that leads by following Jesus. The blending of vocation, faith, and intellect that lies at the heart of a Messiah education is a vital contribution to Kingdom work. As a Christ-centered institution we have a distinct calling and responsibility 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 demonstrate a love of God and love of neighbor.

Also on my summer reading list was *The Way Back to One Another*, by Jeff Galley and Phillip Smith^v. Phil is the great-grandson of our founder S.R. Smith. I have often said that all the evidence I need for the existence of a loving God is found in the kindness and love of God's people and this book calls us to that connectivity in a hurting world. Phil writes poignantly and quite vulnerably about the lowest point in his life when a couple from his church demonstrated a radical act of hospitality by allowing him to move in with them, despite the risks associated with his addictions. The couple offered Phil a way back to healing.

My prayer is that the Messiah community will continue to model radical servant leadership after the example of Jesus who fostered a spirit of compassion and kindness even as He sought to draw people to a relationship with the Father. In leading, let us never fail to follow Jesus and to love others as ourselves.

These three pillars – Courage of Conviction with Kindness, Innovation with Purpose, Leading by Following by Jesus – undergird the development of the Messiah 2034 strategic plan that will guide us to becoming a stronger more vibrant university while keeping us firmly focused on *Christ Preeminent*. And as we work toward finalization of that plan, these pillars give us a charge for how we will live and lead in the years ahead. We are called to do excellent work, with a deep commitment to the mission we share; to encourage our students to engage deeply, build meaningful connections, and discover their place within this community; and to reach across divisions, disciplines, and areas of responsibility to collaborate in ways that strengthen the whole university. This is our opportunity to put our convictions into action, to innovate with purpose, and to lead by following Jesus—not simply preparing for the future we envision, but faithfully building that future together, beginning now.

Upcoming Inauguration

As we move forward with creating action steps for and fully crafting Messiah 2034, we have a bit of a distraction on October 15 – my inauguration. I have been accused that my idea for an inauguration initially lacked a certain sense of celebratory fun... I believe the description by Karin Bisbee was an “Amish Inauguration.”

I am so very thankful for my colleagues Amanda Coffey, Carla Gross, and Karin Bisbee – and a host of subcommittee chairs and honorary members Cathy Musser and Shari Stuckey – who will add some pomp and circumstance to my simpler tendencies. The theme I have chosen is Living

the Lord's Calling: Act Justly, Love Mercy, Walk Humbly, which is rooted in my life verse, Micah 6:8.

As I am preparing my thoughts for my inaugural address, the inaugural theme encompasses both the narratives of the strategic plan and the three undergirding pillars of my presidential tenure. The Lord has called us to important work. It is an absolute privilege to serve alongside each of you as we build on 117 years with an eye toward an even more flourishing institution when we celebrate our 125th anniversary in 2034.

So yes, the state of Messiah University is promising and strong. And with God's help, your help and for as long as the Lord calls me to this work, my focus will be to further build the relationships, resources, and shared confidence that will allow this University to thrive for generations to come. A University that I pray is consistently and clearly characterized as *Christ Preeminent*.

Thank you and welcome to the 2026-2027 academic year!

ⁱ <https://valleyforge.edu/announcement-2026/>

ⁱⁱ Tatum, Beverly Daniel. *Peril and Promise: College Leadership in Turbulent Times*. Basic Books, 2025.

ⁱⁱⁱ Levi, Allen. *Theo of Golden*. Atria Books, 2025.

^{iv} <https://chestertownspy.org/2026/05/07/book-recommendation-heart-lessons-from-theo-of-golden-by-nancy-mugele/>

^v Galley, Jeff, and Phillip N. Smith. *The Way Back to One Another: How to Live as People Created for Community*. InterVarsity Press, 2026.