

## STATE OF THE UNIVERSITY 2023

### This is Messiah's Moment

The ancient Greek Heraclitus, the Old Testament book of Ecclesiastes and the legendary singer Bob Dylan offer a similar conclusion: change is inevitable. Heraclitus explains that you can never step into the same river twice because the river is in constant flux (Heraclitus). In Ecclesiastes 3, King Solomon notes that there is a time and season for everything and lists expected changes like planting and uprooting, weeping and laughing, silence and speaking. And perhaps many of you know the familiar tune penned by Bob Dylan in the turbulent 1960s that reminds us, “the times, they are a-changin.”

We've experienced significant change at Messiah University during the last few years. Many of the changes have been positive—such as adopting university status, launching new programs and partnerships and constructing buildings and renovating spaces. Some changes have been very complicated, such as swiftly adjusting to a global pandemic; remaining a community characterized by civility and hospitality as our national discourse devolved; recruiting students amidst increasingly unfavorable demographics and mounting economic pressures for families; and saying goodbye to beloved colleagues who have retired from long-held leadership positions. When individuals have invested decades of their lives to service at Messiah, it is not easy to imagine the institution without their daily presence; yet we also enjoy the enthusiasm, expertise and excellence that new colleagues bring to our community.

As Christ-followers, I believe that our attitude and response to change reflects the maturity of our vocational understanding established in a faith defined by hope – a hope that rests in knowing and trusting the promises of God. Anticipating that something new is emerging instead of mourning what is changing honors the Biblical charge to “set our minds on things above, not on earthly things” (Colossians 3:2) (Warren).

Meeting challenges and changes requires intellectual rigor, compassionate empathy and creative adaptability — virtues and skills our community certainly possesses! Because of my confidence in each of you and God's continued faithfulness to Messiah University, I believe that this particular season in time is Messiah's moment! Today, I invite you to join me in adopting a

hope-filled perspective toward Messiah University's present and future as we acknowledge the difficulties but embrace the opportunities of this current moment.

How we educate and mentor students looks different from year to year due to a variety of factors. Though we continue to enroll students who are compelled by their Christian faith to grow intellectually and spiritually, we know that students are also changing and experiencing challenges. U.S. Surgeon General Dr. Vivek Murthy recently testified before a Senate committee that youth mental health is the "defining public health issue of our time" (Ward). The psychological consequences of the Covid-19 pandemic among college-aged students include increased anxiety, unhappiness, fear and learning difficulties (Hu K, Godfrey K, Ren Q, Wang S, Yang X, Li Q). Additionally, students' pre-college academic preparation was significantly weakened because of the disrupted learning caused by the pandemic.

These realities are further complicated by students' skepticism of whether higher education is worth the personal effort and financial cost alongside the declining reputation of higher education among many constituencies (Donael). These circumstances affect Messiah as they do all higher education institutions.

Additionally, as we observe many American churches demonstrating a dearth of love and hospitality, valuing political personalities, parties or ideologies over the good news of the Gospel, and refusing to pursue authentic dialogue marked by a spirit of intellectual humility, we could be discouraged. Likewise, as many have become suspicious of Christianity and increasingly adverse to Christian ideals and language, we could be fearful. But we are not discouraged nor are we afraid. Rather, at Messiah University we embrace this moment and the privilege of demonstrating an alternative way of Christ-centered being, knowing and doing.

This anecdote from *Christianity Today* editor Russell Moore illuminates a common but tragic reality: Moore tells the story of a college-aged girl in theological crisis because she was witnessing "atheists and agnostics ... demonstrating more peace, joy, gentleness, righteousness [and] self-control, than she sees in the church." She observed, "In many cases, those who are naming the name of Christ seem more fearful, more anxious, more frantic than other people" (Forum). Although we accept the accuracy of such observations we respond by boldly affirming our unwavering commitment to the Christ-centered educational mission of Messiah University as

we educate our students to become thoughtful, loving models of service, leadership and reconciliation.

This is Messiah's moment – a statement rooted in the historical evolution of our institutional identity and the present status of our educational mission. While some other Christian universities, leaders, churches and individuals succumb to pressure to declare their allegiance to politically conservative or liberal ideals for the sake of enrollment or funding support or in response to an inappropriate desire for influence, Messiah continues to live and thrive in the tension of not adhering to the specific views of any one denomination or political party. Campus Pastor Emily Bingham says of Messiah, “Faithfulness to Jesus requires upsetting both extremes. Being in the middle, like Messiah, is about more than avoiding extremes; it’s about adopting a compelling vision that is truth-seeking and hospitable.”

The middle space that we occupy because of the foundational commitments of our theological heritage (focusing on Christ, not a list of doctrinal particularities) and our long-held institutional ethos of hospitality results in the daily tension of being pulled on and critiqued from people who embrace extremes. Resisting the urge to complacently lean toward one extreme or the other is not easy but absolutely essential to maintaining our distinctive Christian identity and educational approach.

Though tension is uncomfortable, it is necessary for physical, spiritual, intellectual and mental health. To help us understand how tension builds strength and endurance, I asked Dr. Scott Kieffer, professor of health and exercise science, to explain: “A core tenet of exercise physiology is that through training, the positive stress of movement will create training-induced improvements that yield chronic adaptation of the system being trained. For example, during weight training exercises, the muscular effort and time under tension during the training will allow the muscle to grow and positively adapt for future musculoskeletal needs.”

To illustrate the value of physical tension, let’s recall the story of 2022 Messiah graduate Esther Seeland. Esther was a three-season varsity athlete—competing in women’s soccer and indoor and outdoor track and field—while studying biomedical engineering and graduating with honors. Esther’s athletic successes were due in large part to her disciplined approach to strength training. Track and Field Coach Dale Fogelsanger recalls that Esther never missed a strength training session, even when her engineering lab schedule meant she had to train separately from

her teammates. By putting her muscles and joints under deliberate, ongoing tension in the weight room, Esther developed stronger muscles and increased joint stability, which helped prevent injury and enabled her to gain speed, strength and confidence. As an elite student-athlete, Esther learned to balance the academic, athletic, nutritional, social, spiritual and time management demands of college and she became a powerhouse on the track, setting numerous NCAA, MAC and Messiah records.

Though Scott's explanation and Esther's story are specific to individual physical training, I believe similar principles apply to the educational mission of institutions like Messiah. Tension is valuable, and we must identify how our community can thrive—not in spite of the tensions we experience—but precisely as a result of them.

Because we willingly occupy a middle ground of combining rigorous academics, sincere faith and gracious hospitality, Messiah has the opportunity to defy the negative narratives about higher education and demonstrate how a Christian university can provide value by remaining true to its identity and mission in the midst of rapid cultural change. First, we must continue to distinguish ourselves as a university of the liberal and applied arts and sciences, demonstrating our dedication to nurturing the life of the mind *and* enabling students to acquire the necessary skills needed for professional success. Second, we must nurture a community ethos of compassion and civility, which informs the ways we think and speak in this age of discord. And finally, our missional emphasis on reconciliation must continue to compel us to seek restoration with God *and* humanity as we are fully engaged in the pursuit of justice, equity and peace.

Of course, there will be times when we will fall short of our desired ethos and stated mission, but, in those moments, as a community we will respond to one another with grace and humility, seek forgiveness by pursuing a deeper understanding of our misstep and demonstrate that the holistic education we offer best occurs in spaces where difficult conversation is welcomed and nurtured. When we courageously address fractures and disagreements with honesty and empathy, in a spirit of mutual respect and generosity, we model for our students, each other and a watching world that honoring difference and complexity is a strength of the Messiah University community. (Du Mez).

More than a decade ago, when we contracted an external consultant to design an institutional communication platform, the consultant zeroed in on Messiah's educational

approach of engaging opposing ideas with a spirit of curiosity and civility, designing a series of “ligatures” that visually unite two seemingly incompatible ideas that co-exist here. Those ligatures, along with the invitation to “See Anew,” invite prospective students to anticipate their thoughtful engagement of new ideas and perspectives at Messiah University. Let’s examine a few of our ligatures as examples of how we—as Messiah employees—partner with students to address the tensions and challenges of church, culture and higher education.

The first ligature—faith and intellect—articulates the core of Messiah’s identity. We are a university—a place of academic inquiry where the serious pursuit of knowledge and ideas is central to our very reason to exist. And, because we are a Christ-centered university, pursuing intellectual growth occurs in partnership with the maturing of character and deepening of faith.

Faith and intellect can exist in tension with each other, particularly in American evangelicalism, one of the contexts in which Messiah has historically been situated. Michael Luo, in his New Yorker article “The Wasting of the Evangelical Mind” asserts that “evangelicalism in America has come to be defined by its anti-intellectualism...charisma trumps expertise, scientific authority is often viewed with suspicion. So it is of little surprise that American evangelicals have become vulnerable to demagoguery and misinformation” (Luo).

Luo’s comments address the American church, and by extension Christian higher education. Many of our students come from evangelical churches, and their understanding of faith has been shaped by the ways churches have—or have not—created space for dialogue about pressing contemporary issues. Typically students arrive at Messiah with strongly held ideas but without the necessary theological or intellectual depth to examine those beliefs and little motivation to consider the differing beliefs of other faithful Christians. At Messiah, we do not provide an education that is merely indoctrination with a Christian label attached to it; instead students and educators wrestle together with complicated, even troubling, concepts in a spirit of unity. This is an example the church and society need to witness!

Our very model of holistic Christian education illustrates how intellectual diversity enhances student learning experiences. As a university of the liberal and applied arts and sciences, we have found compatibility and positive learning outcomes that span academic disciplines, diverse pedagogies, scholarly pursuits, a breadth of course offerings, service opportunities and research practices that complement and enhance every degree we offer. Interim

Provost Dr. Alison Noble describes the connectedness between the liberal arts and the applied arts and sciences at Messiah in this way: “The liberal arts cultivate both the ability and virtue that liberates individuals to flourish as human persons and to contribute effectively to the flourishing of the larger world. Therefore, we recognize that the study of the liberal arts does not stand in competition with practical skills or applied disciplines but deepens them.”

Messiah provides robust experiential learning opportunities that integrate classroom knowledge with meeting the practical needs of our local and global community.

- For example, when faculty partner with undergraduate students on high-level, collaborative research projects and creative inquiries, students not only sharpen skills and deepen understanding of their examined topic, but also benefit from the expertise, experience and faith of their mentoring educator. This engagement of faith and intellect equips students to see real-world problems through a lens in which both their individual scholarship and concern for the common good are valued.
- Messiah’s nursing program graduates nurses in high demand at hospitals, not just because they are clinically prepared but because they connect questions of faith—such as “what is the meaning and purpose of what I do as a nurse”—with the pragmatic skills of clinical nursing. Our nursing students also engage the community in service, both locally and abroad. Impressively, the program has a consistent 100% pass rate on the NCLEX, the required licensing exam for nurses.
- Consider, too, the work of the engineering department’s Collaboratory – whose mission addresses significant needs around the world and provides students with the opportunity to employ the knowledge, skills and technologies required by their fields of study. Their faith provokes them to consider why and how they should engage with global projects that improve drinking water, accessibility, sustainability and poverty. By tackling real-world problems, students become adept at analyzing, researching, designing solutions and even failing and starting over as they consider the variables of each challenge and creatively seek sustainable solutions.

At Messiah, the fusion of faith and intellect and the integration of the liberal arts and applied arts and sciences produces graduates who are equipped for meaningful careers and redemptive lives. They reflect the words of interfaith leader, Eboo Patel who said, “Our nation

needs to be a place where people who disagree on matters regarding heaven can still work together on important issues here on earth” (Patel).

Our mission also demands that we perceive the brokenness of human relationships and widespread injustice through a lens of Biblical reconciliation. As we learned during our institutional Year of Reconciliation: God’s Language to Heal a Broken World, Scripture provides a clear directive about the need to be reconciled to God and humankind. Very few higher education institutions state a desired educational outcome of reconciliation. Messiah’s harmony-difference ligature highlights this commitment.

At a time when there’s so much public discord and focused attention on individualism, a Christian community where harmony and difference are understood as essential to educational excellence, faith development and community engagement is increasingly rare. Woefully, there are far too many contemporary examples of Christians responding fearfully instead of embracing the multiethnic transformation of the American church and university. We are witnessing Christian universities terminating the employment of faculty who are truthfully addressing issues of justice in the church and society; the closure of campus diversity offices and student multicultural spaces; universities aligning with political rhetoric that is inconsistent with the life and teachings of Jesus; and moral leadership failures within religious denominations and organizations prompting widespread distrust of those who claim to be Christ followers. As incidents of book banning and disputes about America’s troubling and complicated history escalate, at Messiah we will not shield our students from works and ideas that challenge us to wrestle with our past and its implications for the present moment; instead, we will continue to “profess that it is our responsibility to identify what yields hatred and division and seek to bring restoration and healing” (Kim Phipps and Todd Allen).

Our campus’ diversity spans Christian denominations, political and cultural affiliations and economic differences. Dr. Drew Hart, assistant professor of theology, says, “When we make the life and teachings of Jesus our foundation for harmony together, there opens up a gracious space for different experiences, insights, cultures, and faith and intellectual traditions that creatively come together and harmonize as part of the great communion of saints.” Facilitating “gracious space” is a foundational commitment of Messiah University.

In a recent New York Times column, Anglican priest and author Tish Harrison Warren highlights the “near-complete reversal of the global demographics of Christianity.” According to Warren, the largest percentage of Christians now reside in the “majority world,” her term for non-Western countries that make up most of the world’s population. This significant demographic shift, along with the rising number of Americans who profess no religious affiliation and the ongoing influx of immigrants, means religion in America is changing. Warren writes, “The future of American Christianity is probably not one where white concerns and voices dominate the conversation. The future of American Christianity now appears to be a multiethnic community” (Warren).

At Messiah University, we anticipate and welcome change as we seek to become a more diverse community that better reflects the multiethnic kingdom imagined in Revelation 7:9: of “a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb.”

- As we progress closer to our stated goal of a diverse student population of 25 percent by 2025, we must also work to both increase our employee recruitment and retention efforts from diverse populations, while continuing to promote a campus climate where all persons experience a deep sense of connection and belonging.
- Additionally, we are reimagining our international student recruitment strategies as we develop new partnerships in Thailand and Malaysia, recruiting in Central and South America for the first time post-pandemic and participate in key international student recruitment events.
- During the past few years, the Student Government Association has initiated a campus wide Civil Discourse Series to explore controversial topics from a variety of faith-based perspectives thoughtfully and respectfully. The primary goal of this series is not to persuade but to help individuals increase their understanding of and respect for the positions that differ from their own. SGA is setting an example for how we can create gracious space for difference and disagreement as we humbly learn together.

At Messiah, we pursue these types of goals and strategies because of our missional conviction that a welcoming and diverse environment provides the best foundation for



transformational education while serving as formative communities for people to be reconciled with God and each other (George Pickens, Emerson Powery, Cynthia Wells).

The third and final ligature I want to address this morning illustrates that when preparation and imagination are fused together real-world creativity results. This past May, our graduate program faculty and staff utilized both preparation and imagination when a vendor's error significantly delayed the creation and shipping of the appropriate regalia for the Doctoral Physical Therapy and Nursing graduates. When Dr. Julie Gomboc-Hellam, director of graduate and adult student services and compliance, became aware that students had not received their ordered regalia in the promised timeframe, a cross-divisional team began devising and implementing a creative back-up plan. Recent alumni of the graduate physical therapy and nursing programs were contacted and agreed to ship their regalia overnight to be used by this year's graduating class; local alumni and their family members dropped off regalia; Messiah staff drove to area physical therapy clinics and picked up regalia; and Julie was on standby to drive to the vendor in Virginia in case orders were completed too late to be shipped. The vendor delivered the robes within hours of the Commencement ceremony! Julie and her team sprang into action unpacking, steaming and setting up each waiting graduates' regalia, and by the time I arrived for the Commencement ceremony all seemed well; I had no idea that acquiring the regalia had been such a stressful ordeal!

Solving "the Great Regalia Challenge of 2023" required employees from the graduate school, the registrar's office, the campus bookstore, conference and event services, and the division of finance and planning to assess the situation, think creatively, rely on trusted relationships and execute a plan. This anecdote is just one example of Messiah employees rallying together by using their knowledge, experience and creativity to problem-solve on behalf of students.

Every day the preparation and imagination of individuals in our community is evident as we engage creative opportunities which expand Messiah's circle of influence. For example, as you travel Interstate 83 across the South Bridge, the work of Art Professor Daniel Finch and his students is evident in a 445-foot mural depicting the history of Lemoyne. Finch's mural—along with a series of five mini murals recently installed on the exterior of borough hall—demonstrate the power of art to build community, celebrate history and imagine the future (Gleiter).

We are also establishing partnerships to seize opportunities that will increase tuition and non-tuition revenue to the university.

- The offices of University Partnerships and undergraduate admissions are establishing intentional long-term relationships with schools and organizations whose goals align with Messiah’s mission and vision. These partnerships have yielded increased dual enrollment (239 high school students for this fall – last fall it was 140!) through our Pathway Partners Program with private k-12 Christian schools and agreements with regional public school districts. (Note: 53 of FY24 first year enrolled students took a DE course)
- The Messiah nursing department will implement Nurse Aide training for Messiah Lifeways during the upcoming academic year providing an additional revenue stream for the university.
- Graduate counseling program faculty and staff worked diligently and quickly this summer to support 13 Missio Seminary students and more than 30 Alliance University students as they transfer to Messiah due to the unexpected closure of their own institutions.
- Several years ago, Dwayne Magee, Director of Messiah Press and Postal Service, invited the manager of Mechanicsburg School District’s printing operation for lunch and a tour of Messiah Press. Recently, when Mechanicsburg needed a new printing arrangement, they elected to move their business to Messiah Press, nearly tripling the output of the press and bringing in important non-tuition revenue. (Neubauer)

Nationally, colleges and universities are currently examining the role of preparation and imagination in light of the ethical, technological and cultural implications of Artificial Intelligence (A.I), particularly tools like OpenAI’s ChatGPT. When ChatGPT made its debut in late 2022, Sam Altman, CEO of OpenAI, predicted its significance would “eclipse the agricultural revolution, the industrial revolution, [and] the Internet revolution all put together” (How Will Artificial Intelligence Change Higher Ed?). While it is too soon to know whether his statement is hyperbolic, we do know that A.I. is having an impact on higher education and the nation’s workforce.

Tools developed from A.I. are fraught with complexity and the potential for unchecked bias and widespread misinformation. Christian higher education must provide opportunities for students and employees to carefully weigh the possible benefits and efficiencies of A.I. alongside the potential dangers and ethical dilemmas.

The skills and ideals reflected in Messiah’s newly revised General Education Program will help prepare our students for a world that embraces A.I. Increased digital competencies across disciplinary courses are not linked solely to digital proficiency—though technical skill and understanding of how technology is best utilized in a student’s area of study is certainly essential. Equally important in our General Education Program is digital citizenship – requiring students to engage in discerning the positive and negative effects of emerging technologies.

Messiah students are mentored to imagine the potential implications of technology use and to understand the opportunities as well as the dilemmas and moral dangers. Pairing preparation and imagination lead to outcomes that solve not just technological challenges but humane issues as well.

As Messiah continues to persevere through tension, we demonstrate that faith and intellect unite to produce a discerning spirit; harmony and difference unite to produce a passion for Christian community; and preparation and imagination unite to produce real-world creativity. These outcomes—embodied by our employees, students and alumni whose lives are defined by service, leadership and reconciliation—exemplify how tension strengthens Messiah University and its influence in church and society.

As we embrace these tensions and occupy our “middle” space in winsome, gracious ways, we appeal to a wonderfully diverse mix of prospective students and generous donors and friends who enable us to maintain a solid financial position and a strong institutional profile. Throughout the last decade, we have also made challenging—but necessary—institutional decisions in support of that profile and we will continue to do so. (In November, Vice President of Finance and Planning Gary Nowicki will host an employee finance forum to review the highlights of the institutional audit and the multi-year economic forecast.) Some indicators that reflect Messiah’s strong institutional and financial position include:

- Our FY24 enrollment goal of 580 incoming first year students was exceeded by 28 and we are on target to meet the established annual graduate enrollment target.
- Our first-year to sophomore student retention rate remains strong at 86 percent, even after the disruption of COVID.
- Our 32 percent matriculation or yield rate is 10 percent higher than many of our competitors.
- The Office of Development reports the highest year of giving (22-23) in the past five years. The generous alumni and community friends who support Messiah represent a breadth of personal opinions and perspectives, but they are united in their faithful support of our Christ-centered mission and efforts to improve facilities, enhance programs and offer scholarships for students. For example, the expansion of the Engle Health and Counseling Center is complete! This renovation affords critical spaces designed to better meet the increased mental and physical health needs of our students.
- We maintain an impressive A- stable credit rating with Standard and Poor's.
- New program development continues: MSW and DSci in Physical Therapy.

Purposefully navigating tension between seemingly opposing ideals or perspectives is a hallmark of a Messiah University education. For encouragement and hope, we can look to the life of Jesus and how he purposefully lived amidst tension—living as a man while embodying the power of God; inviting a zealot and a tax collector to be among his closest companions; and elevating personal holiness over traditional Jewish law. Jesus was faithful to his mission, despite critique and opposition.

Though the gap between the extremes seems to be growing wider and deeper in our culture and the church, rather than be intimidated or overwhelmed, we must pursue this moment to incarnate and communicate what is distinctive about a Messiah education.

Friends, let's embrace the tensions of being a Christ-centered university who leans not to extremes but centers our efforts in Messiah's compelling Mission, Identity and Vision. With God's faithfulness as our anchor of hope, we can be **enriched, equipped and encouraged** to meet the changes and challenges of the upcoming academic year. Messiah colleagues, we have

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been called for such a time as this and it is my prayer that we will enthusiastically embrace the call. **This is Messiah's moment!**

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