

Presidential Reflections

Community Day 2024

August 20, 2024

Today marks my 21st and final Community Day in which I have the honor of sharing my reflections with you. As employees, you embody the compelling mission of Messiah University in salient and wonderful ways. Our Community Day gathering at the beginning of each new academic year always encourages and energizes me.

Thank you for your gracious response to the announcement of my impending retirement. Over the course of the next 10 months, I will embrace opportunities to articulate how profoundly this community has shaped my life and express my gratitude for all that you have done for Messiah University and its eighth president.

In a few moments, Dr. Craig Sider will come to the podium to speak about “THE Messiah University” and provide an update on the presidential search process. Please pray for Craig and the Board of Trustees as they lead this important initiative. Before I formally introduce Craig, I want to reflect on Messiah’s past two decades and the University’s promising future.

I presented my first Community Day address in 2004. To help you recall that moment in time, here are some reminders:

- Myspace was the coolest social media site. Mark Zuckerberg was just launching Facebook at Harvard University.
- Google launched Gmail; Apple released the iPod Mini.
- George W. Bush defeated challenger John Kerry and was re-elected President of the United States.

Here on campus:

- We welcomed 741 undergraduates in August 2004 (Incoming Class of 2004 Profile). This was before the much-touted demographic cliff.
- The men’s soccer team won their third NCAA Division III national championship!

- Physically, our campus looked quite different: remember the convenient but ugly parking loop in front of Boyer Hall and Murray Library? the Climenhaga Fine Arts Center prior to the addition of new spaces including the splendid Parmer Hall? Eisenhower Campus Center before the addition of the state-of-the-art fitness center, Sawyer Gym, Jordan Court and the lovely Martin Dining Commons? No Orchard Hill or Oakwood Hills apartments in the field across Lisburn Road? No roundabout at the campus entrance?

While we might be tempted to think of twenty years ago as a less complicated or easier time, this morning, let's consider the recent past as we embrace the current cultural moment. Together, we must collectively fight against fear—fear of cultural change, fear of presidential election outcomes, fear of artificial intelligence and other technological advances, and fear of recent and impending transitions for our campus community. We must acknowledge that transition is often at the heart of renewal and revitalization and remember God's steadfast faithfulness to Messiah University.

As I reviewed my previous State of the University addresses, three themes were evident: courage, reconciliation and hope have sustained the Messiah educational community for 115 years, and these values must continue to be incarnated for Messiah University to fulfill its educational mission.

Before I elaborate on each specific value, let's consider how courage, reconciliation, and hope are interwoven with hospitality—an overarching commitment that I have sought to make a practice in my daily life, a cornerstone of my presidency, and a defining ethos of a Messiah University education. As my understanding of the nature and meaning of hospitality has evolved through the years, I have developed a more encompassing view as described by Marjorie Thompson: “receiving the other, from the heart, into my own dwelling place and providing for the need, comfort, and delight of the other with all openness, respect, freedom, tenderness, and joy that love itself embodies” (Thompson). Because hospitality is not mere tolerance or resignation, it requires courage to actively welcome the authentic presence of others, to truly see them and to consider perspectives quite different from our own. When we practice hospitality, seeds of reconciliation are planted as we listen carefully and empathetically to people's stories, including personal narratives of pain and injustice. Then, because we are

followers of Christ who know and love Him intimately, we can be loving, gracious, and hope-filled in our interactions with each other and with our students. As our lives remain characterized by hospitable expressions of our Christian faith and the educational program we offer reflects those expressions, Messiah University will continue to be a distinct and compelling witness for what should be the very essence of Christ-centered liberal and applied learning.

In this current cultural moment, we must choose to be courageous. The word courage might prompt recollections of well-known Biblical accounts such as David confronting Goliath or maybe more modern examples—such as the leaders of the American Civil Rights Movement or the passengers on Flight 93 who prevented their hijacked plane from leveling additional destruction on September 11, 2001. While these examples are certainly memorable, courage is often quietly embodied in individuals before it inspires a visible or noteworthy action. Courage is strength in the face of fear, peace in the midst of change, and perseverance in times of hardship.

The first Messiah-specific example of courage involves founder S. R. Smith's willingness to take the risk in 1909 and establish Messiah Bible School and Missionary Training Home in his Harrisburg home. Smith's personal business was marred by financial difficulties, but he was determined to sponsor an education rooted in the values of the Brethren in Christ Church for all children, and, within just two years, the school filled to capacity and was relocated to its current Grantham location. We must be thankful for S. R. Smith's courageous response to God's leading that resulted in the birth of the Messiah University we cherish and serve today!

A more recent example of courage that inspires me is from (the now infamous year) 2020 when we were faced with an unprecedented global pandemic that shuttered our campus for the final weeks of the spring semester and dramatically altered the following academic year. At the time, our efforts might have been perceived as essential, but not particularly courageous. Yet, it took each employee persevering through personal fear and uncertainty (that's courage!) while working together to ensure that Messiah University's educational goals were met despite the significant demands of providing a safe and healthy learning environment in the midst of COVID.

These examples are just a few in Messiah’s legacy of courageous women and men who have devoted the use of their vocational gifts to ensure the university’s flourishing. Many of us have grown so accustomed to witnessing courageous leadership modeled across campus departments and divisions that we might diminish how essential courage is to contemporary higher education leadership. It is startling to recognize that more than 100 nonprofit colleges have closed in the past few years (Higher Ed Dive). At Messiah, we have maintained financial strength by courageously launching new programs while simultaneously shuttering others, by engaging prioritization processes that led to necessary albeit less-than-ideal decisions, by expanding from a college to a university, and by developing new community partnerships. Thank you for willingly stepping into new, different, and sometimes uncertain circumstances. Together we have witnessed that creativity often resides in transition.

The second thread that is richly woven throughout Messiah’s history and identity is reconciliation – one of three identified outcomes stated in our institutional mission statement: “to educate women and men for lives of service, leadership and reconciliation in church and society.” In recent years, we have attempted to earnestly “lean into” this aspect of our mission statement— designating 2021-22 as a Year of Reconciliation; hosting provocative and inspiring lectures; and supporting grants and programs that instruct our campus community and church leaders about the Christ-centered value of reconciliation. As individuals we have practiced listening well to our students and colleagues; modeled respect and civility on social media; and welcomed opportunities to increase our understanding of reconciliation.

Our perspective on reconciliation is shaped by our humble understanding of Scriptural teaching and the historic foundation of our institution’s religious roots. Reconciliation is a journey of listening, truth-telling, lamenting, and allowing our hearts and minds to connect with people’s stories of pain, marginalization, and injustice as we pursue transformation that repairs and restores broken relationships and systems. Reconciliation is a journey, not a fixed point in time; therefore, our path may not always be linear, but it should always be moving forward.

One of the narratives from Messiah’s history that I first shared during our 2010 Centennial celebration was the story of the Sakimura family. In the aftermath

of World War II, Messiah President C. N. Hostetter Jr. invited the Sakimura family to move to the Grantham campus, where the father, Harvey, was employed as a groundskeeper. The family had endured suffering in an American internment camp, and they eagerly anticipated the promise of a new home and steady employment. While the Messiah community and, in particular, the Grantham Church were very hospitable to the Sakimuras, their presence was met with mistrust and anger by their local neighbors. Despite receiving threatening calls and letters, President Hostetter stood firm, continuing Harvey Sakimura's employment, extending care for the family's well-being, and providing education for the Sakimura children.

The Sakimura family experienced Messiah as a gracious and loving community. Therefore, they extended hospitality to future students by establishing an endowed scholarship with the internment monies the family received as compensation from the federal government. The Sakimura Family Scholarship Endowment exists today to support Messiah students (with preference given to students from Asian heritage).

Another example of commitment to reconciliation is the Lloyd and Lois Martin Multicultural Scholarship. I remember the moment in 2000 when trustee Jim Martin heard a need expressed during a board committee discussion and stepped forward to establish the Martin Scholarship, a full or partial tuition award for students who exhibit strong scholarship, service, ministry, or leadership in their school, church, or community and who have demonstrated a commitment to promoting racial and ethnic diversity and reconciliation. More than \$5.6 million dollars have been invested in the Martin Multicultural Program, which now embraces both Martin's and Flowers Scholars. These scholars have been some of our most exemplary students—serving in key leadership positions and richly enhancing the life of our campus community.

While we celebrate our deeper understanding of the ministry of reconciliation, we know we have much work to do. It was meaningful, and sobering, when we hosted a reunion for Alumni of Color in 2022. As I listened to the personal stories shared that day, I was heartbroken for the times when Messiah mis-stepped and fell short of nurturing a hospitable community for all students. I was reminded that pursuing reconciliation requires daily actions and the pursuit

must always be a goal for any community seeking to be more like Christ while effectively educating 21st century learners.

Educating students toward reconciliation and modeling the process for them is a profound opportunity and serious responsibility. An unwillingness to pursue deep, authentic relationships with people unlike ourselves will destroy our sense of unity, our witness, and the Messiah educational experience. As “ambassadors of Christ,” please keep taking steps forward on this critical journey. Your witness is powerful to our students and to a watching world.

Demonstrating courage and pursuing reconciliation—which I believe are intrinsically connected—are dependent on the value of hope. For Christians, hope is not a wishful, fingers-crossed or knock-on-wood type of value. It is a certainty—rooted in the work and words of Jesus Christ—that allows us to view the future with hopeful confidence because, as my friend Todd Allen says, “we know how the story ends:” one day sin will be defeated, justice and truth will prevail, and all of creation will glorify the Creator.

Hope has been a consistent theme throughout my Community Day speeches. Year to year, as I scanned the landscape of the difficulties confronting Christian higher education, I personally needed to be challenged to lead as a hopeful, faith-filled president. You, the dedicated employees of Messiah University, have always been a source of hope for me. Each Community Day, as I have looked out over this employee audience, I have recalled our shared Christian faith, the hope-filled promises of the gospel message, and our unwavering dedication to the educational mission of Messiah University. This morning, as in years past, I am inspired for the upcoming academic year and sincerely grateful for the privilege of serving alongside you one last time.

My dear friend and presidential predecessor Rodney Sawatsky taught me many lessons about hope. Rod was stricken with glioblastoma at the early age of sixty-one. After he retired to his home in Canada, I traveled to see him on a few occasions. The last time I saw him was six weeks prior to his death. We sat together in his office and I lamented how unfair it was for him to have terminal cancer. I will never forget his response: “Why me? Why not me? I have given love and received love. And I have hope – the hope of eternal life. We must teach students to be people of hope.”

In my 2008 Community Day address entitled “Courage for the Present—Hope for the Future,” we were in the midst of a devastating global economic downturn. I quoted theologian Walter Brueggeman then, and I want to revisit his words this morning. He writes that an essential element of hope is “the capacity to be amazed at the unending power that can be generated by the meeting and trading of lives.” Our relationships with our students create hope. Our relationships with each other create hope. I pray that our Messiah University community is permeated by faithful, amazing, powerful hope as we navigate the year ahead!

The foundational understandings of our theological heritage, our long-held ethos of hospitality, and the dearth of civility and compassion in American life highlight the critical need for individuals and educational institutions to be characterized by values of courage, reconciliation, and hope. Will you join me in embracing the following commitments this academic year?

- Let us humbly engage in constructive learning with colleagues and students and emulate civility and compassion.
- Let us actively mentor our students to think critically and avoid the extremes of polarization and division.
- Let us passionately pursue reconciliation as we labor to nurture a genuine ethos of true belonging for our campus and extended community.
- Let us work to promote the Common Good by “loving our neighbors as ourselves.”

Together we have been entrusted to help students integrate their faith, vocation, and values in an effort to address the critical needs of this world. What a joy it is to be involved in meaningful work of lasting impact.

During the course of my presidency, I have encountered many anecdotes of former professors and campus leaders. One account involves natural sciences Professor Emeritus K. B. Hoover, who served Messiah for 42 years. During his doctoral defense, a question was posed to him regarding the theory of evolution to which he succinctly and prudently responded, “Things change, and God is in it all.” K. B. was right! Change is a given. Change can be unsettling and demanding, but it can also be filled with possibility. As we seek to embody courage, reconciliation and hope, I am confident that we can overcome fear and anxiety; be

equipped to meet difficult challenges; and bolster our faith in the One who is truly in it all!

Thank you, dear colleagues. It is now my pleasure to introduce you to Craig Sider.

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