

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

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

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

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

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.

Works Cited

Higher Ed Dive. *A look at trends in college consolidation since 2016*. 1 August 2024. 19 August 2024. <<https://www.highereddive.com/news/how-many-colleges-and-universities-have-closed-since-2016/539379/>>.

"Incoming Class of 2004 Profile." 2004. *Messiah University*. 10 July 2024.