

State of the University 2021
August 17, 2021

Messiah University:

students are mentored toward mature intellect, professional competence, personal integrity and

instructed and to truly “love our neighbors,” regardless of what

perspectives and traditions must be understood in the context of Messiah University's distinct identity and particular theological framework. Our Diversity Strategic Plan states that "Diversity is part of what it means to celebrate the goodness of God's creation and to renew our understanding of the reality that all of humanity reflects the signature of God" (Diversity Affairs). By engaging diversity in all areas of institutional life, we realize God's vision for us—the body of Christ—is evident as we bring hope and healing to individuals, communities and societies. The need to fulfill our individual and communal calling to be reconcilers has been consistent throughout Messiah's history but the urgency has increased as a result of our current context.

In preparation for this Year of Reconciliation, a campus task force was formed, led by Dr. Todd Allen and Dr. Kris Hansen-Kieffer, and comprised of employees from across many University departments, as well as a trustee, student and alumni representative. The task force selected a powerful visual image to serve as the logo for our 2021-2022 "Year of Reconciliation." Listen as our colleague, Dr. Obed Mfum-Mensah, Professor of Education, explains this symbol's significance.

Obed Mfum-Mensah "Understanding the Mpatapo Symbol" video

The logo includes a Scripture reference that functions as the cornerstone for Messiah's commitment to reconciliation: 2 Corinthians 5:17-20a, "So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation, that is, in Christ, God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us. Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us."

The ministry of reconciliation to which we are called, alongside all of our students, is not solely a vertical process between us and God *nor* is it solely a horizontal process between us and others. It is both. "There are two movements in this story, and the order is important. The first movement is about God and what God has done in Christ. The second is about the transformation this first movement has enacted in the world and in the lives of people," write Emmanuel Katongole and Chris Rice in *Reconciling All Things* (43).

As Christians, we look to Jesus as our ultimate example. Consider the context in which Jesus lived: born under scandalous circumstances, a refugee fleeing from Herod, a Hebrew descendent with a multicultural and multiracial family tree. He grew up in Galilee, a diverse province with enslaved people, and

He lived among individuals who represented different religions, cultures, languages and social classes (DeYoung 53).

Jesus did not isolate himself among people who looked, sounded and believed like he did. He intentionally touched the sick, befriended the marginalized, spoke against injustice and with his words and actions he reconciled individuals to God and to each other. Jesus' ministry of reconciliation disrupted expectations and destroyed social and religious taboos, requiring the type of sincere conviction and bold courage he exhibited throughout his earthly ministry.

The preeminence of Christ in our lives should inspire and empower us to participate in the sacred ministry of reconciliation. We are required to think, feel and act, and we have clear instruction about how to begin. Jesus declares in Matthew 22, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbor as yourself'" (Matthew 22:37-38). The first step in the journey of reconciliation is to love well—first the Lord and then others—acknowledging that all are lovingly created in God's image.

Nothing surpasses the mandate to be reconciled to God and each other. The Church—as described in the Book of Acts—was born into a society divided by inequities and divisions, much like what we witness in our contemporary world.

Yet, scholar Justo González reminds us that the gift of the Holy Spirit “undermines

prominent throughout the United States. Despite receiving many 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 (Phipps). As we reflect on this story, we must acknowledge the fear and prejudice that led to the unjust internment of innocent Asian Americans during this time of global instability, and we must diligently examine personal and community anxieties that lead to the adoption of evil and oppressive systems which must be ended. But we can also be encouraged by this account because it demonstrates how—in a time of turmoil—the Messiah community embraced and brought healing to a family who had been terribly mistreated and entered into a meaningful long-term relationship with them.

After enduring much physical and emotional pain, the Sakimura family found Messiah to be a gracious and loving community, and they wanted a similar hospitable experience for others, so they established an endowed scholarship with the internment

I share these examples to demonstrate that Messiah has historically valued hospitality, not to imply that we have always succeeded at making all students and employees feel welcome. But, early examples of hospitality such as these helped to inform the inclusion of reconciliation as one of the three stated outcomes of a Messiah education when a mid-1990s task force of faculty, staff and trustees drafted the current institutional identity and mission statements and the delineation of our core values. Because reconciliation was a central thread of our theological framework and a crucial part of institutional history, it was undisputed to purposefully pair more common educational outcomes such as “service” and “leadership” with reconciliation, a distinctive commitment among higher education institutions.

Since the adoption of our mission statement more than 25 years ago, Messiah has continued to lean into its values by acknowledging and addressing the need for University protocols and practices that lead to greater intercultural

Though we publicly express our commitment to reconciliation and can cite many examples of extending hospitality, we have not always been successful at “living into” our institutional calling and ideal. We know from our Campus Climate Survey that we have important work to do to ensure that all students and employees experience being valued and appreciated.

For Messiah University to fully embrace and visibly demonstrate its continuing commitment to

practicing the virtue of hospitality, but it is precisely in the moments when I devote too much attention to completing tasks and not enough attention to listening to others that I realize how much I need God's help to live out the call of reconciliation.

The Campus Climate Survey and recent conversations with colleagues and students have challenged me to consider whether hospitality is a sufficient paradigm. What action steps must we take to ensure that all Messiah community members experience not only an initial welcoming embrace

interactions with Brethren Housing Association staff and clients, students explore their personal biases and learn to more accurately identify and address the determinants of health, privilege, discrimination and access in the health fields. No longer are health care access issues mere textbook case studies; rather, they are human dignity issues attached to faces and names personally known by the students. When students witness the challenges and limitations experienced by economically disadvantaged individuals, their perspective is forever changed, and they are motivated to practice reconciliation in their healthcare-related careers.

Educating students toward reconciliation and modeling the process for them is a profound opportunity and serious responsibility. Pope Francis describes institutions like Messiah as “vital reserves of moral energy and civic love” (Pope Francis and Austen Ivereigh 46). Listen as Dr. George Pickens, professor of theology and director of the peace and conflict studies program, shares a meaningful account of reconciliation across different religious traditions.

George Pickens “Interfaith Peacebuilding” Video

Though each person’s reconciliation journey will be unique, there are common steps that guide the process. Consider relationships in your own life that might be broken: perhaps you and a colleague have a long-term conflict that impedes your working relationship; perhaps someone’s political posts on social

media have caused you to draw back from your friendship; or perhaps you have been unwilling to undertake the difficult work of unpacking your particular role in systems and policies that promote inequities. Now is the time to follow the commandment of Matthew 22 to love God and love others by taking these

Ultimately, forgiveness must be extended and accepted for complete restoration of

more than a century ago, and today, we remain actively engaged in the ministry of reconciliation both within our educational community and the greater Central Pennsylvania region. Here are a few examples of the good work presently being done by our employees and students:

The **Digital Harrisburg Initiative**, a collaboration between Messiah University, Harrisburg University of Science and Technology and community partners, was awarded the Leadership in History Award by the American Association for State and Local History. Students and faculty in the humanities engaged Harrisburg history in reconciliatory ways by collecting oral histories, creating interactive GIS maps about multiethnic neighbors and supporting the creation of the Commonwealth Monument Project, an initiative to commemorate the passage of the 15th and 19th amendments and acknowledge the thriving African American and immigrant community that existed there.

Thriving Together: Congregations for Racial Justice is a Lilly Endowment-funded, multi-faceted, multi-year initiative designed to strengthen Christian congregations so they can help members deepen their relationships with God, build strong relationships with each other and contribute to the flourishing of local and global communities. Dr.

not successful. From this perspective we will not so easily give into the disappointment of failure but will, instead, lean further into the forgiveness, truth-telling and lament that reconciliation requires of us.” In the year ahead, let’s adopt postures of learning and leaning—moving toward people with the goal of listening and serving as faithful ambassadors for Christ.

Imagine the story that Messiah University will communicate to our constituents when they witness us intentionally and whole-heartedly leaning into reconciliation. Messiah University: an educational community marked by stories of how all of our students and employees experience human flourishing. Messiah University: a place of hopeful possibility where people recount their individual stories of transformation and the distinct kind of “heart, spirit and life that inspires and sustains” the difficult ministry of reconciliation (Katongole and Rice 125).

Most importantly, the Messiah story will point to and glorify our good and

glorious God (2nd Cor 3:18) who bore the cross for us (1st Cor 1:18) and who is the

started as just one small seed. In *Reconciling All Things*, Katongole and Rice offer this hopeful reminder: “We plant in hope, not certainty. But we plant because we know it is true and right and good. Even as we bend to push the seeds beneath moist soil, we are learning that hope is the patience to work and wait for a future yet seen” (107

Works Cited

DeYoung, Curtiss Paul. *Reconciliation: Our Greatest Challenge, Our Only Hope*. Valley Forge: Judson Press, 1997.