

Opening Year Address **Wednesday, August 25, 2010**

"Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ."

Thank you for taking time out of your day to join us this morning to welcome our new colleagues and to allow me to share my message as we begin the 2010-11 academic year.

As is the case in previous years, today's message is not intended to be my State of the College. I intend to do that in October when we have received the final draft of our financial audit and the 20th day numbers are in. At that time, I will provide, in fuller detail, where we are.

Let me begin by answering the recurring question on campus and around town, "How's enrollment looking?"

As of 11:00 this morning, we have enrolled 609 students. This represents a 3% increase over last fall's enrollment and a 13% increase over the last three years. More importantly, this is the first time since fall 2003 that Bethany's enrollment has exceeded 600. Certainly, "up" is better than "down," but we must grow faster than 2-3% a year.

On the good news side of the 608, we enrolled 365 returning students from last spring – on a goal of 350 – and it appears our freshmen-to-sophomore retention (that is, last year's freshmen to this year's sophomores) is at 64%, up from last year's 59%.

On the "we have to do better" side of the 609, we have 173 first-time freshmen, which is 9 fewer than last year, and 58 transfer students for a total of 231 new students, which is 12 fewer than last year.

Let me now shift to our agenda for 2010-11. Over the next year, I see our focus on six major items.

First, have fun together and strengthen our community!

Over the last two years, the Good Times Gang has done an outstanding job in bringing us together to have fun and to build community. I look to them to continue and to build on that good work this year. As we work through our shared challenges and our shared opportunities, we need to do so as One Bethany.

Since we were together last in May, our community suffered the loss of three of our students: Leah, Emeka, and Max. We celebrate their lives and pray for God's strength and comfort for their families and friends.

Additionally, our Lutheran college community suffered the loss of our sister institution Dana College. We celebrate its Danish Lutheran heritage and mission; and pray for God's strength and comfort for Dana's alumni and friends.

In 1992, the year many of this year's incoming freshmen were born, Queen Elizabeth II would describe the year as "*annus horribilis*" meaning "horrible year." Would I be too bold to describe this summer as "*aestivus horribilis*" – "horrible summer?"

Regardless, I believe with Pastor Noni that "adversity has a way of bringing out the true nature of a community, and the deep strength and character of Bethany and her people is evidenced by your work, your compassion, and your faithfulness."

In my three years at Bethany, I've come to respect and admire Bethany's community. As we move forward, I'd like to challenge us to work harder on strengthening our community. I truly believe that if we come together to do our shared work as one Bethany, we can achieve anything. I truly believe that if we work as if we believe Bethany is Our Community, we can and will control our destiny.

For this reason, our theme for the upcoming academic year will be: *One Bethany, Our Community*.

Second, prepare for and deliver a successful comprehensive site visit November 15-17, 2010 for our reaffirmation of accreditation.

Over the last two plus years, under the outstanding leadership of Carolyn & Bruce Kahler, the Self-Study Steering Committee and the five criteria-based committees have been hard at work. The self-study is done and the five-person

site visit team has been selected. I would like to acknowledge and thank those directly involved in the great work they have done.

Would those members of the steering committee and the five criteria committees please stand so that we can recognize and thank you?

Thank you!

As we approach the site visit in mid-November, we can be proud of the work that has been done across campus. This has been a community project.

More information will be shared as we approach the site visit in November.

Third, conduct a year of discovery and complete by mid-May a plan to improve Bethany's first college year.

As many of you are aware, during the upcoming academic year, Bethany College was selected to participate in a national higher education project known as "Foundations of Excellence® in the First College Year." This project, sponsored by the John N. Gardner Institute for Excellence in Undergraduate Education, utilizes a model of excellence for the first year of college. The model will enable us to confirm our strengths and recognize our opportunities for improvement.

Perhaps the tag line of the program is the best explanation: *The first year matters!* The first college year is central to the achievement of our mission. The first college year lays the foundation on which the Bethany experience is built. Foundations of Excellence® in the First College Year presents us with an opportunity for improving not only the first college year, but also the entire student experience.

Yes, if we are successful, and we must be, a beneficial by-product will be increased retention and graduation rates. In fact, a recent study of previous participants who implemented their plan to "a high degree" had an average increase in retention of 6 percentage points in the first four years. That result would have a huge impact on Bethany, but I believe we must and will do better!

Most of all, the success of our self-discovery and implementation will be based on our success as a community. Consequently, I am persuaded that another beneficial by-product of this undertaking will include moving us farther, faster to becoming One Bethany.

The official launch of this process will be September 2. There will be two meetings that day so that the largest possible number of faculty and staff can become familiar with the self-discovery process over the year ahead. More information will follow in an upcoming *Bethany Insight*.

The next three items really are a package of three inter-related actions.

Fourth, continue to execute and make progress on *A Call to Action*.

As you are aware, last May the Board of Directors vigorously discussed and approved a short-term, three-year plan called *A Call to Action*. That plan was updated in June and again this month. My goal is to update the plan about every two to three months and to report on progress every month to the Board and to the campus.

To refresh your memory, *A Call to Action* has five goals, 28 initiatives, and a lot of action steps covering the next three years. The goals clearly communicate the desired outcomes. They are:

1. Grow enrollment to 700
2. Maximize net tuition revenue
3. Expand philanthropy
4. Align expenses to 600
5. Achieve financial stability

Perhaps a way of looking at *A Call to Action* is that it is focused to guide Bethany through today so that there is a tomorrow. But while focusing on today – and surviving today – is absolutely important, if however all of our efforts are focused on today, then we lose the opportunities we could create for tomorrow.

This segues nicely to our next agenda item.

Fifth, explore and *Engage the Future*.

Between February and July, the Imagineering the 21st Century Bethany College Work Group explored Bethany's future and how we might define that future. I have accepted their final report and that report has become the foundation of a visioning document called *Engage the Future*. That document has been reviewed and improved by President's Council, the Imagineering Work Group, and the Board of Directors. The next iteration, version 4, will be shared with the campus community during September for your responses and suggestions.

This is an emerging future for Bethany College. That future is still being explored and our community will have a chance to respond to it in small groups. More information will be forthcoming as soon as version 4 is ready.

As a side note, from the campus community's input will come version 5 which will be shared with invited representatives of Bethany's external constituents during Homecoming. Based on their feedback, version 6 will then go to the Board of Directors for their adoption.

Engage the Future is an important process and product because it will define the Bethany College we aspire to become in 2020 and 2031 at Bethany's sesquicentennial. *Engage the Future* is what awaits us on the backside of the rough waters we are sailing through today. *Engage the Future* represents our tomorrow.

To ensure stability in leadership and in navigating the rough waters through today to the possibilities of tomorrow, the executive committee of the Board of Directors recently offered me a new five-year contract. Because I wholeheartedly love this community and firmly believe in Bethany's future, I accepted.

Sixth, be the change.

Here we are, called to act today so that we can engage the future tomorrow. Here we are at the confluence of today and tomorrow. I've characterized this place as the brackish waters between today and tomorrow. It's not clean; it's unpleasant. I recognize that. But, more importantly, it represents we are entering – if we haven't already entered – a period of change.

Some will be energized by change and some will fear change. As we enter this brackish or transition period, I find strength in Paul's second letter to the Corinthians (5:17) ¹⁷*So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see everything has become new!*

The *Lutheran Study Bible's* commentary on this passage is very interesting: "In the new creation, God and world share all things in complete, loving communion. ... In Luther's language, the 'happy exchange' between Christ and humans extends to the relationship between God and all of God's creation. The perfect union of God and human in Jesus of Nazareth anticipates the world's future and God's."

As each of you know, I firmly believe Bethany College is a called college, part of that "happy exchange." If that is true, we should be energized as we enter this time of new creation. I know I am.

Many of you are aware, but for those who are not, a Bethany College graduation tradition that dates back to the early 90's is, as I present the graduating senior with his or her diploma, I am presented with a small token. A year ago, the class of 2009 each gave me a crayon. This past May, the class of 2010 each gave me a penny. Not only was I given a penny, but many of them whispered something about change in my ear: "Keep the change ... Be the change ... Keep the change coming ... You are the change ..."

To remind us in the weeks and months ahead about the change that lies ahead, with the help of the Good Times Gang, I'm going to give to each of you one of the pennies given to me by the class of 2010. As a small reminder to be the change, I'm going to keep my penny on my desk.

Let's have a great year, let's work hard and have fun. Let's answer the call to act today, so that we can engage the future tomorrow. Let's be the change. Let's constantly remind ourselves that we are "One Bethany, Our Community!"

Thanks be to God.