

## President Patrick Ferry's Inaugural Address, August 1997

### Looking Back, Looking Ahead, Looking to Jesus

There are a few moments in our lives that truly defy description. I refer to the extraordinary times that even poets struggle to capture with mere words. Do you know what I mean? Perhaps you have known some such times in your life. I feel that I have been living in the midst of just such a moment for many weeks—indeed, for several months the moment has been prolonged. Right now the indescribability may reach its highest point to date. Yes, I have often stood in this very spot and sometimes have spoken to assemblies nearly as large, but never before have I experienced a time such as this, a moment such as this.

But, this moment is not what this moment is really all about. That is an awkward way of saying that today's greatest significance is that it rests right in the middle of yesterday and tomorrow, in between the past and the future. The day is an exciting one for me personally, but it is not about me. My past, intriguing as it might be for my own reflection upon all that has led up to this moment, is only incidental to the real meaning of today. It pales by comparison to what truly makes the moment so significant.

The moment belongs to Concordia. Today we look back and celebrate 116 years of God's blessing upon Concordia. Today we also festively look forward as we call upon the same God, who changes not, to bless Concordia's future—our God, our help in ages past, our hope for years to come. It is an extraordinary moment—a high point from which we have a splendid opportunity simultaneously to glance back and to glimpse ahead. The day is not really about today—it is about Concordia, its heritage and history, its direction and dreams. I am truly honored to say a few words about my view of things from this high point, a place that nearly takes my breath away.

The text that frames what I want to say about Concordia's past and future is Hebrews 12:1-2 which reads, "Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us. Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God." Or, if I might paraphrase for our purposes a bit, "look back, look forward, look to Jesus."

The writer to the Hebrews refers to an impressive array of witnesses whose faith in God's creating and saving acts in history provided a model for those who lived in that turbulent time and that perilous place. Fortified in their own faith by the example of saints gone before them, they were urged to persevere though they faced an uncertain future (which was finally not so uncertain at all as long as it rested in the hands of the one whose hands were nailed to the cross and then raised in resurrection triumph to pronounce heavenly benediction). Look back, look forward, and look to Jesus.

Looking back from where we stand today we see that from its beginning Concordia has been first and foremost a Christian university. Indeed, to say "first and foremost" is misleading if taken to suggest that something else could come second and slightly modify what is first. It is better to say simply that Concordia is a Christian university, and it is best to say it without compromise and without apology. Today we are surrounded by the memory of dedicated and devout servants and saints who have first blazed a trail and then paved the way for us, servants and saints who have brought Concordia to this moment, servants and saints in whose train we follow. We honor them best by thanking them for fixing their eyes on Jesus and working so hard to keep Concordia's Christian mission in clear, sharp focus.

Some who look at us from outside may see such a perspective as very backward looking and totally out of touch with our own times. Some may offer the observation that such an anachronistic point of view, rooted in an age now past, has no future in higher education. Indeed, some may even regard the ideal of a "Christian University" itself to be a hopeless oxymoron, an anti-intellectual contradiction in terms. Looking back we see that even some within the ranks of the church have raised concerns about the tensions between faith and the academic pursuit. "What does Athens have to do with Jerusalem," one ancient Church Father asked, "or the church with the academy?" Can Concordia, as a "Christian/University," have it both ways?

What we are really asking is, "can the faith that the writer to the Hebrews advocates handle close scrutiny?" Can we ask questions, even the most challenging ones, or must we confine ourselves to right answers? Are we able to be fully engaged in intellectual inquiry, or do we have to hold back because of the risks and dangers of higher learning? Are we willing, as Milton urges, to let truth and falsehood grapple?

Church or Academy, Jerusalem or Athens, Jesus or Socrates, does it have to be one or the other? Pardon my Socratic approach. No, on second thought, do not. Because unless Concordia is willing to raise, wrestle, and risk the hard questions, as Socrates did, it should not consider itself an institution of higher learning. Unless Concordia is prepared for Athens and the Academy alongside Jesus and Jerusalem it might as well disregard its Liberal Arts tradition.

## President Patrick Ferry's Inaugural Address, August 1997

A Christian, Liberal Arts College. So what sort of an educational experience should a student who enrolls on our campus expect to receive? What does it mean to hold a degree from Concordia? And how will our Christian Liberal Arts tradition influence the decisions that we make together about a new Concordia—does our view of the past contribute to our vision of the future? So many questions! Those who want answers instead of questions may be disappointed today's remarks. But, I am a firm believer that questions push us much farther than answers, and though we have come a long ways in 116 years, we still have far to go.

In the weeks and the months that are ahead many of the Concordia's stakeholders—from on and off of campus--will join me in tackling questions about our mission and our vision. We will closely examine where we have been and where we are heading—looking back, looking forward, and all the while I trust, looking to Jesus. It would be premature to say just how I expect the details of our vision to unfold. But, for today, looking back and following the cue of the Ancient Greeks, I begin with what the philosophers identified as the four “transcendent virtues”—no gimmicks, no trendy fads—but the transcendent virtues which have always been an aim of higher learning. What better place to start as we anticipate running the race laid out for us? The word curriculum, by the way, comes from the Latin for “racecourse”—an apt word for today. So what are the markers that we look for to help us to run well as we strategize about Concordia's racecourse, its curriculum, and all that pertains to the teaching and learning experience here? Look for these markers: truth, beauty, goodness, and unity.

Sound a bit esoteric or impractical? Sound a little out of touch? In his book “If Aristotle Ran General Motors,” Tom Morris argues that a more open and human corporate America has an opportunity to succeed, and even thrive, with serious attention to these very guides to excellence. What about us? Is Concordia's eager to transcend the mediocre and create a learning community devoted to providing our students excellence in Christian Higher Education? Is Concordia interested in making the next step from bigger to better a reality? If we really have such goals, if offering students the best possible learning experience is important to us, then we who are Concordia will want to eye ways in which truth, beauty, goodness, and unity could shape campus, church, and community.

### Truth

“I do not know what I may appear to be to the world,” said Sir Isaac Newton, “but to myself I seem to have been only like a boy playing on the seashore and diverting myself in now and then finding a smoother pebble or prettier shell than ordinary, whilst the great ocean of truth lay all undiscovered before me.” So much to learn, so little time. What shall we do? Give up? The disciplined pursuit of truth has always driven Concordia's academic mission. Disciplined, not lazy. “God offers to every mind its choice between truth and repose,” said Emerson, “Take which you please—you can never have both.” Good minds, to avoid turning to mush, cannot repose—they must be exercised—just like the body. For any institution of higher learning, the constant exercise of the mind in search for truth defines the mission.

What is different from our postmodern preference for relativistic uncertainty, however, is a Concordia conviction that objective truth exists. Moreover, it is defined, indeed embodied, by the one who claims “I am the Truth.” “What is truth?” the postmodernist Pilate might ask unaware of its meaning even as he looks Truth straight in the eye. “Christian truth is redemptive truth because it is not simply truth about something, but knowledge of someone. It is personal.” Once they hung it upon a cross and tried to avoid dealing with Truth that way. Then they hid it behind a rock. But, the stone is rolled away. The Truth lives and is seated at the right hand of God, our text says, where Truth rules for all eternity. Let truth and falsehood grapple—what is there to lose? Concordia was, is, and by God's grace always will be a Liberal Arts university dedicated to the perseverant pursuit of the truth, a Christian university confident that truth can be known. We insist on having it both ways. A Liberal Arts education is one that liberates, and it is the Truth that sets us free!

Freed by the truth, we find forgiveness for our failures, we have peace and pardon, we have a lightened load. Transformed by the truth, integrity must characterize each conversation, direct all dialogue, and energize every exchange. Truth is a powerful thing, and, therefore, we are advised on how to handle truth among us. To “speak the truth in love,” as the Scripture urges, means that truth is a tool to build up, not a weapon to tear down. At Concordia we have the opportunity to model on our campus for church and community the art of argument. That means solid logic and sound reason, careful research and clear communication are employed winsomely not to win a point, but to win a brother or a sister. The truth, in love, here. The truth of God's love--here.

## President Patrick Ferry's Inaugural Address, August 1997

### Beauty

Truth and beauty go side by side. The Apostle says it better, “whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things.” Do we have here the Pauline perspective on the college curriculum? Indeed, the sorts of things he wants us to think about include truth and beauty. Truth belongs on the college campus—who would argue otherwise? But beauty, while more obvious, is less obviously necessary. Is beauty a luxury that, when push comes to shove, we can afford to do without? Is beauty an extravagance that we cannot afford to keep? I rejoice, and again I say rejoice, in this apostolic affirmation of the aesthetic from Philipians.

Beauty is born from creativity. The beauties of heaven and earth are the handiwork of a magnificent master designer, an awesome Creator God. We, who are His humbler creation, also create. To include beauty in this message is more than lip service to one of the philosophers’ virtues, it is my way saying that we must encourage creativity. Of course, our most beautiful work is more often the result of perspiration rather than inspiration. Creativity, in other words, is work. The Creator worked and then rested. Our ability to draw a picture, to play a piece, to speak a line, to sing a note, to turn a phrase just so—or even the ability to appreciate the beauty of these creative acts—takes work. It is the playful work of creative learning inspired by creative teaching. Without learning we fail even to recognize the noble, pure, and lovely. Without learning the admirable, excellent, and praiseworthy escape our attention. Learning takes work—but what pleasing work it is meant to be, and what pleasing results it is capable of creating!

Church and community need creative people to reach out from our campus. Not only to promote an appreciation for the arts, sure that, but beyond that we need creative answers to complex problems. We need people who have worked and learned to think critically and creatively, people who are willing to work in the world for pleasing outcomes, for beautiful solutions to what are so often very ugly situations. Without an appreciation for the beautiful ugliness rears its ugly head everywhere you turn.

Hebrews urges us to run the course laid out for us—what does that have to say about beauty? I love to run—not just because it is an athletic experience, or an ascetic experience, but most of all because it is an aesthetic experience. Anyone who ran the race this morning simply must concur. The view of Lake Michigan from the bluff was more breathtaking than the pace. Beauty pushes us along and, I am convinced, enables us to finish well. We are wise to keep that in mind as we consider the meaning of our curricular “racecourse.” Is ours one that will emphasize the importance of beauty as well as truth, one that will cultivate and celebrate creativity, and one that will stress the aesthetic value of hard work well done? Sure, running the racecourse is not always easy. They might pretend otherwise, but students do not want it easy. There are no shortcuts to a job well done. We who are faculty must be challenged to challenge our students, to urge them, to help them finish well and leave this place with a degree and, more important, with a real sense of accomplishment.

Run the course laid out for us with perseverance, as Hebrews says. But, also with great pleasure, I might add, as we fix our eyes on what is most beautiful of all about Christian education, Jesus, our Beautiful Savior. Here is a crucial marker for us. Without it we do not know where to turn out there. But, because we have it, our creative energies allow us to do the most meaningful work—work that is an expression of gratitude for Christ’s saving work, work that flows from our Christian sense of calling to our neighbor. And how often we have the opportunity here to applaud the contributions of gifted faculty, staff, and students whose work bring glory to God. What a joy. Dr. Maschke has often said to me that he has never seen a runner with a smile on his or her face. His own joyful visage is evidence to the contrary. He is among those here who runs the race laid out for us with perseverance and with pleasure as he looks to Jesus, our Beautiful Savior.

### Goodness

The God of all truth is gracious and good. The Creator God saw everything that He created and said that it was good. Concordia might aspire to greatness. I would be more pleased if our university aimed for goodness. If Concordia earned a reputation for goodness, that would be great. It has been said that “Of all the virtues and dignities of the mind, goodness is the greatest, being the character of the Deity.” That must be what Cicero, whose many accomplishments include finding his way on to Concordia’s seal, meant when he said “in nothing do men approach so nearly the gods as doing good to men.” And Goethe, likewise on that seal just below Cicero, said, “the ground that a good man treads is hallowed.” This afternoon we have walked on to holy ground. Not just this chapel, but this entire campus is a sacred place where men and women, motivated by the Gospel, are good to each other. There is no need to spend lots of

## President Patrick Ferry's Inaugural Address, August 1997

time on this third transcendent virtue, right? As Thoreau says of the Golden Rule, “an honest man would have but little occasion for it,” so also we don’t need to talk much about goodness, for goodness sake. Concordia understands what it means to be good, to do what is good.

Our problem as Shakespeare (also on the seal, just below Goethe, by the way) points out in very Luther-like fashion is that “the web of our life is of a mingled yarn, good and ill together.” What a tangled web we so often weave—deceit, ugliness, evil. Christian people know about goodness, but you do not have to go off this Christian campus to find its antithesis. This holy ground has been trampled over by people who might even step on each other to get their way. I am not talking about the armies of people who surged past me to cross the finish line ahead of me this morning. I am talking about anyone who is inclined to a “me first” mindset. In other words, I am talking about “me” first.

Goodness thinks about someone else instead. Goodness looks around for a way to help, for a way to make a difference in somebody else’s life. Our Lord Jesus has done that for us. The good that we would do, that we do not, but that which we hate, that we do, who will save us from this body of death? Thanks be to God, He does it through our Lord Jesus Christ! The One who truly is good intervened on our behalf. We now have the best reason of all to pursue the good—gratitude to a good and gracious God.

In recent weeks I have said to many people that my goal is for Concordia to prepare graduates who are committed as well as competent. Any student may come here looking for a degree in order to get a job. Every student ought to leave here with an education and a profound sense of vocation, a sense of responsibility entrusted to us by God to serve our neighbor on campus, in the church, in the community. Will students see the goodness grounded in gratitude that I am talking about modeled for them here? Will they have occasion to learn from teachers who are genuinely interested in helping them to learn, teachers who go out of their way to offer encouragement and support, teachers who run alongside them for the extra mile despite the busy pace of their own lives? Will students learn about vocation from a staff that is dedicated to helping them, a staff that sees them as unique individuals each deserving of caring attention, a staff that appreciates its own crucial role in helping this university to be good, not merely great? Will students learn about the importance of commitment from an administration that gives consistent evidence that it is committed to them and their learning above all else? “Goodness is the only investment that never fails,” said Thoreau. Concordia must invest all of its energy and efforts, all of its resources and resourcefulness into what is good for students. A student who responds to goodness like a child shaking the package under the Christmas tree wondering, “what’s in it for me,” misses the point. What is good is not getting whatever we want. What is good is getting that which we need to ensure our competence and, even more important, to inspire our commitment. I pray that students who walk these grounds will notice that at Concordia, in gratitude for the Gospel, we hold service very sacred. I pray that students who leave these halls will sense their own call to serve.

### Unity

It is time for us to pull this all together. A few weeks ago a publication of the Church edited a few of my remarks from a speech that I made to the faculty last August. The article quoted me as having said that “I plan to launch the most aggressive building campaign in recent years.” I hope that city of Mequon officials did not get hold of the piece and get the wrong idea. What I actually said was, “I plan to launch the most aggressive building campaign in recent years—building community.” Of course, building community is the key, not just to that sentence, or even to that speech, but I think to Concordia’s future. It is unity, working together with one mind, that contributes most to community.

We are all different. Unity within our community does not require uniformity. Uniformity draws lines that limit us and prevent us from excelling. Collectively, we are better because we are different, as long as we bring our differences to the table and use them to help each other to grow, as long as we lay differences aside when they interfere with our common purpose of sharing the Gospel of Christ and extending the Kingdom of God. During the last few weeks on campus I have had the opportunity to observe some remarkable examples of different people working together on our campus to accomplish some great things and contribute to Concordia’s excellence. I saw the talented cast members of Blood Brothers bring their various gifts to the stage to perform one of the most thought provoking dramatic productions on campus in years. While I was impressed by Sam Hilgendorf’s ability to play many roles, the show was better because he did not act alone. I listened to the instrumentalists of the Wind Ensemble and bell choirs at the Pops concert joining together to play pieces that thrilled the audience. If only one hand bell or one woodwind was available for use it would have been less than it was. I watched the soccer team kick the ball from one player to the next with astounding efficiency in a total team effort to win the

## President Patrick Ferry's Inaugural Address, August 1997

conference tournament just as they won the regular season championship. Good individual performances by themselves would not have carried the team nearly so far. I saw no Falcon woman cross the line first at the conference meet, but the determined running of each member of the squad led to yet another conference crown. There are many other examples of our overall Concordia team working together in classrooms, in meetings, in any place where different people with various ideas come together for a united purpose—the good of the community. We will accomplish more not just by wearing the same uniform, or being all the same, but by working in a united effort toward the same goal: excellence in Christian higher education.

It is important for our students to know that, while we are all different, we have much to learn from each other. For me this indicates that we do them no favors keeping them insulated on a cloistered campus. A campus like ours easily becomes too homogeneous. For instance, in our suburban setting it would be easy to ignore the urban experience right under our nose. Most of Concordia's history is in the city, and it is important to get back to our roots and find ways that our campus community can make a difference in the Milwaukee community at large. We should go a step further and say that we live in a global community. We do not serve our students well unless we give them significant exposure to broader global experiences through study abroad opportunity and by helping international students to study on our campus. Our Christian calling is from campus to community. We build community here, but it does not stay here. It builds bridges out to form partnerships with the business community. It reaches out to volunteer at community centers. At times it stretches us out of our comfort zones to reach out to people who are different from us in the name of our Lord who has reached out from the uncomfortable cross to grasp us.

Concordia needs community support. It comes from many quarters. But, more than anything else we look for support from the community of saints who have run before, as Hebrews says, and those who run alongside right now. Our connection to the Church community is not something that we take for granted. Concordia is pleased and proud to be owned and operated by the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod. We affirm the confessional connections that we have with our church body. We are grateful for the gifts and help that God's people have provided Concordia through the years, and we are humbly thankful that through the years we have helped to educate thousands who have prepared for ministries within the Church. We find the opportunity to offer a Christian, Liberal Arts education and professional training to people called to various vocations very meaningful, and we will always cherish the privilege of serving those who sense the Lord's calling to become pastors, Lay Ministers, and teachers. Looking ahead we are determined to work with our colleagues and co-workers in the Concordia University System to prepare numerous laborers for the harvest.

Indeed, Concordia has always been most eager to help people in the community to see Jesus in our teaching and in our service. As I see it from here, this quest will always remain most certainly true. I believe that even if we do not reach any other goal, if we help to spread the Gospel then we have fulfilled our chief purpose. I have held up before you today the lofty aims of truth, beauty, goodness, and unity. These transcendent virtues may seem a bit shapeless on the surface, but I am convinced that if our school is widely recognized for truth, beauty, goodness, and unity, if excellence in Christian Higher Education becomes more than a motto, good things will happen. Will students come from miles around just to learn from us? Will donors line up in droves to knock on our doors and cause our phones to ring off the hook? Perhaps not, but I can assure you that with such a focus people will see Jesus, the Truth, our Beautiful Savior, whose goodness and grace makes us one with Him and with one another. If Concordia is instrumental in helping one person to fix her or his eyes on Jesus and cling to Him in faith, then the angels in heaven will rejoice even if nothing else goes as well as we might hope.

Things won't always go as we hope. Therefore, this message ends as it began—looking back, looking forward, and looking to Jesus. We hope to avoid being frightened by the risks of openness and honesty and to speak the truth in love. We hope to accept responsibilities rather than to cover up mistakes with excuses. We hope to look for creative solutions before ugly problems get uglier. We hope to be able to put others' needs first rather than cater to our own. We hope that, despite our differences, we can work in harmony, in Concordia! But, things won't always go as we hope—As Hebrews reminds us, sin easily entangles. But, we do have hope because we have Christ. Faith looks to Jesus Christ alone and rests in Him unceasing. We fix our eyes on Him.