

# FROM THE DESK OF PRESIDENT DAVID L. PARKYN

A QUARTERLY NEWSLETTER TO LEADERSHIP AND LEGACY DONORS  
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## ARE WE UP TO THE CHALLENGE?

A “good practice” espoused by organizational consultants asserts that institutions ought to have a clear mission and vision. I’d venture to say that every student who graduates from North Park University knows our mission: “to prepare students for lives of significance and service.” These words are repeated often on campus; they even fly on banners hung from light poles along Foster and Kedzie Avenues.

North Park also claims a vision statement:

Our vision, building on our core institutional identity—Christian, urban, multicultural—is to fashion a university of uncommon character and enduring excellence where faith, learning, and service meet.

We agree, at North Park, that three ideals shape our identity in special ways.

- Distinctively Christian – We nurture faith, balancing commitment and freedom, affirming the historic Christian faith of the Church worldwide shaped by the ethos of the Evangelical Covenant Church, even while we welcome students from all faith traditions.
- Intentionally Urban – We engage Chicago as our dynamic place of learning and service; Chicago is our classroom and all Chicagoans are our teachers.
- Purposefully Multicultural – We embrace and value all people, celebrate the complex global cultural tapestry, and engage the reconciling mandate of the Christian gospel.

It is easy to state these ideals; it is more difficult to actually live by them. We seek to form a learning community that reaches in a direction which challenges our natural inclination.

Sociologist and journalist Bill Bishop, in a recent book titled *The Big Sort*, argues that across America the over-riding tendency is for communities to be comprised of like-minded people. Americans have nearly always been attracted by the familiar, the comfortable, the agreeable. What Bishop argues, however, is that over the past 30 years this phenomenon has been radically accentuated. He writes:

We have built a country where everyone can choose the neighbors (and church and news shows) most compatible with his or her lifestyle and beliefs. And we are living with the consequences of this segregation by way of life: pockets of like-minded citizens that have become so ideologically inbred that we don’t know, can’t understand, and can barely conceive of “those people” who live just a few miles away.

American communities are comprised of like-minded people. At North Park we expect just the opposite—we have deliberately shaped our learning community to be comprised of different-minded people. We want to gather people from across America and around the world to form a single, cohesive learning community where we live and sleep, learn and play, eat and work together, 24-7. There is a considerable challenge in bringing together such a group and an even greater challenge in learning from each other.

While reflecting recently on this challenge I remembered a question from a litany some churches use to celebrate the sacrament of baptism. In this litany the congregants are asked: “Will you seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving your neighbor as yourself?” At North Park we wrestle with the implications of this question as our campus increasingly reflects the world God created. Students of color now represent one-third of our undergraduates, and the proportion is higher in our adult and graduate programs. This diversity is true also for the people who work at North Park. Current staff members speak a host of languages—French, Spanish, Korean, Tagalog, Vietnamese, Croatian, Italian, Czech, Assyrian, Arabic, Serbian, Lingala, Portuguese, Swedish, Hungarian, Catalan, Slovak, Danish, German, Bulgarian, Greek, Mandarin Chinese, Russian, and Twi—and the list would be even longer if we added languages spoken by our faculty.

With such an impressive and ever-growing diversity among us you would think we could find our way “to seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving our neighbors as ourselves.” Yet we do not always live in harmony. We are discovering that living together and learning from each other as an inclusive community is hard work. We are discovering that as our diversity increases each of us is sometimes threatened. We are discovering that because much of our life is spent with people who are most like us (in the schools we’ve come from, the neighborhoods we’ve lived in, and the churches we’ve worshiped in) we do not always know how to live and learn together as we should at North Park.

And yet we learn. We learn, in words paraphrased from Barbara Brown Taylor, that “being diverse is not about serving God perfectly but about seeing God visibly; allowing other people to learn whatever they can from watching us rise and fall.” At North Park University rising and falling is a way of life—a way of life we should not shy away from; a way of life we should embrace as good, not perfect, but good.

We face a challenge, but it is an achievable challenge. And it is a challenge worth fighting for. Learning is best done in the company of others. When we walk side-by-side we recognize our difference, learn from our difference, and choose to accept our difference. As we rise and fall we seek and serve Christ in all persons. As we rise and fall we learn to love our neighbors as ourselves.

## WHAT DID WE ACCOMPLISH?

During the summer months I reflected on the past academic year, seeking to remember what we had accomplished together as a learning community. I noted a host of things, some more important than others, yet all part of our work together. In just part of my list I remembered that during 2007–2008:

- We achieved an all-time record in student enrollment.
- The Seminary and the School of Music each successfully completed accreditation reviews.
- Several books were published by campus authors, on topics as diverse as biblical and theological studies, conflict resolution, and academic dishonesty.

- Music CDs were produced featuring the compositions of one faculty member and the band of another.
- For the first time in the history of the University a graduating student achieved a Fulbright award.
- We provided \$1.2 million in compensation increases for faculty and staff.
- We secured funding from the Kern Foundation for several full-tuition scholarships for students in the Seminary.
- Attendance at the Axelson Center's ninth annual symposium increased by 26 percent.
- We prepared a new strategic plan for the University.
- We welcomed our new provost.
- We hired more than 35 new members of the University's faculty and staff.
- We received an Award for Excellence in Landscape Architecture from the American Institute for Architects and the Society for College and University Planning.
- Burgh Hall was renovated.
- The faculty by-laws were re-written and a new governance structure was agreed on.
- We held the second annual senior honors symposium.
- We graduated 611 students.

Recalling the achievements of the past year is important, especially as we anticipate the beginning of a new academic year. Each accomplishment is not the achievement of one individual; rather each accomplishment represents the best of our collective efforts.

## THE WORLD AT NORTH PARK

In his recent book about Chicago, titled *Never a City So Real*, Alex Kotlowitz describes our neighborhood with these words: "The world intersects at the corner of Lawrence and Kedzie Avenues." For 115 years North Park University has been at home in this global intersection.

Over the summer, we entered the intersection in new ways. Though a number of our students and staff traveled to various parts of the world for research, service, and mission during the summer, groups also came from around the world to study at North Park.

One group included 68 students from nine countries who enrolled in the University's summer English as a Second Language program. Coming from Korea, Mexico, Brazil, and six other countries, these students spent the mornings in English language classrooms and then learned American culture and had opportunity to practice their developing English language skills in field trips throughout the city.

Overlapping with the ESL program for two weeks, a dozen University professors from Mexico resided on campus as part of a teacher exchange program sponsored by the Fulbright Commission. The participants in this program will "exchange" classrooms with individuals from the United States for the next year. Faculty members who teach English in Mexican Universities will teach Spanish for a year in the United States, whereas faculty members who teach Spanish in American schools will teach English for a year in Mexico.

The two weeks spent in Chicago, on the North Park's campus, allowed for a program of orientation to American culture and the American classroom. Subsequently, the group traveled to Washington, DC

where they met with their exchange counterparts to introduce each other to the specific classroom they would be entering. And from there the groups went their separate ways—across America for the visitors from Mexico and across Mexico for the faculty members from the United States.

## BURGH HALL RENOVATION

Students vacated their rooms on Friday, May 9; we held commencement on Saturday, May 10, and at 7:00 a.m. on Monday, May 12, the demolition crews moved into Burgh Hall. While we didn't demolish the building itself, the building will never be the same. Perhaps this is a good thing, because for all practical purposes Burgh Hall has been the same for the past 52 years since it was constructed in 1956.

Over the summer the original built-in bedroom furniture was removed, a new emergency sprinkler system was installed, electrical wiring was upgraded, wireless internet access was provided, new lighting fixtures were installed, floor coverings were replaced, walls were painted, and the lobby was completely renovated. Just before students returned for classes new modular furniture was moved into each room. All of these changes complemented the overhaul of the bathrooms on each floor which had been completed over the past two summers.

When students return this year they will see a familiar building from the outside but will find an entirely "new" building on the inside. Burgh Hall has always been a popular student residence. Its central location provides considerable convenience, and its relatively large rooms allow for a certain measure of comfort. Now with new furniture, fresh paint and carpet, upgraded electrical service, and wireless amenities, the building is sure to be popular with students, perhaps for another 52 years!

## PARTNERSHIP

I'm confident of at least one thing: it takes more, much more, than a president to run a University. I'm joined in this work by some wonderful people on our campus who teach and mentor students each day of the year. More than this, I'm joined by you and others like you from across the country. You make the difference; your prayers and your support assure the margin of excellence which makes an education at North Park distinctive.

Thank you for your partnership.



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