PRESIDENT'S LETTER

A QUARTERLY NEWSLETTER TO PRESIDENT'S CLUB AND HERITAGE CIRCLE DONORS

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In the twenty-first century, if we are to remain faithful to our mission—"to prepare students for lives of significance and service"—we must do so in, and for, and among the people of the city.

PREPARING THE WAY

During the recent season of Advent I was drawn to the infancy narratives in the early portions of the Gospels. Here we read, not only of the Christ-child but also of a second lad who as a young man would grow up in the desert and teach strange things. His name was John, with a nickname, "the Baptist."

John was born an infant with a mission—"to make ready a people prepared for the Lord." He was also an infant born with a special blessing—"the hand of the Lord was with him."

As I've studied the history of North Park I've often felt this is an institution blessed by "the hand of the Lord." And in hearing the mission given to John I hear quite clearly the mission of our school: to make ready our students, "to prepare [them] for lives of significance and service."

As a young man John was not high on social sensitivity; he called those around him a "brood of vipers." Yet John commissioned these same people, these vipers, to make ready the way of the Lord.

"What then shall we do," the people asked, "to make ready the way of the Lord?" His answer stunned these people even as it surprises us. Repent? No. Live peaceably? No. Fast? No. Live a holy life? No.

The people asked, "What shall we do to make ready the way of the Lord?" And John answered, "Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise." How do we make ready the way of the Lord? By being generous through sharing all we have.

When we gather on the campus of this wonderful University, when we cheer it on from afar, when we assure its continued health and vigor, we are preparing the way of the Lord.

Without the support and generosity of many before us, North Park would long ago have closed its doors. Without the gift of your second coat, without setting that extra place at your table, without your generosity, students today would not walk these sidewalks, or study in the Brandel Library, or power up their computers, or exercise in the Helwig Recreation Center, or lift their voices in Christmas song. Without your generous participation in Campaign North Park, future generations of students would not have the place to learn or scholarships to help pay their way provided through this campaign.

As Advent turns to Christmas, and Christmas to Epiphany, it's important to recall the blessedness of giving, to praise the generosity of spirit which characterizes those who love North Park. Your gifts prepare the way of the Lord on this campus.

Advent 2011: A Festival of Lessons and Carols at Our Lady of Mercy Church.

STARS SHINING OVER CHICAGO

Three years ago we made several changes to our annual program of Christmas music. By adopting the ancient format of "Lessons and Carols" and through partnering with a local Roman Catholic parish, our goal was to embrace our neighborhood and broaden our audience even as we enhanced the quality of musical performance.

We reached this goal in this year's program on the first Sunday of December! In collaboration with Father Joseph Tito and the parishioners at Our Lady of Mercy Church just south of the campus in Albany Park, we have more than doubled attendance to over 1,000 people. The Hebrew prophets and the Greek Gospels were read in English and Tagalog. Composers were drawn from around the world: Bach, Enns, Olatunji, Pärt, Holst, and others. Guest musicians included members of the Chicago Children's Choir and the YOURS Orchestra from our neighboring Hibbard School. University musicians reflected the many cultures of our campus—Linea, Giovanni, Alberto, Yuri, Kendra, Quincy, Lena, Faith, Zinea, Sefan, Nyawour, Monica, Jaquita, Anders, Omar, Israel, Francisco, and many others.

Each word spoken and each note performed rose into the sky above as stars shining over Chicago. What wonders of Christ's love!

OUR PAST, OUR FUTURE

Through Advent and Christmas this year I've reflected on what it means at North Park to "prepare the way of the Lord." What is our part, what will be our part, in presenting the infant Savior to God's world in the year to come and in the many years that will follow?

Here's what I'm thinking.

We cannot know what that small band of immigrants from Sweden envisioned in 1891 when they gathered for an annual church meeting in Moses Hill, Nebraska, and decided to start a school. What we do know is that after two years in a Minneapolis church basement this infant program was moved to what historian Leland Carlson identified as a "sparsely settled community" far north of the city of Chicago. Carlson noted: "Old Main stood like a lone sentinel surveying the territory of onion fields, cabbage patches, and cornfields."

Old Main still stands on its original foundation, but it is no longer the "lone sentinel" Carlson described. The community is a radically different place today. In the intervening decades the city has come to our neighborhood and wrapped its arms around us.

The onion fields and cabbage patches have been plowed under, streets and sidewalks have been put in place,

North Park University students in downtown Chicago.

businesses have been established, the river has been contained, bungalows and two-flats have been built, and most importantly, people from around the world have moved in.

Some 90 years after the school was established our institutional leaders wondered whether the college should remain at Foster and Kedzie. Free land was offered in the countryside. Should we sell our buildings and construct a new campus further away, distant from the challenges (and opportunities) of the city? The answer, in 1980, was a resounding, "No." And with that single word the future of North Park College was confirmed as an urban institution.

The phenomenal growth of Chicago during the decades since the founding of North Park has mirrored the growth of cities worldwide. At the beginning of the twenty-first century, specifically in 2008, a monumental turning point, a seismic social shift, took place: for the first time in history a majority of the world's people now lived in cities. And this trajectory will continue into the foreseeable future: as noted in the recent Discovery Channel documentary *Earth:2050*, demographers expect that **by 2050 over 80% of the world's population will be urban**.

What does this have to do with the future of North Park University? Everything.

In the twenty-first century, if we are to remain faithful to our mission—"to prepare students for lives of significance and service"—we must do so in, and for, and among the people of the city. Though our institutional forefathers did not envision this when they gathered in Moses Hill nearly 125 years ago, we must envision it today for the future of North Park. Faithfulness to our mission today, and faithfulness to our call from God, requires this.

(A footnote: 2050 seems like a long time away, likely beyond the course of my lifetime and perhaps yours. But know this: 2050 will be reached within the working lifetime of today's undergraduates. **The world of 2050 is the one for which we must educate and prepare today's students**.)

As president I often tell students at North Park that "Chicago is our classroom and all Chicagoans are our teachers." There is considerable truth to this, though today it still may be more rhetoric than reality. This must continue to change, just as the world's population has shifted in massive proportions. The educational reality at North Park must soon fully embrace and completely reflect our rhetoric.

Our faculty must continue to become experts in teaching through the city—in embracing the resources of the city for learning, in using the city as a classroom.

This will radically impact the education provided through North Park. Our students must be prepared to lead their professional and personal lives as city dwellers.

- The undergraduate general education curriculum should focus on our urban setting as the common integrative framework for learning.
- Graduates in education must be skilled at teaching in urban schools.
- Nursing graduates must know how to promote healthful living in the city.
- Business graduates must support the entrepreneurship of family-owned businesses on neighborhood street corners and the efforts of nonprofit service providers, just as they must be active in global financial and corporate enterprises headquartered in world-class cities.
- Science students must learn the ecology of the city, theatre students must embrace storefront venues, language students must speak their second language with residents in our neighborhoods, literature students must know the genres of the city, music students must perform the many musics of the world, political science students must become leaders in government and urban planning.
- Every graduate of our Seminary must be prepared for urban ministry.

This now is our institutional vocation, our divine calling, our holy obligation. In 2050, heeding the call of John the Baptist—to "prepare the way of the Lord"—will mean nothing less than this. He did so in the wilderness around the Jordan; our graduates must be prepared to do so in the city. The future of God's kingdom will be found in the city—because this is where most of the people of the world will be living.

North Park University is strategically located and positioned to be God's witness in and for the people of the cities of this nation and the world. In this place we (the people of God) can reach more people from more cultures than ever before possible in the history of the world. Our student body already reflects these many populations. The same must be true for our faculty, our staff and our leadership team.

What a grand inheritance this is which we have received from our institutional founders.

What a great responsibility now rests on our shoulders.

A CLOSING REFLECTION

I've written these words on the eve of the first Sunday after Christmas Day. Tomorrow Christians in churches across this land and around the world will pray, "Grant that this light, enkindled in our hearts, may shine forth in our lives."

I pray this for myself and I pray this for you. Yet I also pray this for North Park University—that the light of God's love will shine forth in the life of this school across Chicago and around the world, through families long a part of this school and in families now joining this community who bring to it new life through new cultures and traditions.

The word was made flesh and now dwells among us.

Blessings,

Lives of Significance and Service
NORTH PARK UNIVERSITY
CHICAGO