

# ADDRESSING RACISM WITH FRESH EYES, ATTENTIVE EARS AND CURIOUS SPIRITS

BY PRESIDENT GAYLE D. BEEBE, PH.D.

A year ago, we sat down and planned the magazine themes for the entire year, but the mood, climate and challenges facing the country have changed and we've needed to change with it. We originally intended to focus this issue on a variety of new developments at the college and highlight the fifth anniversary of the Lead Where You Stand leadership conference scheduled for June 3-5 before we had to cancel it. Then, as we moved into spring, we thought the lead story would describe the rise, threat and response to COVID-19 and how best to honor and recognize our graduates in the class of 2020. But even a global pandemic couldn't squash decades of frustration and anger with our struggle to overcome racism and make meaningful progress on the issues of race, equity and inclusion that erupted following the killing of George Floyd. These attitudes and events have galvanized global opinion in the public square.

The life and work of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., my favorite civil rights leader, have shaped my own life and thinking. Growing up in a Christian tradition that valued peaceful solutions of conflict, I considered Dr. King as an especially inspiring figure. Then, during an undergraduate church history class, the professor brought him to life in a way that electrified our imaginations and helped us see that he could only be understood in the context of his vocation as a pastor of a large African American church. Even in the midst of our current crisis, I find some of the most helpful, unifying voices coming from pastors of African American congregations. Recently, I listened to four different sermons from four different African American pastors. In every case, they called us to do the right thing for the right reason in a God-honoring way.

**Many of the issues engulfing the country touch the college. Here are just a few.**

**I.** First, how do we emulate great people of faith like Dr. King, who followed God and died for his beliefs? He once said that the goal of every thoughtful Christian is to integrate the message of Scripture with the contemporary events of society. How do we develop a structure of meaning to accomplish this goal? Leading thinkers who help us do that include Jaroslav Pelikan, whose landmark study, "Jesus Through the Centuries: His Place in the History of Culture," identifies and articulates the 18 enduring archetypes for Christ. Pelikan describes how Jesus's eternal nature has taken on time-bound form throughout the 2,000-year history of the church. Thirty-five years later, we're still working to understand and articulate what this means. Today, our culture and society stand at a critical inflection point. As we grieve the current events that have galvanized our country's anger, our attention must shift to issues of race as we realize that a fresh understanding and a different approach is necessary in every sphere of our society.

**II.** Then, at Westmont, we're trying to develop a greater capacity to listen by opening our hearts to the most aggrieved members of our society. We want to understand and empathize with those groups who have been left out and left behind. We want to be a community of learners that seeks to reconcile even

as we experience the rich impact of God's reconciling and transforming work on our own life. We're working to develop a capacity to see the wider hurt in our society and the role we've played in it. Here are at least seven different issues and challenges and how we're attempting to respond.

**1** **First, concerns with the image of Jesus as portrayed in the stained-glass window in the Nancy Voskuyl Memorial Prayer Chapel have prompted us to take a fresh approach to this sacred space as well as all spaces on campus.** The chapel was built to honor Nancy Voskuyl, who was 19 years old when she was tragically killed in a car accident while returning to campus after lunch in December 1959. She was the youngest daughter of Roger Voskuyl, then the president of Westmont. Professor Lisa DeBoer, who chairs our art department, has shared a wonderful history with me that reflects the original purpose and design of the chapel ([westmont.edu/nancy-voskuyl-chapel](http://westmont.edu/nancy-voskuyl-chapel)). My own academic discipline, philosophy of religion and historical theology, pays great attention to the design and use of great centers of worship, believing that church design and furnishings reflect our most dominant understanding of the purposes of God.

During the last few years, the chapel window has become a significant distraction to its primary purpose as a place for prayer. We've engaged in several conversations, including with the two Voskuyl daughters, Jane and Ruth, who have been incredibly understanding and supportive of our direction. We've continued to move forward, working to address some of the most significant concerns. Professor DeBoer, along with Professor Telford Work, who teaches theology—specifically, doctrine—are working with me and others from diverse cultural backgrounds to help us identify an approach that will broaden our understanding of the universal reach of Christ. We've also engaged outside religious architects and consultants authorized by the highest church authorities to assist us. Together, these and other voices are helping us craft a plan that will add a variety of images to the chapel to more fully educate us and represent the global life of the church and the various events that distill the life and impact of Jesus.

**2** **Second, we're committed to curricular innovations that tell a broader story and incorporate all parts of our society and culture into course offerings at Westmont.** Under the leadership of Provost Sargent, appropriate faculty committees have been meeting via Zoom and have approved a revitalized and repurposed ethnic studies minor. Several developments make this possible, including the ongoing hiring of people of color on the faculty who are expanding and broadening our curriculum. Across the spectrum, professors from all disciplines are thinking anew about what it means to approach their discipline with fresh eyes, attentive ears and curious spirits, anxious to understand and learn the full implications of these new realities.

One impressive example is the work of Professor John Blondell, chair of our Theater Arts Department. In thinking

through the canon of great plays and playwrights, he realized he had overlooked important works and voices from a variety of marginalized and underrepresented communities. As a result, he's incorporated important works from a newer canon into the college's repertory. This adjustment reflects his own awakening. John then goes on to identify great playwrights of the past and discusses how widening the circle to make room for important voices in the present will shape our Theater Arts program going forward.

**3 Third, we'll offer collegewide implicit bias training. We all carry subconscious prejudice toward individuals and groups different from our own, and we're mostly ignorant of our own implicit bias.** Drawing on the research and expertise of our own Professor Carmel Saad, a social psychologist and daughter of Egyptian immigrants who fled religious persecution, we intend to launch a multiyear effort to provide relevant and essential training on implicit bias, diversity, equity, inclusion and intercultural competence. A great scholar and teacher, Professor Saad has gained national recognition for her work, and she consults with a variety of organizations, including police departments. I first learned the meaning of "implicit bias" from Carmel, and I've appreciated the way she approaches the issue. She uses self-disclosure and self-deprecating examples, personal and corporate experiences and evidence-based studies to illustrate her points and educate our students. Now it's time for the whole college community to learn. The skill she brings to the classroom will increase our understanding and awareness as we work together to make Westmont an even more vibrant and just community.

**4 Fourth, I'm particularly encouraged that we've been able to respond to a variety of challenges because we're committed to hiring a diverse faculty.** During my 14 years at Westmont, we've brought in 58 new professors: 35 women, 23 men and 17 people of color—and 85 percent of them have stayed. A variety of people get involved in hiring faculty, including myself, the provost who leads the search, the relevant department chairs and appropriate additional members of each search committee. Over the years, we've also employed 13 professors who come from countries other than the United States. Our commitment to diversity and to excellence strengthens our academic program.

**5 Fifth, we'll amplify our focus on diversity, global engagement and intercultural competency in recruiting students. This effort, supported by both a committee of the faculty as well as a committee of the board, has benefitted from our priority on raising money for student scholarships.** In the past 14 years, the diversity of the student body has increased from 30 percent to more than 45 percent. None of this happens instantly. All of it occurs over time, and we never solve a problem in just a year. We often overestimate what we can get done in one year and underestimate what we can accomplish in 10. We recognize we still have a lot to do, but we also have the commitments and the priorities in place to get this work done.

**6 Sixth, we're expanding resources available collegewide. Beginning this fall, we'll strengthen staff working with intercultural programs by adding key advisers who can assist us.** Carol Houston, an African American pastor who serves on our board of trustees, will come to campus weekly to work on issues of diversity, global engagement and inter-

cultural competence. With her guidance, we'll improve our capacity for conversations that matter on race, equity and inclusion. We'll also ask bridge-building alums from previous classes to get involved with student clubs on campus to provide intergenerational perspective and leadership.

**7 In addition, we plan to work with Arrabon, an organization headed by David Bailey, an African American.** He advises a variety of organizations as they develop a capacity for cultural understanding and work across racial boundaries, helping them learn how to engage in ways that build trust and promote healing and draw on a biblical perspective. We're grateful David is available and look forward to beginning this important work.

**III.** Finally, all of this is occurring in the midst of our response to COVID-19, our preparation to repopulate campus in time for the start of school at the end of August, and our desire to honor and celebrate the class of 2020 later this fall. We've undertaken a major planning effort. More than 150 faculty and staff are serving on 50 different committees and subcommittees covering everything from testing, tracing and isolating to socially distanced formats and locations for classes to protocols for the residence halls. COVID-19 represents just the latest in a long string of challenges for our beloved college. We hope to gather as a campus community during Homecoming weekend, October 16-18, to host a delayed Commencement.

We look back on a long and enduring history of facing all manner of challenges, both natural and human. As we work to prepare for and respond to our country's historic civil unrest and a global pandemic, we do so believing that God will remain faithful. Just as he has led Westmont in every previous generation, God will renew us again with his guidance and mercy.



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