ADDRESSING RACISM WITH FRESH EYES, ATTENTIVE EARS AND CURIOUS SPIRITS IN THE MIDST OF COVID-19

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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 16th anniversary of the Lead 2025 Roundtable Conference scheduled for June 3-5 before we had to cancel it. Then, as we moved into spring, we thought we’d focus more on the social and cultural landscape that 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 have been guided by the lessons I learned from Dr. King as an 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, inspiring and meaningful teaching 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 persons of faith like Dr. King, who followed God and died for his beliefs? He 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' eternal nature has taken on time-bound form throughout the ages. Thirty-five years later, we're still working to understand and articulate what this means. Today, our culture and society stand at a critical inflexion point. As we give the current events that have galvanized our country's anger, our attention must shift to issues of race as we realize that the leadership and a different approach is necessary in every sphere of our society.

II.

Then, at Westminster, 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. We're reconciling and transforming work to develop a capacity to see the wider hurt in our society and the role we serve to play in it. Here are at least four different issues and challenges and how we’re attempting to respond.

First, concerns with the image of Jesus as portrayed in the stained-glass window in the Nancy Voskuy Memorial Prayer Chapel have prompted us to take a fresh look at the visual representation as we well as all spaces on campus. The chapel was built to honor Nancy Voskuy, 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 Voskuy, then the president of Westminster. Professor Lisa Dellore, 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-voskuy-chapel). She underscores the 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 Voskuy daughters, June and Ruth, who have been incredibly understanding and supportive of our having to make a change. As we proceed, working to address some of the most significant concerns, Professor Dellore, along with Professor Todd 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.

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 Westminster. Under the leadership of Provost Sandra Raine, a series of faculty committees have been meeting via Zoom and have approved a revitalized and revamped ethnic studies minor. Several developments make this possible, including the ongoing hiring of persons of color on the faculty who are expanding and broadening our curriculum. Across the spectrum, professors from all disciplines are thinking about how it means to approach their discipline with fresh eyes, attentive ears and curious spirits, and to understand and learn the full implications of these new realities.

Our impressive example is the work of Professor John Blondell, chair of our Theatre Arts Department. In thinking through the capacity 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 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 playweights of the past and discusses how widening the circle to make room for important voices in the present will shape our Theatre Arts program going forward.

Third, we’ll offer college-wide implicit bias training. We carry unconscious prejudice toward individuals and groups different from our own, and we’re mostly ignorant of our own implicit biases. 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 multi-year, comprehensive training that includes implicit 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 open our academic understanding and awareness as we work to make Westminster an even more vibrant and just community.

Fourth, I’m particularly encouraged that we’ve been able to respond to a variety of challenges because we’ve committed to thinking ahead. For example, during my 14 years from Westmont, I’ve brought in 38 new professors: 25 women, 23 men and 17 persons 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.

Fifth, we’ll amplify our focus on diversity, global engagement and intercultural competence in recruiting students. This effort, supported by a Strategic Plan initiative of the faculty as well as a commitment of the board, has benefited 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.

Sixth, we’re expanding resources available college-wide. Beginning this fall, we’ll strengthen staff working with intercultural programs by adding key advisers who can assist us. Carol Houston, an African American educator on our board of trustees, will come to campus weekly to work on issues of diversity, global engagement and intercultural 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 support for these efforts.

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.

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 July, and celebration of 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 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 graduating class. 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 Westminster in every previous generation, God will renew us again with his guidance and mercy.