

Foreword

Perhaps more so than at any previous time, Christian colleges are today focusing anew on their identities. Undoubtedly this self-examination is, in part, a defensive action to guard against the “slippery slope” towards secularism. Aware of the many colleges that gradually abandoned their Christian identities, despite ongoing nominal denominational relationships, colleges determined to remain Christian are reinforcing their definitive Christian commitments.

Defensive posturing is not the only nor the primary reason for new mission statements. More importantly, Christian liberal arts colleges are coming of age. They are achieving increasing excellence and visibility. They are becoming a significant force in American higher education. The renewed identity statements speak the language of confidence and optimism. Their tone suggests that a new era for the Christian college seems just before us.

Yet the questions remains for each college to answer: what definitional language is appropriate to us? An incarnational faith, Christianity is always communicated in specific people, words, and communities. Christianity is never only an abstracted set of beliefs. It is always the Word becoming flesh. Hence, Christianity is communicated through many different denominational, inter/non/paradenominational, and theological languages. Therefore “Christian” – and even “Evangelical” – embraces a great variety of connotations depending on the speaker and the hearer. Hence each college will carefully craft its unique Christian identity appropriate to its particular sense of mission.

In defining its identity each Christian college must address two frequently competing agendas. The one is essentially conservative, that is of maintaining and communicating the particular heritage of the college. Colleges are stewards of the past, they preserve both the

shame and the glory of the past to inform the present and the future. Thus they are guardians of specificity, of the particularities of faithfulness which God has used and blessed. The second is more expansive, that is of including and embracing a variety of people and perspectives. Most Christian colleges move significantly beyond the confines of their denominational heritage. This is almost always a constructive and creative dynamic. It enriches the specific with the ecumenical. Balancing these two agendas is almost always a challenging imperative.

The Fresno Pacific College Idea is an unusually rich articulation of a Christian college identity. The 1995 version builds on a 1982 revision of the 1966 original. The original formulation influenced by the neo-Evangelicalism and neo-Anabaptism of the day, sought to move beyond a fundamentalist past to combine the best of the Mennonite Brethren heritage with the best of liberal arts education. The product of visionary young professors recruited by President Wiebe, the Idea evidenced a creative and bold vision, perhaps unmatched in its detail and breadth by any other Mennonite college.

The original Idea sought to carefully balance Mennonite Brethren specificity with evangelical ecumenicity. Yet it did not adequately address professional and graduate studies. And as increasing numbers of non-traditionally Mennonite Brethren students, faculty and administrators joined the Fresno Pacific community, the balance in the original some believed over-emphasized Mennonite specificity. Interestingly, Mennonite Brethren pastors encouraged the College to de-emphasize the tradition in favor of a more generic Evangelicalism. They were the liberalizers while faculty were the conservatives.

The 1995 Idea is a rebalancing and rearticulation of the original. While retaining most of the original essence, it speaks in languages more readily heard and understood today. It communicates the Fresno Pacific College identity to an increasingly pluralistic community. The neo-Anabaptism so evident in the original is not lost but its prophetic vision of the faithful church and the coming Kingdom is reformulated for a new generation and a new era. It is a statement of confidence and optimism for the future.

The Pacific College Idea will surely continue to serve Fresno Pacific College very well as it is increasingly recognized to be a leading Christian college on the West Coast. The Idea can also serve as a very helpful model for every other Christian college defining its own unique identity. The evolution of the Idea chronicled in the following pages will certainly prove instructive to colleges seeking

to be faithful to their past and their present as they anticipate the future. This volume on Christian college identity is most timely and will be warmly welcomed as Christian colleges redefine their mission for these challenging and exciting days.

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