

The Fresno Pacific Idea: Principles of Transformation

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I have a unique experience with the Fresno Pacific University Idea statement. I encountered the first version of the Idea as a student from 1971-1975, returned to the university as a professor fifteen years later (1990) when the second iteration of the Idea was in place, then in 1995 chaired a committee of four that drafted our present statement, a third rendition of the Idea.

The first form of the Idea, ratified by the college's Board of Trustees in 1966, was intentionally revolutionary from an Anabaptist Christian perspective. It was developed soon after the college received accreditation as a 4-year senior liberal arts institution. President Arthur Wiebe (1960-1975) had hired many young scholars who held Anabaptist Mennonite orientations. These faculty members, as well as Pacific's administrators, were interested in creating a college that was progressive and forward looking without losing connection to Mennonite Brethren theological foundations.

As Dalton Reimer put it, an Idea "reveals the center of an institutions' identity, reason for existence, core values, view of communal order, and relationship to the world...an Idea is less a statement of present reality than a vision of the ideal. As such it serves as a guide for the future, providing an anchor against aimless drift, a hedge against the fads of the moment."¹ The word "Idea" was chosen to signify 'a vision for a human activity.'" It was first introduced in the academic arena by John Henry Newman in the 19th century and was used by Elton Trueblood and Arthur F. Holmes in the 20th.

The initial Idea had seven sections, incorporating key aspects of the college's foundational concerns: Pacific College was thus:

1. a Christian college
2. a community
3. a liberal arts college
4. an experimental college
5. an Anabaptist-Mennonite college

6. a non-sectarian college

7. a prophetic college

I was a student at Pacific College during the first Idea's heyday. In the early 1970s there was a sense that something very important was happening at Pacific, that all of us – students, faculty, staff and administrators -- were engaged in important, transformative thinking and being, doing things inside and outside of class that would make a difference in our personal lives and by extension to society at large.

On campus -- in classes, and in student, faculty and administrative conversations -- there was a spirit of critique and challenge from an unapologetically Anabaptist and prophetic perspective. There was also significant experimentation with the academic curriculum. The 1973 Winter Term, for example, was divided into three 3 ½-week sections. I read the writings of William Shakespeare (with Wilfred Martens) and studied social conflict and intercultural relations with Paul Toews and A.J. Klassen. As part of the latter class, we spent a weekend in a West Fresno church, where we were introduced to the reality of racism. In San Francisco, we met with social activists, including folk singer, Joan Baez. I also studied Medieval Europe with Peter Klassen.

In fall 1974, when a few of us expressed interest in studying Marxism, we were accommodated by Paul Toews, Delbert Wiens, Richard Wiebe and others. They designed a special 3-unit seminar that included planned conversations in different residences and cafés (where we once encountered a waitress who thought that we were talking about the Marx Brothers comedians).

Even more important there was a strong sense of community on campus. I recall being in the homes of at least seven faculty members, sometimes formally; other times informally. Community even manifested itself in an "XY" Club that was organized ostensibly to support Pacific's men's basketball team but that brought together virtually all sections of the university campus community --and it also caused some trouble.²

In 1982, seven years after graduation, the Pacific College Idea was significantly revised with impetus from board members who believed that the 1966 rendition of the Idea was either too parochial or too experimental. Moving to "broaden" its constituent base, as Paul Toews wrote, "The 1982 revision di-

minated the distinctive elements and pushed the college toward becoming a more generic evangelical college.” It is important to note that faculty members from Anabaptist backgrounds were deeply involved in the process of rewriting and approving this new rendition of the Idea, even though not all of them fully supported what was happening. The new Idea preserved the first three (1966 rendition) sections: “Christian,” “liberal arts” and “community,” and dropped the rest.

When I returned to “Fresno Pacific College” in 1990, the institution was a very different place than it had been fifteen years earlier. The community was much larger. It included graduate as well as undergraduate students and a school of professional study. A much smaller percentage of students now lived on campus and the college was more diverse culturally and in terms of age and religious affiliation. These changes were seen in the faculty, staff and administration as well.

But even in this larger, more diverse place with its broadened sense of outreach, I continued to be energized by what remained in the Idea. The various segments of the college continued to place a unique emphasis, for example, on community and its relationship to faith and the liberal arts.

I was also propelled by aspects of the first form of the Idea that had been dropped from the 2nd -- for example, the importance of being prophetic and experimental. Although not found in the 1982 Idea these principles were foundational for many faculty members and administrators. I recall early meetings with Arthur Wiebe and Silas Bartsch, both of whom advised me to think creatively and outside traditional parameters when designing courses of study.

In the early 1990s, Fresno Pacific continued to have a special commitment to the idea of community. There was a strong sense of collegiality and collaborative faculty/administrative decision-making. As a faculty representative I served on the President’s Cabinet and was a Board representative during most of the period 1993-1998. Fresno Pacific’s unique salary schedule was highly compressed, with no rank or status. Every regular faculty member was a “professor.” Faculty members continued to use first names with students.

By the mid-1990s, however, many faculty members thought that it was time to revisit the Idea. As Paul Toews notes “Unlike the 1982 revision, the impetus for which came from the Board of Trustees, this one came from internal pressures.”³ And while some administrators were initially resistant, leadership

agreed to the establishment of an ad hoc committee whose responsibility was to review the Idea and make recommendations for change if needed.

The Idea committee as established was unusual in its representation. It included two board members (Patrick Evans and Winnie Bartel), one administrator (Graduate School Dean, John Yoder) and one faculty member (myself). Interestingly, neither John Yoder or I (at the time) had traditional undergraduate school responsibilities. We were also both relatively new employees. When the committee was formed in Fall 1993, I was beginning my 4th year at the college; Yoder, his 3rd.

From the outset, those of us on the committee were committed to a collegial process of discernment. We shared personal concerns and those expressed by colleagues and decided early on that the Idea needed to be rewritten. John Yoder and I spent much time testing ideas and wording and creating drafts that were shared with committee members. Yoder spent significant time with Dalton Reimer and Bob Enns (who played roles in earlier Idea creations) trying to get a historical sense of the 1966 and 1982 renditions.

Through a process of consensus, a committee-supported draft was eventually circulated for discussion and response from different faculty constituencies, academic divisions, administrative committees and board members. There was constant revision and ultimately a new Idea statement was submitted to the faculty and Board of Directors for approval in 1995.

Four issues were particularly important to members of the Idea committee: First, we continued to emphasize the foundational importance of the liberal arts in all subject fields, including the more specialized graduate level programs. Second, we reintroduced the word “Anabaptist” to the document to confirm the relationship between the college and the “believer’s church” historical tradition. Third, we resurrected the 1966 Idea section that dealt with the importance of being prophetic. Fourth, we gave greater attention to diversity in its different forms – religious, cultural, ethnic, age; graduate and undergraduate students. This was missed in earlier forms of the Idea. As Paul Toews put it, “More than previous versions of the Idea, it offered an understanding of Christian faith as transcending and including cultural, racial, ethnic and ideological partialities. All have room in a community seeking to establish a foretaste of the inclusiveness of the Kingdom of God.”⁴

Although the 1995 Idea went through many drafts, Yoder and I recall little if any disagreement with board members on the committee with reference to any of the changes, or any of the language included in the revision. I recall Patrick Evans' strong commitment to being "prophetic," Winnie Bartel's concern with "diversity." And in the end, the draft, after undergoing many revisions, was accepted almost unanimously – with many of the same people who had accepted the 1st and 2nd versions now voting for the 3rd version -- at a meeting of the Faculty Session at a conference room at the Piccadilly Inn. This meeting included administrators, who, in those days, were full members of the assembly. This recommendation was later ratified by the board of directors.⁵

The FPU Idea is a unique statement for a Christian university. We embrace the Christian faith ("All aspects of reality are understood to be parts of a larger whole. There is no contradiction then between the truth of revelation, of scholarly investigation and of action"⁶). We are also a "community of learners": we "recognize the importance of the interpersonal dimension of the learning process.....the result of interaction between persons, ideas, and experiences... with knowledge and understanding taking place through dialogue and discourse between people who have different experiences and perspectives."⁷ And we are also prophetic, serving "the church and society by engaging in dialogue with and critique of contemporary culture and practice."⁸

NOTES

- ¹ Dalton Reimer, "The Origins of the Fresno Pacific College Idea," Paul Toews, ed., *Mennonite Idealism and Higher Education*, 25.
- ² Gerald Ediger, "Me and Ed and 50 Others," 1973, Paul Toews Papers (Fresno Pacific University documents series). Mennonite Library & Archives, Fresno, Ca.
- ³ Paul Toews, 153.
- ⁴ Paul Toews, "Epilogue" in Paul Toews, ed., *Mennonite Idealism and Higher Education: The Story of the Fresno Pacific College Idea* (Fresno: Center for MB Studies, 1995), 153.
- ⁵ Copies of the three renditions of the Idea statement are included in the Appendix.
- ⁶ Paul Toews, 162.
- ⁷ Paul Toews, 163.
- ⁸ Paul Toews, 163.

