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Where Our Roots Run Deep
Faculty-Staff Kickoff
Jon R. Wallace, DBA, president
August 29, 2002

This year was the 28th consecutive year of the student leadership program, "Walkabout." I was privileged to go on my 25th Walkabout, and as with past forays into the wilderness with students, I found my time deeply satisfying. One of the most significant parts of our 10-day journey together is the act of telling our story around the campfire and the gentle prodding that comes from insightful questions. This year a young woman named Emily Reed gained the reputation in our group as someone who asked focused and perceptive questions during these campfire interviews.

One of the questions she asked that became a favorite and then was asked of each of us was, "If you could be present at any point in history, when would it be?" I think the number one answer given was the Resurrection. But others included Creation, the parting of the Red Sea, a day with the Apostle Paul, and any one of the many times Jesus healed. Later in our discussion, we added a second historical moment within the last 200-300 years. Many of these responses included events during the founding of our country, and historical moments of decision in the 1940s during the Second World War.

Think about that question for a minute: If you could choose to be present for a historical moment from biblical times and one within the last 300 years, what two moments would you choose? What two events would allow you to capture insight, discernment, vision, or faith that you could pull forward into the present? And if you could — if you really could — be present at the tomb on Easter morning, or walk across the Red Sea; if you could stand beside the father of the possessed child and see Christ deliver him from his unbelief; if you could sit at the signing of the Declaration of Independence or across the table from Eisenhower when the decision to launch D-Day was made, or even as one of our group members requested, be present when your mother and father were courting, what moment would you choose?

For me, it would certainly be Easter morning. I can think of no other event more defining in human history than that moment when Christ defeats the last great curse — death. And I am pretty clear on the second moment as well. I would like to be a fly on the wall in Philena Hadley's living room when she and Mary Hill and several others first envisioned the Training School for Christian Workers. You see, all of us tonight and the nearly 7,000 enrolled

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students of this [God First](#) university, are directly tied to that historical moment. I wonder if they had any inkling what God was beginning through them? I wonder if they could have envisioned the number of us present tonight preparing for our 103rd year. With that moment from 1899 in mind, let me talk a little bit about events and issues that I believe form the context of this historical moment.

Last week I had a conversation with David Weeks, Ph.D., dean of the [College of Liberal Arts and Sciences](#), about the historical circumstance in which we live today. After asking him those same two questions that were asked in my Walkabout group, I queried him a bit to bring definition to the era that our university, our nation, and our world is currently experiencing. The descriptive word he landed on was “transition.” From his perspective, there is uncertainty about the next great historical marker. Will it be the rise of China, given its size and influence? Or perhaps we will be defined if the next great world conflict is geo-religious instead of geo-political. Will the next historical marker be environmental? Is there an irreparable manmade tear in the delicate balance of Creation? Whatever is on the horizon, within our sights or just beyond, the fact is that our current historical reality as a community of disciples and scholars continues to be impacted by the historic and unprecedented speed with which change is occurring, and the nearly unprecedented scope and size of this change.



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Most of you in this room know exactly what I am talking about in regard to change because the APU community has been living at what feels like the epicenter of change. As we have tried to responsibly embrace unanticipated growth, strategic initiatives, and new vision, many of us have at times felt like we are barely keeping up. Let me take this moment to personally thank each of you in this room for your dedication to the God First mission of this university and the way in which you have all responded to change with God-honoring excellence. I really do want you to hear me on this — the sacrificial service and commitment by this faculty and staff remains one of the core motivators for this president and our Board of Trustees. We are deeply thankful for the many ways you have responded to meet the challenge, solve the problem and advance the mission of the university. Thank you, thank you, thank you.

So, what do I see for this year? Let's begin with the verse that is on your table.

Blessed are those who trust in the Lord
and have made the Lord their hope and confidence.
They are like trees planted along the riverbank,
with roots that reach deep into the water.
Such trees are not bothered by the heat
or worried by long months of drought.
Their leaves stay green, and they go right on
producing delicious fruit.
(Jeremiah 17:7-8)

I used this verse in my inaugural and last year at this same Kickoff dinner. As a community, we will stay with this verse for some time. I believe the promise and the metaphor strike directly at the heart of who God has called us to be. Tonight I want to highlight four areas where I believe our roots need to reach deep as we witness first-hand the way God unpacks the next chapter in our history.

Last year I asked for this community to focus on several strategic initiatives. I want to thank you for the many efforts you made as administrators, deans, directors, department chair, faculty, and staff with those initiatives. One of the lessons that I have learned as a new president is the importance of staying on task and clearly within mission. This year I am asking each of

you to commit with me to these four emphases: advance diversity, grow a culture of scholarship, embrace God-honoring excellence, and live out truthful and effective communication. These four, taken from the great start we made last year, will continue to frame my leadership and the direction of this university.

Across recent years, significant steps have been made within the APU community to advance God-honoring diversity. In the last five years, the number of ethnic faculty has increased from 10 percent to 16 percent. When both undergraduate and graduate student enrollments are combined, more than 25 percent of our nearly 7,000 students come from minority populations. I am particularly pleased that the search committee for the special assistant for [university diversity](#) has worked through a significant pool of applicants and have identified and interviewed this week, our two final candidates. I expect an announcement to be made soon regarding the selection for this very important position.

Recently the university, working with the consulting firm, Scannell and Kurz, reviewed our current recruitment and financial aid policies in light of our long-term goals, including this goal of healthy diversity within our student body. One of the most significant findings by Scannell and Kurz was the fact that our current undergraduate demographic recruitment profile excludes large portions of the Southern California evangelical minority population. This is particularly important when you consider that the predicted increase in new students that form the 2002-10 West Coast tidal wave will be primarily students of color. The President's Cabinet and Academic Cabinet, after reviewing this study, have agreed that the demographic footprint of our recruitment effort must be expanded. This responsibility has fallen primarily to Deana Porterfield, associate vice president for enrollment. Working with our administration, academic deans, and the admissions committee, Deana will begin to craft an enrollment management plan that opens the door for these minority populations. Increases in the number of students from minority populations is not enough to move us as a university to where we need to be with diversity — we must also increase the number of multicultural faculty and staff. And, we must specifically target retention programs and support services for the unique needs of these student populations if we are to reach this goal of a richly diverse university community.

While we are on this topic, let me just comment briefly about enrollment growth. As most of you know, the growth in our undergraduate population has primarily come through a significant increase in student retention. As a matter of fact, the data shows that our freshman to sophomore retention rate has risen over the last five years to just under 80 percent, and our six-year graduation rate now stands at 62 percent, up from 48 percent just a few years ago. I do not foresee undergraduate enrollment continuing to rise at this pace. I believe we are at the point where gains from retention will level out and the university's undergraduate FTE will increase annually much closer to the 75 new students per year identified in our Strategic Plan.

In addition to advancing diversity, we must also continue to grow a culture of scholarship. Last year the provost and the dean of the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences chaired a task force composed of both graduate and undergraduate faculty. The purpose of this task force was to form a draft statement that would begin the process of defining what scholarship means at Azusa Pacific University. I want to thank David Weeks, Ph.D., Pat Anderson, Ph.D., and the seven faculty members who served for their diligence in pushing through with this draft statement. This year Michael Whyte, Ph.D., and I will host a series of occasional lunches to have conversation with any faculty member who would like to comment on this draft. Next spring I will forward these comments to the faculty senate for their input and then to the Board of Trustees for their approval.

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One of the most important applications of scholarship in the university community is that it informs our teaching. This kind of scholarship that keeps us current, shapes our thinking, and ultimately impacts the student in the classroom is the same kind of scholarship that I have asked the Board of Trustees to undertake. This year our board will engage in discussion and study that will bring clarity to the meaning of evangelical as it is used in our university mission statement. In addition, I have asked the board to thoughtfully begin to study the issue of human sexuality. In light of biblical teaching, sound theology, and a commitment to grace-filled practice, our board will begin to lead us to a Christ-centered understanding. I have spoken here of a kind of scholarship that informs the teaching of our faculty and the leadership of our board. I also want to speak to the many staff that are here this evening. Our commitment must be to new learning — scholarship if you will, that informs our service. We must model with the faculty and the board a commitment to lifelong learning. Every staff person fills a position and performs a service that can be raised to a higher standard of excellence by active involvement in personal and professional growth. I challenge you this year to involve yourself in any of the many opportunities available to you through the Human Resources office.

Advance diversity, build a culture of scholarship, and embrace God-honoring excellence. Many of you have heard me previously say that “excellence honors God.” I do believe with all my heart that APU must continue to measure all of who we are and all of who we believe God is calling us to be against the highest standards of excellence. With this in mind, the Board of Trustees last spring began a discussion to identify the core values of the university. A full day was given at the board retreat and significant progress was made. And now we need to take the next step as a university community, which is to address the effectiveness of our current mission statement. I am taking the leadership role with John Reynolds’ assistance, to initiate a university-wide discussion that will look at our mission statement, our core values, and an emerging vision for the 21st century. A task force consisting of representatives from the Board, staff, and faculty will lead this course of action. Please be in prayer as we move ahead in this important process.

When I think about excellence at APU, one of the most important standards of excellence that primarily lies with administrators, deans, department chair, and supervisors, is the process of hiring new employees. As you may



know, all full-time faculty have a final interview with both the provost and the president, and all full-time staff at the director's level and above are interviewed by a member of the President's Cabinet. While it is true that I ask several general questions related to a faculty member's area of study and classroom methodology, and I ask staff questions about their span of care and scope of responsibilities, I usually expect that these questions will have been covered before they make it to the final interview. Therefore, much of the interview is clearly and precisely focused on that faculty or staff person's relationship with God, their faith, their discipleship, and their scholarship. As many of you in this room can attest, I ask every new employee about their willingness to enter into dialogue with students about their journey toward Christ. I usually ask them this specific question: "If a student were to approach you after class or during work with a question about how to accept Jesus as Savior, how would you respond to that student, and how would you support their spiritual journey?" I expect that those of you involved in the interview process will ask similar faith questions. Commitment to God-honoring excellence must include a commitment by all of us in this room to our students' spiritual journey and to our own journey of growth and obedience. We must as a faculty and staff community recognize the tremendous responsibility placed in our hands by God for the spiritual journey of all of our students, both traditional undergraduate, and our large and growing adult-student population.

Another important step in moving the university strongly behind commitments that we have made to raise the bar of excellence is the university's ability to accurately and adequately align financial resources. One of the stumbling blocks to this has been the fact that our strategic plan runs out five or six years into the future, but our budget process barely extends 12-14 months. This year, Joan Singleton, our CFO, has committed to move the university into a multiple-year budget process. Many of you in this room are the budget officers for your department or school, and your enthusiastic support will be necessary in helping the university embrace this standard of excellence.

Advance diversity, build a culture of scholarship, embrace God-honoring excellence — and finally, live out truthful and effective communication. Again, let me say that much progress was made in raising the bar of effective communication in our community this last year. I want to thank Dave McIntire, Ed.D., the faculty moderator, David Borgeson, the out-going Staff Council chair, and all of you who served on standing committees, task forces, councils, and special project teams, for your commitment to full disclosure and effective communication. This year the IMT department, in an effort to build on this goal of better communication, has established a new webpage entitled, "APU Talk." This is simply a new iteration of the good old suggestion box. Tomorrow morning, John Reynolds will send an APU everyone with the link and a general invitation to all of our faculty and staff community to share any concern, comment, or encouragement. This is an important piece as we embrace the value of adult-to-adult conversation within this community.

For just a moment, I want us to think about communication outside the APU community. In the coming weeks and months, we will have several opportunities to engage in a process of listening to our Azusa neighbors as we dialogue over the university master plan. Last year, I was intentional about being in the Azusa community one or two times a week, meeting our neighbors, talking with local business people, trying to catch a sense of who they are and who they perceive us to be. As we listen to the heartbeat of our neighborhoods, we may even find a strong connection to the call of God on our life. This year in my Walkabout group, I met one such student. Rebecca Ylvisaker and Ben Gaines are graduating seniors, engaged to be married next June. Rebecca and Ben listened to the call of God on their hearts, and this last year reached out to the more than 50 children living in the Lime Street neighborhood, just behind Arby's, in what is most certainly, one of the most needy neighborhoods in the city. Ben and Rebecca earned the right to represent the love of Christ by sponsoring Saturday soccer games. Although Rebecca is from Bellevue, Washington, and Ben is from Detroit, Michigan, their June wedding will take place here in Southern California, so the children and families of this community can share in their special day. They have even tentatively identified that same Lime Street neighborhood as the place they would like to begin their married life. Living out truthful and effective communication can have this same kind of powerful effect, both

inside the APU community and outside the APU community. Please join me in thanking Ben and Rebecca who are here tonight.

Okay. I need to bring closure, but I have not yet told you about Alice Watkins, Ph.D., our dean emeritus, and her journey with Azusa Unified School District. I have not unpacked how thrilled I am for the more than \$26 million of construction that is currently underway on the student post office, the new residence hall, and the Duke Academic Complex. I did not get a chance to say, “Yeah God,” for the U.S. News and World Report recognition that came last year, the approval of our doctorate in physical therapy, and the many accreditations that came for several of our departments. What I do want to take time to do, however, is revisit one more time this historical tree planted by God, whose roots run deep.

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The streets of North American cities were once lined with American elms, a beautiful, fast-growing tree with abundant shade. Wood from these trees taken from the North American forests, were used for furniture, flooring, construction, and veneer. Early in the 1930s, the Dutch elm disease began to devastate forests in the northeast, and by 1977, had moved across the country and killed or infected nearly all of these great North American trees. For more than four decades scientists at many leading American universities worked to find a defense for this disease. Failure followed failure, and for many years any kind of relief seemed out of reach. At some point botanists discovered a few disease-tolerant trees. After conducting a nationwide search, it was estimated that these disease-tolerant trees are so rare that only one in 100,000 exist. From these disease-tolerant trees, the U.S. National Arboretum was able to breed a new disease-resistant American elm. Currently, there exists a cooperative project between the USDA forest service and the National Arboretum to reintroduce these trees in North America.

By God's grace, that is what we are. That tree in Jeremiah 17:7-8 — the one with "roots that reach deep" is a disease-tolerant tree. We are called by God to be resistant and stand against the powers of sin in a lost and dying world. The fruit that we are called to produce in the faculty and staff and students who move us to the core of our mission, are people with a Christian worldview. After moving through the APU [God First](#) experience, our alumni are planted in vast regions around Southern California, this great nation, and even around the world. It may in fact be that there has never been a more important time in history for a disease-resistant, Christ-centered, God First university to exist in the heart of Southern California than today.

You will be as thrilled as I am to learn that something historical is happening at Azusa Pacific University. You may remember that on our annual Day of Prayer, I asked all of the staff and faculty in attendance to pray specifically for students, who this year, would cross the line of faith and accept Jesus Christ into their lives. Several weeks ago when our football team returned for two-a-day training, approximately 35 players began meeting nightly after practice, praying for God to move in great ways among their team this season. Last Wednesday night, following two nights of Bible studies, 10 players responded to an opportunity, stood, and made first-time commitments, accepting Christ into their lives. That is historic.



During the summer months, 200-300 students have continued to meet for Wednesday night chapels. Over the summer, these students from the East San Gabriel Valley area, meeting in Munson Chapel, were privileged to see about 18 young adults cross the line of faith to follow Christ. That is historic.

The seniors on our men's soccer team have challenged each other to lead the remaining 20 percent of non-believers on their team to Christ before the season ends. Chris Brown, our campus pastor, recently met with more than 150 of our student Resident Advisors and Alpha Leaders. During this time, these student leaders made a commitment to let go of the title of their position and instead define their student involvement as ministries. That is historic.

On your tables tonight is a glass vase with small palm trees with their roots clearly visible and immersed in water. We want you to have these to take home because we want you to have a clear picture of what it means to live in a Christ-centered community, with a commitment for our roots to run deep. You will walk out of these doors tonight holding in your hand a picture of the historical challenge we face today, living in a world changing at the speed of light. You see — those small palm trees will die if their roots are left immersed in water. Should you want to extend the life of those trees, you have to do something about it. In essence, pull that tree out of the water and plant it in well-drained soil, or it will die.

We cannot dodge the reality and need of life-giving change. But as a Christ-centered university, we must never let go of our core purpose, our reason for existence. Around the [Cornerstones](#) of Christ, Scholarship, Community, and Service, we are called by God to bear the fruit of disease-resistant disciples and scholar — equipped and planted by God to change the world.

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