



## **Becoming a People of Promise**

State of the University Address

Philip W. Eaton, President, September 19, 2007

It is so great to see you all once again. I want to thank Stephen Newby and Pastor Abbott and all the participants for the worship service this morning. What a wonderful way to begin our academic year.

Speaking of Stephen, let me remind you all that we begin a new day for our chapel program next Tuesday. Over the last couple of years, we have been quite intensely discussing changes that need to take place for our chapel program and our University Ministries programs. How can we gather and worship more effectively in Christian community? That was the question I brought before the community last fall at this time—and we have made enormous progress.

Stephen took over in July, and now with the whole team in University Ministries, they are announcing a new day—with all kinds of changes and new energy for our chapel program. In addition to this new spirit, through the fall, Professor Rob Wall will be speaking three times, Earl Palmer will be here, Eric Hanson will be guiding us through the music of the Wesleys, Jurgen Moltmann will be here, and I will be opening the series next Tuesday. So, I encourage you to buckle up for the new ride ahead.

It is always a powerful feeling to gather in this room, with all of the players of this great university—our trustees, faculty and staff, our student leaders—as we commit ourselves once again to the compelling ideas and the rewarding work of Seattle Pacific University. I love the energy and eagerness I feel as we begin another year.

And this is always a time to say thank you. Maybe it is most about saying thank you, because it is the work and the energy and the commitments of the people in this room that will get the job done throughout the year. There is so much happening among you all—I wish I had the time to lift up even more of what's going on.

Thank you all for your work. Thank you for the gifts you bring to the table. Thank you for your various roles and for your contributions to the life and work of this great university.

Tomorrow night I will speak to 721 new freshman students, our largest freshman class ever. There is such good news in these enrollment numbers. This is the largest applicant pool we have ever had—an indicator of our demand. Balancing all of this out is the strongest four-year graduation rate in our history—which keeps the overall enrollment number manageable. And get this: close to 20% of this incoming class is composed of ethnic minority students. This is up from 9% in 2001 and it indicates huge momentum for our work with reconciliation.

All of this, by the way, comes directly out of the clear, strategic goals of our Blueprint. The Blueprint is working. Our people are working on clear strategies. These numbers signal the amazing success and accomplishments of so many people.

I understand there will be some 1,600 students and family members gathering tomorrow night for this new beginning in their lives. I love their energy and excitement. I was telling Stephen Newby on Saturday night at the Student Leadership Conference that this is a very precious thing our students bring to us, this anticipation, this energy. These young people will come to us with a gift of their trust. They trust us that we have something valuable to offer them. And we do.

Speaking of energy, Sharon called me one afternoon in late August and said she looked up from what she was doing and spotted this huge, black cat wandering around the house. We don't have cats. We don't even like cats. After some searching around, with

the “here kitty kitty” appeals, we finally located the cat in the back downstairs bedroom under the bed. I poked around a little and suddenly realized I had encountered a wild creature, with lots of fierce energy, who gave evidence of living down there for a couple of weeks while we were on vacation, and who was announcing, with this alarming hiss, that he did not intend to leave.

I called for help from Security. Shaun Ellingson, one of our fine security officers, came to the rescue, and then he called for reinforcements. (I can imagine Shaun’s report back at the security office that night: “you won’t believe what I had to do up at the President’s house tonight.”)

There was a different kind of invasion of energy in our house recently. We had 250 student leaders over for dinner on Saturday night—talk about energy.

How do we capture and channel and encourage all of this amazing energy in the room today? How do we release it? How do we encourage it? Sustain it? Empower it? Focus it? How do we make our energy purposeful, truly meaningful?

Those are the questions of the morning. Those are your questions, I know. Those are my questions. Those are the questions for the University.

And here’s my premise: if we can focus all of this extraordinary energy, and move it somehow in the same direction, we can change the world. That’s what I want to talk about this morning.

A couple of weeks ago, I went down to the science building to listen to the presentations of a group of undergraduate researchers that have been guided and mentored by Professor Derrick Wood throughout the summer. After ten minutes or so of the first presentation, I realized I was not going to understand a word that was being said. I caught something about things moving downstream and upstream. Those words made sense, but as Bruce Congdon said, I didn’t know what stream I was on.

And I thought, isn’t this marvelous. Professors Derrick Wood and Ben McFarland and Cara Wall Sheffler all sat there knowing exactly what was going on. And they were leading these students, teaching them, mentoring them. Cara said to me later that these students were each working on a very special, focused piece of the larger, overall project, and when I came in that day, they were thrilled to discover how their particular piece connected to the whole.

Isn’t that cool. I’ve got my part to play, my piece of the work of this great university. And each of you has your part. Sometimes we don’t understand the language the other is speaking, but we still gather, in Christian community, around our higher and more common vision and purpose.

As I think about the State of the University this morning, I have this sense that we are in a moment of enormous creativity and culmination. Some very significant efforts we have launched over the last few years are coming together. Things are gelling. We have kept the Blueprint out in front of us every step of the way. And we have lifted up our Signature commitments in very meaningful ways.

And what is exciting to me is that these things are guided by a sense of vision. We have clarity of purpose and direction. But what is equally exciting is that all of these accomplishments come out of the extraordinary gifts and energy of our people. And what is even further exciting is that they often come out of collaborative effort, a reaching across the boundaries to work together.

And that is very cool. Great people, working together, on big ideas, all guided by a clear vision.

I think of things like the major Biblical Theological Education grant proposal that has come together over the summer. I think about the redesign work of the Perkins Center and the Office of University Ministries. I think about the collaborative work of the web

redesign team. I think about all of the amazing work in the sciences and the learning of science. In most of these cases the work is highly collaborative, much of it potentially transformative, and all of it guided by our vision and our signatures.

In the midst of all of this too, so many things are continuing to operate and perform with excellence. Our athletics teams continue to succeed at the highest levels—we have four of our fall teams ranked in the top ten nationally. Our positioning efforts through Response and etc are receiving rave reviews and awards across the nation. I think about some of the accomplishments of our faculty scholarship: Rob Wall and his fine commentary on Acts; David Nienhuis's new book on Paul; Jennifer Meir having one of her published poems read by Garrison Keeler; Micheal Roe's work on peace, and conflict, and reconciliation in Northern Ireland; Richard Scheuerman's new work on Native Americans; the work of Henry Peterson and Randy Franz on perceptions of responsible business; and on and on. I understand that Art Ellis's book has received major attention in Russia and that Jaeil Lee's book on her own spiritual journey is a best seller in Korea. I just got word yesterday that Elaine Scott and the whole team in our engineering program received a \$600,000 NSF grant for scholarships for underserved students in engineering. This is huge.

This list can go on and on. It is just quite stunning what our people are achieving. Creative energy, a culmination of efforts, and meaningful collaboration across boundaries—all of this makes for an exciting State of the University this morning.

And so where are we going for the year? Every summer I step back from all that is going on, all that we have been working on in the past years, where we stand with the execution of the Blueprint, and I think hard about where I think we should be headed for the year ahead. I work hard with the Cabinet in this reflection. This year we expanded the conversation out to the deans and a number of directors. I talk with the Board of Trustees.

Out of all this reflection and conversation, this morning I want to propose Four Broad Themes that I will lift up for strategic focus this year.

- Imagining The Sciences On The Cutting Edge. A number of years ago, we invested heavily in the sciences. At that time I felt so very strongly, that if we were going to engage the culture and change the world as a premier Christian university, we had to aspire to excellence in the sciences. We invested hugely in new facilities: a new science building, plus a complete renovation of an old facility. Outstanding new faculty joined our community, renewing the curriculum, absolutely changing the spirit of the sciences at SPU. Through it all our enrollments and our applications exploded.

I have concluded we must continue to lift up the sciences as one of our distinctives. With all that we know about our country's shortage of scientists and science teachers, and the shortage of math and engineering students, it is our civic and strategic duty to educate leaders for the future. With all of the perceived conflict between the sciences and faith in our culture, it is our Christian duty to lead the way for the engagement between science and faith.

I think here about the work of Stamatis Vokos and John Lindberg and Lane Seeley on the learning of science. I think here of the repositioning of our engineering program under the new leadership of Elaine Scott, and now this new grant. I think of the amazing collaborative work between our scientists and Bill Rowley and the School of Education and the work as well with John Medina and the Brain Center. I think of the amazing guidance by Ken Moore and Cindy Fitch of our pre-med students and the extraordinary success of placement into medical school. I think of the work that Tim Nelson and Eric Long did over the summer on Blakely.

We are on the cutting edge in so many ways in the sciences, a premier Christian university science program, and I will be gathering with our scientists and our education folks to see how we should take all of this work to the next levels. We must keep the sciences on our strategic table.

- **Becoming More Intentionally Global.** On Tuesday next week at the Opening Convocation, I would like to sketch out further thoughts about becoming more intentionally global. We began that conversation last year, and now is the time to become even more clear and concrete about what we should be doing.

This is something we must do. Even as so many of our people are engaged in so many things across the globe, we must focus our energies. We must articulate a clear and distinctive vision for why we care about global education. We need to think even further about the theological underpinnings for why we think globally. And most importantly, we will need to launch concrete programs to enhance our global effectiveness.

In this coming year, we will come out with a clear and very concrete plan of action about becoming more intentionally global.

- **Becoming Biblically and Theologically Educated.** As you know, one of our signature commitments is that we will be a place that embraces the Christian story, becoming biblically and theologically educated. There is huge momentum here, some very exciting things happening. Dave Nienhuis has led a task force from the School of Theology to study this question, meeting all spring with the theology faculty, talking with groups all across campus. They brought to me in the summer one of the finest grant proposals I have ever seen. I was able to take the outlines of that proposal down to the Murdock Trust two weeks ago to begin the process for a major grant proposal. We will also be working hard to bring together the work of Stephen Newby with our Chapel program and the work of our theology faculty and music faculty to enhance our effectiveness at Christian community formation.

By the way, right at the heart of the BTE proposal is the notion that we might become a national/international resource center for information, scholarship, and strategy around biblical and theological education—through the web. Think about the power of the web in all areas of our work as we seek to redesign this incredible and powerful tool.

- **Practicing Reconciliation.** Like the sciences, we might think we have done our work with reconciliation. We have made enormous strides with this initiative. Through the leadership of Tali Hairston and the Perkins Center, through the impact of the teaching of John Perkins himself on this campus, through the impact and encouragement of the Ames Scholars, through the efforts of so many people across this campus, through the enormous connections with friends and partners in our own urban community, we are reaching out with the message of reconciliation.

How can we encourage this work even further? How can we keep this work on the strategic table? How can we ensure that reconciliation is part of our commitment to global education, to the biblical, theological education, reaching into all corners of our work? We are in this for the long haul, as I have said before, and we must continue to challenge ourselves to become even more effective.

As we think about these four broad themes for the year, I fully understand all of this will take resources. Throughout the year I will be working with the Cabinet and the Advancement team and the Board of Trustees to shape our next fundraising campaign. We will also begin to finish up our new look at our facilities plan, which facilities must receive our priority efforts as we move forward. I will continue my efforts to shape a vision and raise funds for The Grand Hall.

So as we lift up these four broad themes, we will be working hard to focus our resource needs so that we might invest wisely and strategically to accomplish our aspirations.

We have been having meetings with folks from nationally known web design firms in our redesign efforts. And they have all said in one way or another, that so often the web design process exposes a muddle about identity and vision for an institution—“but you folks know who you are and where you are going,” they said.

Are our visitors right that we are a people who know who we are? Do we really know

where we are headed and why?

Are we really moving all of this extraordinary energy in the same direction?

I've been reading Jurgen Moltmann this summer. I took his extraordinary work *Theology of Hope* on vacation with me. I told the faculty at their retreat that I swear I need to learn how to read cheap novels on vacation, but there I was, absolutely absorbed in this wonderful work of theology. By the way, I once took Nietzsche to Hawaii. Now that is sick.

As you know, this great theologian will be here on our campus on October 24th. I trust you will find the time to gather together to listen to this teacher of hope.

But I have been absolutely blown away through a fresh encounter with Moltmann. He is speaking to our purpose here at Seattle Pacific. He is showing us how we can bring all of our individual energies together to move in the same direction. He is telling us how it is that a university can change the world.

And here is the message for us this morning. Moltmann says:

"From first to last, and not merely in the epilogue, Christianity is eschatology, is hope, forward looking and forward moving, and therefore also revolutionizing and transforming the present." P. 16

I think this is part of the reason we can aspire to change the world. We are compelled by hope. Our faith looks forward aggressively with a vision that all of God's children might flourish, everywhere, all across the globe.

Such a faith, built on such a promise,

"can have nothing to do with fleeing the world, with resignation and with escapism."

There is absolutely no room for separatism here. There is no room for smug withdrawal, whether academic smugness or Christian smugness. We must engage. We must enter into the fray of ideas and suffering and the challenges of our culture and our world.

In the eyes of hope, says Moltmann,

"the world is full of all kinds of possibilities, namely all the possibilities of the God of hope. [We] see reality . . . in the hand of him whose voice calls into history from its end, saying, 'behold, I make all things new,' and from hearing this word of the promise [we] acquire the freedom to renew life here and to change the face of the world."

And here's the point for us at Seattle Pacific: because our God is a God of promise, we can be a people of promise. We have a chance to marshal all of the energy in this room, to channel our work, to work together collaboratively, to encourage one another—so that we can be a people of promise.

We are not a people of cynicism and suspicion and absence of trust—the posture that grips so much of higher education and our culture today. We bring promise to our students. We must equip our students with hope. We gather together in worship, in Christian community, in order to equip ourselves with hope, in order to be and become the people of promise.

And so, in all of this, let us drive our vision even further outward, pushing ourselves to know and understand what's going on in the world, driving our thinking toward a global reach.

And then let us dig down even more deeply into our roots, embracing our Christian story, our Christian scriptures, worshipping together, embracing God's promise, that in Jesus Christ, all of God's children everywhere might flourish.

If we can do this, reaching out and digging down deep, we can be a people of promise

for the world. If we can together hear “this word of promise,” as Moltmann says, we “acquire the freedom to renew life here and to change the face of the world.”

God bless each one of you as bring in this new year. May this word of promise be the theme of our song for the year ahead. May we discover even more deeply what it means to be a people of promise at Seattle Pacific University.

