

A large, colorful stained glass window with a prominent cross design in the center. The window is made of many small, irregular pieces of glass in various colors including blue, green, yellow, and red. The background behind the window is a dark, cloudy sky.

FOR SUCH A
TiMe
AS THIS

*Identity, Mission and the Future
of Abilene Christian University*

A SPECIAL REPORT OF THE ACU BOARD OF TRUSTEES

ACU is committed to the integration of faith and learning, grounded in the liberal arts, nurtured in a context of innovation, focused on professional preparation, and undergirded by rigorous scholarship at the undergraduate and graduate levels. Out of such a context will come graduates who will make responsible and informed choices within a Christian context as they serve and lead throughout the world.

– ACU BOARD OF TRUSTEES, October 2012

We live in a time of substantial change – in society at large and certainly in higher education. In such an environment, only colleges and universities that know their identity and focus their mission on new realities will survive undiminished. It is not surprising, then, that Abilene Christian University is engaging questions about its identity and mission. The current challenges and the university’s character and commitment demand it. The vibrancy of its future depends on how the institution responds to these questions and whether it discerns which questions are the most important to ask.

Most colleges and universities today are seeking answers to a variety of pressing questions. Because of current economic challenges, most are exploring new financial models to better serve them. In a time of increased competition for new students, they are looking for the best strategies for recruiting and marketing. With the changing needs and expectations of students and the rapid development of new technologies, faculty are inquiring about the most creative and engaging approaches to teaching.

In addition to these questions, Abilene Christian has its own set of concerns, growing out of its particular circumstances. How can ACU extend the accomplishments of its first 100 years into its second century? How can ACU fulfill its *21st-Century Vision*, and what elements should be included in any new vision statements? More broadly, how should the significant changes taking place among Churches of Christ – our primary constituency – as well as within the larger Christian world, affect future university policies and practices?

These are significant questions. Such attention on *How* things could better be done is vital to any university’s future. But an institution’s focus on questions of *How* must not cause it to miss the more fundamental question: *Why*? In the words of organizational expert Peter Block, “Too often when a discussion is dominated by questions of *How*? we risk overvaluing what is practical and doable and postpone the questions of purpose and collective wellbeing.”¹ Such questions – of purpose and collective well-being, of identity and mission – are crucial for these times. They call us back to what a university was designed to be in the first place. Specifically for ACU,

the *Why* questions are deeply embedded in its Christian heritage and commitment as it is uniquely expressed through time since its 1906 founding.

Poet and essayist Wendell Berry has notably said, “The thing being made in a university is humanity. ... What universities are mandated to make or help make is human beings.” Their purpose is to make a certain type of human, “not just trained workers or knowledgeable citizens, but responsible heirs and members of human culture.”² For this reason, American institutions of higher education are not designed as *multiversities*, with the various disciplines and areas of the school functioning independently from one another, but as *universities* with all areas combining holistically to form mature human beings. To this end, every unit, every office, every individual in the university should be devoted.

For Christian universities, few issues could be more central to their identity. If they market and recruit well, are financially stable, teach innovatively, engage in cutting-edge research, and develop national reputations for excellence but forget that they are in the business of shaping human beings into the nature of Christ – the *Why* of Christian education – they lose their reason to exist. The purpose of Christian education, as Nicholas Wolterstorff has reminded us, is “to equip and energize our students for a certain way of being in the world ... a Christian way.”³

The *Why* of Christian education, at a fundamental level, is about whether students are formed into the image



¹ Peter Block, *The Answer to How is Yes: Acting on What Matters*. San Francisco: Berrett-Hoehler Publishers, 2003, 3.

² Wendell Berry, “The Loss of the University,” *Home Economics*. San Francisco: North Point Press, 1987, 77.

³ Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Educating for Shalom: Essays on Christian Higher Education*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004, 33.

The Board of Trustees of Abilene Christian University prepared this document in October 2012 to articulate what it means for ACU to be a Christ-centered institution of higher education within the Christian heritage of the Stone-Campbell faith tradition, particularly as expressed in Churches of Christ. We strongly affirm the finest values of that heritage and will pursue a Christ-centered focus using the inspired Word of God to guide our decisions as an institution. Rooted in these values, ACU will pursue sound and innovative educational principles so our students will be fully prepared to live lives of Christian service and leadership. This document aims to be comprehensive enough to provide guidance in meeting the challenges and opportunities of the future, yet brief enough to be used readily in various deliberations throughout the university.

of Jesus. Students at Christian universities, as at secular ones, should be well-equipped with certain knowledge and skills to help them do good work and live as responsible citizens. But if Christian universities are true to their purpose, students also are shaped to live into God's mission in the world, applying what they have learned and who they have become to the brokenness around them, to be the suffering and healing presence of Christ in the world. Regardless of its particular heritage or vision, when a Christian university loses its *Why* in the rush to answer *How*, it loses its soul.

For precisely this reason, to make clear the *Why* undergirding ACU's identity and mission, the trustees of the university created this document.

The document is divided into four sections, each oriented by a driving question:

- **What time is it?** Addressing our current challenges requires us to understand the pressures of our particular time and place.
- **What is our heritage?** The key impulses from the past that have shaped Churches of Christ and ACU are crucial for understanding the *Why* that must shape our future.
- **What are the core values from our heritage that inform the guiding principles for our future?** From our past have come significant values out of which emerge principles for shaping our future.
- **What kind of university should we be?** The university must work to articulate a shared sense of ACU's purpose and vision.

WHAT TIME IS IT?

When Jesse P. Sewell became president of the college a century ago, just six years after the school had been founded, he said, "We must live in a world as it is now, and not as it has been in the past, or as it may be in the future. We must succeed or fail in the midst of present day conditions."

He spoke these words in a world substantially different than our own. The painful division in the Stone-Campbell Restoration Movement had occurred only a few years before. The wounds of that division were still fresh. The school he led was small and struggling. He could hardly have imagined then the global conflicts, economic variability, scientific advances, and cultural shifts to occur during the almost six decades remaining in his life.

President Sewell and the trustees had to lead the school on the basis of what they knew. They had to do it in relation to their own circumstances and out of the context of their own lives and heritage. We, like Sewell and the trustees a century ago, must determine how to adjust to a rapidly changing world, while at the same time holding on to the core principles of our founding faith.

The challenges we face today are immense, and so are the opportunities. To say it plainly, we stand at a watershed moment



in history. We are living in an age of rapid and radical social change. How ACU responds to this moment – how it grasps and applies in this new day the *Why* of its existence – will shape its present mission and largely determine its future.

ACU is affected by these societal shifts in at least three areas: in our relationship to the surrounding culture, in our involvement with various church constituencies, and as a participant in the value system undergirding American universities.

A Time of Change in Culture

The world is experiencing a significant shift in social patterns and norms that is affecting virtually every part of our life and culture. The shift began in the early 1900s, at the beginning of a century of global wars, a scientific revolution, the significant expansion of mass communication, and substantial changes in art, music, literature, science, ethics, politics, education and religion. Since the mid-1960s, the cultural changes have been hard to miss.

These changes coincide with a weakening of the pillars of what it has meant to be "modern." These pillars, which have prevailed for more than 250 years in Western civilization, include the assumptions that progress is inevitable, that science and religion are mutually exclusive domains, that faith should be relegated to the private sphere, that human ability to make the world better is limitless, that knowledge is inherently good, and that individual rights are almost always more important than the well-being of the community.

The deterioration of these defining characteristics of Western culture is having a substantial impact on all of us, both for good and for ill. These are not small changes or temporary trends. The world as it once was will not return. In every area of life, certainly in higher education, we are facing a new day.

Many of today's university students see the world differently than their parents and grandparents. Their pre-college education was different. Their values are different. Their understanding of truth and authority are different. Students today are generally less optimistic about the future than earlier generations were. They are open to the divine, though not necessarily to traditional expressions of Christianity. They often embrace experience more than understanding, the mystical more than "right doctrine." They are less interested in propositions and more responsive to narrative. They have moved from books to electronic images, from the objective to the imaginative, from one Truth to many truths. While this description does not apply to every student, it is descriptive of the inclinations of the generation. This cultural shift is great enough to prompt re-examination of how ACU engages with students and functions as a university.

But there is more – the crisis of culture is amplified in light of the corresponding crisis of identity within virtually every Christian denomination or fellowship, including Churches of Christ.



“All of this host of the past – and you of the present – have been and are like the originals: people of great faith, determination and hope. Ladies and gentlemen, this is no ordinary college ...”



– DR. DON H. MORRIS, *ACU's seventh president, in his final Chapel speech, 1973*

A Time of Crisis in Churches

Churches in the Western world have been experiencing dramatic changes over the past few decades. Two of these developments have a particular impact on ACU.

The “Undenominationalizing” of the Church. After 500 years of churches in Western Christianity splintering and forming an ever-wider array of denominations, the tide is now reversing. We are beginning to see early signs of the dissolution of long-held and bitterly contested boundaries among Christian groups – the “undenominationalizing” of the Church. In some cases, especially among groups experiencing a rapid decline in membership, denominations are merging. More commonly, however, the blurring of denominational boundaries is not taking place at the formal structural level but in the actual practice of believers. Many people seem to move with relative ease from one denominational affiliation to another with little concern for doctrinal differences, a practice hardly imaginable a few decades ago. Understandably, this waning of denominational loyalty is having a significant impact on Christian universities tied to particular Christian traditions.

As with other Christian fellowships, the diversity of practices and beliefs among Churches of Christ is increasing substantially, creating considerable anxiety and fueling a widespread crisis of identity. Speaking to our own tradition in Churches of Christ, it is not likely that Churches of Christ in the future will be like they were 50 years ago, or even 10. Over the next two or three decades, the boundaries separating Churches of Christ from other Christian fellowships will become increasingly blurred, making it harder to identify congregations as Churches of Christ with clear distinctions from those that are not. In fact, it already is. And the growing diversity between autonomous congregations using the label “Church of Christ” will make it more and more difficult to know what that designation means.

The younger generations are very much a part of this post-denominational Christian world. They do not think in highly differentiated categories common to previous generations. This tendency is more than just a symptom of the decline of denominational loyalty. Rather, something more profound, more culturally rooted, is at play. The intellectual and social life of many within the younger generations is oriented around diversity, pluralism, relativism, and tolerance for differences. As a result, they are difficult to categorize and they strongly resist labels. The impact of these trends on ACU’s identity and mission will be substantial.

The Marginalization of Christianity. A second global trend affecting Christian churches and institutions also is at play. As the pillars of our modern world have begun to weaken over the past century, so has the tie between Christianity and the state.⁴ That is not to say that our world is post-Christian. A majority of American citizens still profess to be Christians. And globally, Christianity is on the rise. But the tie between Christianity and the state, whether formally as in parts of Europe or South America or functionally as in the U.S., is being torn. Christian institutions and believers are less and less likely to be supported and encouraged by centers of cultural and political power. Students who graduate from schools like ACU will increasingly face challenges that were rare for past graduates. Being a professing Christian may no longer be an advantage in the workplace or in community settings. Christian values may work against the grain of the prevailing social norms.

As difficult as these changing circumstances are for Christians, we should see this development as good news. Christianity has always functioned best from the margins of society rather than from the centers of power. But while the opportunities are great,



the challenges are even greater. In the U.S., the federal and state governments may not continue an interest in helping educate students in faith-based institutions. Accrediting organizations may penalize the weight given education related to the Bible in the curriculum of a faith-based university.

The implications of the end of the alliance of Christendom are not yet completely clear. This we know – the growing marginalization of Christianity demands that ACU profoundly grasp why it is educating students and toward what end. ACU prepares students not just to be excellent professionals and good citizens, but also, most importantly, to be Christian witnesses and servants in the world.

A Time of Challenge in Universities

As if the dramatic changes in culture and church were not enough, universities throughout the U.S. are experiencing their own challenges. The modern university, first conceived and established at the University of Berlin in 1810, has been the model for most universities in America since the middle of the 19th century, usually with an emphasis on research.

The normal practice within higher education in the U.S. has been to segment, if not isolate, the academic disciplines. The focus has often been on depth of knowledge in specific fields rather than the integration of various subject areas and the holistic preparation of students. Academic disciplines that are focused on information gathering and theory building are typically separated not only from one another but also from professional programs (such as law schools, medical schools, business schools and seminaries) where specific skills and practices have generally been emphasized.

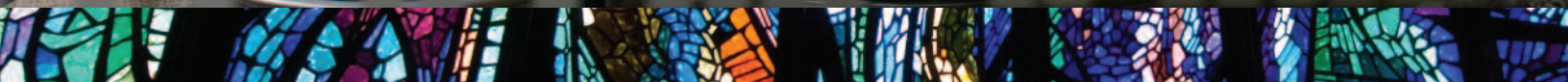
Over the past few years, these traditional distinctions have begun to blur, creating significant new challenges in many schools. While faculty has normally been trained in relatively narrow disciplines, they are increasingly called upon to teach across disciplines or gaps in disciplines. This development often requires faculty to retool their research skills and broaden their areas of expertise. Moreover, in many places the traditional gulf between theory and practice is being bridged, and pedagogy – the art and science of teaching – is receiving greater emphasis. In the process, the means of faculty evaluation and promotion are being reassessed and often revised.

Growing budget constraints are causing further changes. Many schools are reducing the number of full-time faculty, eliminating courses and cutting majors – even departments. Some schools are choosing to de-emphasize the humanities, the arts, summer programs, and/or traditional graduate programs. At the same time, new programs in income-generating areas, especially for non-traditional students, are being added.

Perhaps the most obvious development in university education is the rise of new educational technology and delivery systems. Significant new opportunities for distance education, by various means, are changing the face of higher education. Instruction that extensively uses mobile learning devices also is altering pedagogy in the traditional classroom. Contextual education is moving teaching and learning well beyond the classroom. Universities that cannot adapt to the new technologies, pedagogies and delivery systems will be left behind.

ACU’s adaptability, creativity and financial strength, along with a history of excellence in teaching and research, have allowed it to respond well to these academic and financial challenges. In fact, Abilene Christian has been on the innovative edge of many advances in teaching and learning as well as the use of new technologies. However, the effect of these challenges on the

⁴ The term “Christendom” has been applied to describe a close relationship between the church and the state, in contrast to the early centuries of Christianity where the state persecuted the believers. In the early fourth century, the Emperor Constantine laid the foundation for the state and the church to be closely tied together, with the state often dominating the church. This practice continued throughout the Middle Ages and even into the Reformation period, especially in Europe.



“The intellectual giant is worth more than the physical giant. Intellectual training does not consist in cramming facts into a student’s head. The student should be trained to rely on self, to do independent thinking, to discover new ideas, and to see the relation of old and new ideas to present-day problems.”

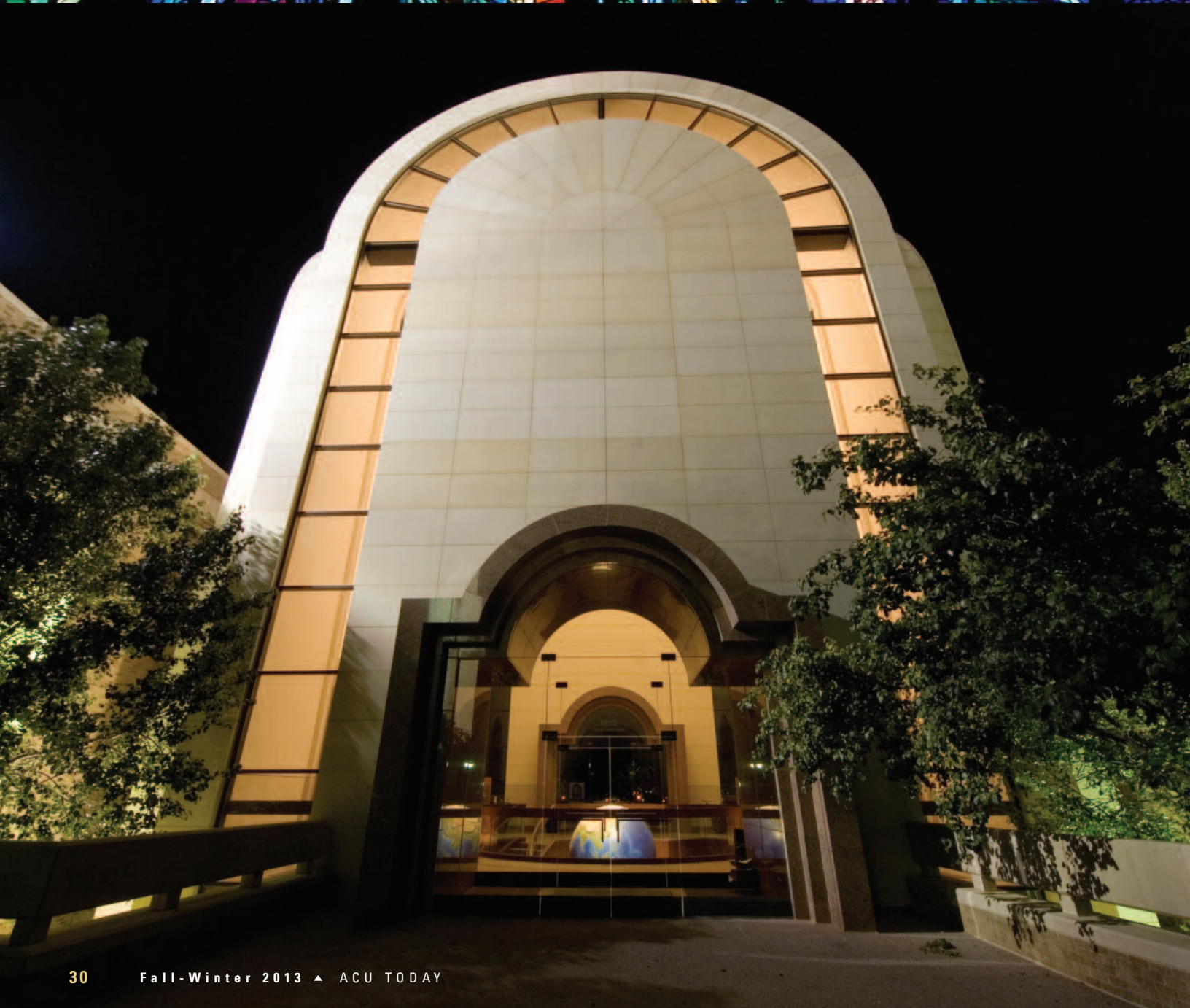
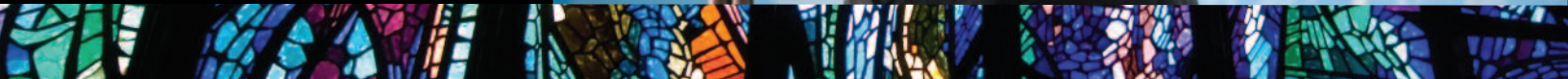


— R.L. WHITESIDE, *ACU's third president, 1912*

“There are no subjects
on this earth, or in
outer space, or in the
metaphysical realm,
which we cannot study
on the campus of a
Christian institution
of higher learning.”



— DR. JOHN C. STEVENS
1969 Presidential Inauguration



university, especially combined with the crisis of culture and church, has been substantial. The next several years will be especially challenging. A firm grasp of ACU's identity and mission is essential.



understanding of Scripture became normative for Churches of Christ and fueled their separation from the Christian Churches/Disciples of Christ. While many in Churches of Christ today do not believe this “argument from silence” is the best way of interpreting Scripture, all have been affected by it.

WHAT IS OUR HERITAGE?

All people, all institutions, all movements are indelibly shaped by their histories. Our past both frees and limits us, opening some possibilities and closing others. Our history makes it difficult to see some things. At the same time, it gives us certain values to envision and to build upon in the future.

An institution's past does not determine its future, but it does shape it in significant ways. ACU has a certain past that causes it to value certain things rather than others. As a product of a particular history, we have a unique institutional DNA, which endows us with a certain collective set of gifts and limitations. Our religious and cultural history provides an essential character to our identity. It is at the heart of our *Why*. The better we know it, the better we can negotiate the hows as we seek God's preferred future for us.

While ACU is independent from any church structure or polity, it has been organically tied from its beginning to Churches of Christ.⁵ Understanding ACU's past is not possible without understanding where Churches of Christ came from, which brings with it a certain irony. From the beginning, many churches within the movement that birthed them assumed a kind of “historylessness,” an impulse simply to skip over and even deny the past in an attempt to have a pure connection with the first-century church alone. This tendency to jettison one's history has a long history. Nevertheless, the movement's noble and significant past brings with it a number of impulses that can serve these churches and the institutions connected to them well in the crucial days ahead.

What follows is a brief summary of five streams that played a major role in shaping the doctrines and practices of Churches of Christ. Where have we come from and how has it shaped our view of Christian higher education?

From the Reformed Tradition

Churches of Christ are among a host of other Christian fellowships in the lineage of the Protestant Reformation, which erupted in Europe in the early years of the 16th century. The reformers, led initially by Martin Luther, wanted to free the church from the abuses they saw among the church's leaders and to bring it back into submission to God's will. They called believers back to Scripture alone as the source of authority, rather than the traditions and councils of the late medieval church. They emphasized God's sovereignty, individual responsibility before God, and a gospel flowing from grace received by faith. Many of the instincts and practices that became normative for Churches of Christ emerged directly from the Reformation.

What is referred to today as the Reformed Tradition grew primarily out of the Swiss Reformation, the non-Lutheran stream of the Reformation, under its two most prominent leaders, John Calvin and Huldrych Zwingli. It was Zwingli, whose teachings were a more radical departure from traditional Catholic teaching, who influenced Churches of Christ centuries later in two particular areas.

First, Zwingli argued that any practice the Bible did not explicitly authorize should be forbidden. This “argument from silence” led him to forbid instrumental music and choirs in his churches since, he believed, the Bible did not explicitly authorize such practices. In the mid-19th century, aggravated by events connected to the aftermath of the American Civil War, this

Second, Zwingli argued against the prevailing view that Christ was present in a real and substantial way in the Lord's Supper. Zwingli taught that the Supper was a memorial and that the bread and the wine “represented” Christ's body and blood. His concern for the authority of Scripture and rejection of what he viewed as superstition shaped his thought and continues to influence Churches of Christ.

The most prominent voice in what became known as the Reformed Tradition was that of John Calvin. While his teachings framed virtually all the Reformed conversations that followed, it was a reaction to Calvin that eventually played a role in shaping a key doctrine among Churches of Christ. Several decades after Calvin, Jacob Arminius (early 17th century), a professor of Reformed theology in the Netherlands, challenged several of the major tenets of Calvin's teachings. Most significantly, he rejected the notion that Christ died only for an elect few who were predestined to be saved.

This belief that any person could make a free-will decision to follow Jesus resonated with Barton Stone, Thomas and Alexander Campbell, and others on the American frontier in the early 19th century. Preaching that called for personal decision fueled the spiritual revival that swept across the Ohio River Valley in their time. From the beginning of the Stone-Campbell Restoration Movement, the belief in individual free will, rather than predestination of a few, has been a defining characteristic of Churches of Christ.

From the Puritans

Perhaps the most direct influence of the Reformed Tradition on Churches of Christ came from the English Puritans in the 17th and 18th centuries. They worked zealously to purify the church in accordance with their understanding of Scripture. The Puritans passed on to their spiritual descendants at least four doctrines they believed were clearly taught in the Bible and that are still commonly practiced among Churches of Christ.

First, the Puritans had a passion to restore the church of the New Testament. Second, through the influence of Scottish reformers, elder-led or presbyterian churches became the norm. Third, many Puritans taught and practiced a congregational form of church organization, in which each congregation functioned autonomously from others. Finally, some Puritans, following the Anabaptists, practiced and strongly advocated immersion of believers, rather than infant baptism. All four of these doctrines or practices became normative for Churches of Christ.⁶

From the Enlightenment

The period of the Enlightenment, emerging in the late 17th century in Europe, was a time of dramatic transformation in the way Westerners thought about the world. The basic traits of the Enlightenment have largely formed how most people in the Western world understand the modern world. Enlightenment thinkers placed a high value on the ability of humans to think, to reason, to understand the world around them by their own mental abilities. The Restoration Movement, which emerged in the Enlightenment-saturated early days of America, drank deeply of those principles – particularly from the empiricism of John Locke, the scientific method of Francis Bacon, and Scottish Common Sense Philosophy.

⁵ From its beginning in 1906, ACU has had a self-perpetuating Board of Trustees. Although the charter and by-laws specify only that the trustees should be “members in good standing of a local Church of Christ,” historical precedent shows that the same religious affiliation has applied to the faculty and to certain key administrative and staff positions. The charter and by-laws are silent as to faculty and staff religious affiliation.

⁶ The term “Puritan” in the 17th century originally described English people who wanted to “purify” the Anglican church of the time. Later, the term described a variety of religious groups, not one single group.

The English philosopher John Locke was one of the earliest and most influential of the Enlightenment thinkers. Alexander Campbell regarded him as the “great Christian philosopher.” Locke believed humans were born with a “blank slate.” Humans discover truth empirically, that is, through their senses, and make sense of those truths through reason. Not surprisingly, anyone who followed Locke’s thinking believed in the importance of education and the responsibility of individuals to seek knowledge.

Campbell and other Restoration leaders also followed the inductive method of scientific investigation proposed by Francis Bacon. Bacon’s method began with the specifics of a question and argued toward a reasonable and inevitable conclusion. Individuals could discover truth with assurance. For Restoration leaders this method provided a scientific way of understanding Scripture, working from individual facts or rational propositions toward a sure understanding of Bible doctrines.

Scottish Common Sense Philosophy, incorporating views from Locke and Bacon, asserted that all humans were capable of knowing. Every person has the capacity to discover moral and religious truth. Alexander Campbell was directly exposed to this philosophy in his early years. This democracy of knowledge – the assumption that every person can know truth – played a prominent part in early Restoration preaching. Restoration leaders became quite confident in their logical and critical skills.

From American Ideals

Enlightenment ideals found fertile soil in America. Out of such ideals, churches in the Stone-Campbell Restoration Movement developed an acute sense of democratization, which was evident in strong anti-clergy instincts and a view that every Christian was a priest; a determined individualism, which focused on the responsibility of each believer before God; and a pervasive optimism, which expressed itself in a high confidence in humans to understand correctly and live rightly. In the words of church historian Dr. Douglas Foster:

In religion this Americanization of Enlightenment ideas led to the assumption that every individual who approached the Scriptures with an honest heart, common sense, and the proper methods would arrive at the same truth in all matters of Christian belief and practice. Different conclusions and practices meant that something was wrong in heart, mind, or method.⁷

These ideals also fueled a substantial spirit of anti-intellectualism among these Christians: if everyone had access to the truth and if all that was needed to understand the truth was common sense, then why were experts in Scripture or anything else needed? Among more than a few Christians in the movement, the value of advanced education was questioned, especially education in the study of the Bible.

Two impulses, then, emerged side by side. On the one hand, education – including higher education – for all Christians, men and women, was prized. Colleges were established early in the movement, reflecting the high value placed on the life of the mind. At the same time, a suspicion of highly educated people also prevailed. That both intellectualism and anti-intellectualism thrived is one of the paradoxes of the movement. Yet both impulses were rooted in American ideals.



From a Desire for Unity and a History of Division

The driving impulse of the early leaders of Churches of Christ in the 19th century was for God’s people to be one. They believed the church must not fight against itself. They believed that the church Jesus established is one –

not one denomination or fellowship as opposed to others, but one in Christ. They urged followers of Christ to love one another and to come together in every locality to work and worship in unity.

When Stone and Campbell churches began to unite in 1832, in spite of numerous differences among them, their desire was for unity, not more division.⁸ They believed that denominational organizations and creeds separated Christians in the one universal body of Christ. Both men had previously experienced painful fragmentation within Scottish and American Presbyterianism. They both longed for the unity of all followers of Christ. Thomas Campbell wrote these stirring words in his “Declaration and Address” in 1809:

Division among the Christians is a horrid evil, fraught with many evils. It is antichristian, as it destroys the visible unity of the body of Christ; as if he were divided against himself, excluding and excommunicating a part of himself. It is antisciptural, as being strictly prohibited by his sovereign authority; a direct violation of his express command. It is antinatural, as it excites Christians to condemn, to hate, and oppose one another, who are bound by the highest and most endearing obligations to love each other as brethren, even as Christ has loved them ...⁹

Unfortunately, the movement that wanted to undo the fragmentation of the Reformation quickly found its love of unity subverted by division. The American Civil War played a significant role in fueling the division among the Stone-Campbell churches, with Northern, urban and wealthier churches on one side and Southern, rural and poorer churches on the other. The seeds of division that had been planted before the war blossomed into full flower in the decades after the war.

The churches that had worn the interchangeable names Christian Churches, Disciples of Christ, and Churches of Christ began to fragment into separate streams. The first division in the late 1800s separated Churches of Christ from the Disciples and Christian churches, mainly over the use of instruments in worship and mission societies. Underlying that division was a growing difference in interpretation of Scripture, going back even to the early influence of Zwingli in the 16th century.

The 20th century in Churches of Christ witnessed dozens of fractures in fellowship. Divisions came about over differences of interpretation of scripture, combined with a drive for what leaders perceived as doctrinal correctness more than a love of unity. While some of that sectarian spirit is still around, it is diminishing. Increasingly, there is a renewed appreciation for the beauty of Christian unity that focuses on shared core truths and differences embraced in love. ACU has been a positive voice in calling believers to unity in Christ, a theme deeply embedded not only in the history of our movement, but in the words of Jesus himself.

These five streams out of our history have substantially shaped who we are today. Knowing something of that past is not only critical for understanding the primary traits and values of Churches of Christ, it also provides an important perspective on how education in this tradition has been understood.

⁷ Jeff Childers, Douglas A. Foster, Jack R. Reese, *The Crux of the Matter: Crisis, Tradition and the Future of Churches of Christ*. ACU Press, 2000, 102.

⁸ Richard T. Hughes, *Reviving the Ancient Faith: The Story of Churches of Christ in America*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans: 1996, 2-3.

⁹ Proposition 10 of the document.



“ACU is a university, not a church. We know the difference. We grant degrees; we educate people. We teach them the dignity of a noble profession and the value of a deep personal faith. We know the difference between education and indoctrination. Our task is to teach people how to think from a Christian perspective, to be discerning, and to search relentlessly for truth, which we believe to be objective and not relative. Etched in stone on our Administration Building is the scripture, ‘You shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free.’ We believe it.”



– DR. ROYCE MONEY, 1992 *Presidential Inauguration*



Education in the Stone-Campbell Heritage

From the earliest days of America, education was viewed as a cherished resource. In this environment, and out of their particular intellectual and religious context, early leaders of the Stone-Campbell Restoration Movement aggressively promoted not just education but higher education. Dr. M. Norvel Young, a distinguished educator among Churches of Christ in the 20th century, said that Alexander Campbell was especially devoted to this cause:

A study of the early leaders, particularly Alexander Campbell, reveals important influences which have molded in the main the church's attitude toward education. In the very nature of the stand taken by the early reformer there was an essential emphasis upon the value of education ... Campbell's view of the Bible required an emphasis upon education.¹⁰

In 1836, Campbell wrote the following in his journal, *The Millennial Harbinger*,

We, indeed, as a people devoted to the Bible cause, and to the Bible alone, for Christian faith and manners, and discipline, have derived much advantage from literature and science, from schools and colleges. Of all people in the world we ought then to be, according to our means, the greatest patrons of schools and colleges.¹¹

Several colleges were established in the 19th century within the Stone-Campbell movement. In contrast to a 19th-century trend in American colleges, all of the Restoration Movement schools were co-educational from the beginning. The assumption was that all individuals – not just ministers, not just professionals, not just men – should be thoroughly educated and fully prepared for productive and informed Christian life in the world.

Alexander Campbell established Bethany College in 1840. In the spirit of unity that he so strongly sought, he encouraged ministers from various denominations to preach on campus. Ministers from any denomination were permitted to attend Bethany College without tuition charges. In such environments, the assumption was that the church is not yet fully restored but is in the process of being restored. Churches of Christ are heirs of a vision of higher education in which every assumption and tradition, including its own, is subject to scrutiny. In the words of church historian Dr. Richard Hughes, “The nondenominational ideal of Churches of Christ can thus help sustain the relentless search for truth that characterizes serious higher education.”¹²

These impulses toward gender inclusiveness and the rigorous pursuit of knowledge, which were embedded in the early Restoration colleges, were prominent among the colleges established in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Not surprisingly, all were liberal arts schools. Among them was Childers Classical Institute, established in Abilene, Texas, in 1906, which eventually became Abilene Christian University.

The 20th century witnessed the flourishing of several new colleges and universities among Churches of Christ. All of them emphasized the liberal arts. Most required students to take Bible courses and participate in regular chapel experiences. By mid-century, most had established graduate programs, some of which have gained national reputations for excellence. All are regionally accredited, with many of them accredited by discipline-specific accrediting associations. Over the last half century, schools associated with Churches of Christ have produced a disproportionately large number of graduates who have gone on to earn research doctorates and other terminal degrees –



a tribute to a long history of commitment to Christian higher education.

These same colleges affiliated with Churches of Christ were also affected by the social movements of the mid-20th century, especially the Civil Rights Movement. All the Christian colleges and universities except Pepperdine had excluded African-Americans from their beginning. This grave injustice finally began to be corrected in the 1960s, with enrollment open to all ethnic and racial groups. Several years later, in 1999, as the result of a series of racial reconciliation meetings, ACU issued a formal apology for the sin of racial discrimination in its past regarding its admission policies. The university continues to refine its policies and practices to be more consistent with the heart and spirit of Christ, the Creator of all.

These are our roots. This is the path God set us on. From it we should be able to see more clearly our purpose and our promise.

WHAT ARE THE CORE VALUES FROM OUR HERITAGE THAT INFORM THE GUIDING PRINCIPLES FOR OUR FUTURE?

Knowing where we have come from is crucial to knowing who we are and what our vision for the future should be. As we have seen, five dominant historical streams have profoundly shaped the Stone-Campbell Restoration movement, Churches of Christ, and therefore, ACU. In addition, certain instincts have been cultivated in that tradition regarding higher education. Out of that rich heritage have come a number of strengths, a set of values that are deeply embedded in our institutional DNA. From these values emerge guiding principles to help us clarify our identity and envision our future. Like individual strands of a rope, all are important and somewhat interconnected.

Christ at the Center

Jesus Christ is the focal point of all Scripture. Because he is Lord and Savior, every dimension of our lives is affected by that belief. The example of Christ should motivate all our behaviors and decisions and be a guide in every relationship. It is through the revelation of Jesus that we know God and the Holy Spirit. Therefore, the teachings and example of Jesus as revealed in Scripture should inform everything we believe and do as an institution of Christian higher education. Our aim is a lofty one – to make the priorities of Jesus our priorities. This continual quest requires from all in the ACU community a deep reliance on the Lord for wisdom and guidance.

Our goal is to instill in every student a moral and spiritual compass that centers on the person of Jesus and what He would have them do with their lives. We are charging our students to be ambassadors for Christ, agents of reconciliation and bearers of peace in a conflicted and divided world. We will call them and equip them by means of a distinctively Christ-centered liberal arts education to lead and to serve as followers of Jesus throughout the world.

PRINCIPLE: *ACU will keep Christ at the center of the university, informing the curriculum and co-curriculum, undergirding policies and decisions, and calling everyone to be shaped by His life, death and resurrection.*

¹⁰ M. Norvel Young, *A History of Colleges Established and Controlled by Members of the Churches of Christ*. Kansas City: The Old Paths Book Club, 1949, 25.

¹¹ *Millennial Harbinger*, Series One, VII (1836), 377, quoted in Young, *A History of Colleges*, 26.

¹² Richard T. Hughes, “What Can the Church of Christ Tradition Contribute to Christian Higher Education?” in *Models for Christian Higher Education: Strategies for Survival and Success in the Twenty-first Century*, edited by Richard T. Hughes and William B. Adrian. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997, 405.

The Authority and Inspiration of Scripture

The Bible is God's inspired Word. This tenet has been an invariable commitment of Churches of Christ from the beginning. The combination of the high value of reason, along with a fervent belief in Scripture's authority, created an environment in which the study of the Bible was honored and encouraged – publicly and privately.

Christian colleges and universities in this movement have always expected students to study and know the Bible. Decisions and policies in most of the schools in this tradition have been based on the assumption of the Bible's authority and its place in informing faith and practice. It has always been at the heart of ACU's reason for existence.

PRINCIPLE: *ACU will always emphasize Scripture as the inspired Word of God, through which believers may see and follow the God to whom Scripture points – Father, Son and Holy Spirit. ACU will have the teaching of the Bible as a significant component of its curriculum and will help students integrate faith and learning throughout all disciplines and university experiences, in preparation for their life and ministry through their careers.*

A High View of the Church

Churches of Christ have an unusual commitment to the life of the church. Congregational life is the center of Christian fellowship and practice. Each congregation is responsible for its own practices and belief, ideally overseen and shepherded by godly elders. All members are expected to engage in ministry and in worship.¹³

A university supported by such churches develops habits of extensive participation by students, staff and faculty in the life of the university. They engage in regular worship and look out for each other's interests. The commitment to church life means that people are never viewed as commodities but as bearers of God's image and valuable to God's kingdom.

Through the years, Churches of Christ have shared common beliefs on church organization, the process of conversion, the structure and content of worship, and other matters. There is more diversity of thought on these matters now than in days past. But attention to core matters of the Gospel, with grace in matters of opinion, offers the promise of a close and abiding fellowship among Churches of Christ.

Therefore, a university such as ACU is certainly not synonymous with a particular fellowship known as Churches of Christ, nor is it sponsored or "owned" by the church. Yet it is in some sense intimately connected to Churches of Christ, serving them and the broader Christian community in ways that compel it to be a leader in kingdom matters as an authentic and distinctively Christian institution.

PRINCIPLE: *ACU is committed to the life of the church through nurturing worship and community, by a commitment to unity and appreciation for diverse people and viewpoints, and as a faithful partner to churches around the world. To that end, ACU will serve the body of Christ by being an authentic and distinctively Christian institution.*



A Commitment to Academic Quality and Innovation

The Stone-Campbell Movement has demonstrated an unusual commitment to thought, reason, study and knowledge – the life of the mind. Since its beginning, the leaders of the movement were committed to educating people so they would make informed, quality choices. From the earliest days, these leaders were noted for their rational, even scientific, search for truth. Restoration churches assumed that every person had a responsibility to seek the truth. For that reason, several institutions of higher learning were established in this movement, as has previously been noted. Since the pursuit of knowledge was an expectation and a responsibility, faculty and students were expected to engage in scholarly activity within the framework of a broad liberal arts curriculum.

Because of a strong belief in individual free will¹⁴, the movement was and is committed to educating people so they will make responsible and informed choices within a Christian context. It is important that a strong emphasis on the pursuit of God's truth in all things be maintained in an environment undergirded by an emphasis on the liberal arts, as has historically been the case.

It is therefore no surprise that out of such a heritage, this high level of commitment to learning produces an environment of exceptional innovation at ACU. ACU has emerged as a world leader in the application of technology to learning. This achievement was and is led primarily by faculty from various academic disciplines. In this unique combination of commitment to the integration of Christian faith and learning, blended with serious scholarship in a quest for God's truth in all disciplines, focused on professional preparation, and set in a context where innovation is encouraged – all in a liberal arts context – ACU is ideally positioned for significant Kingdom influence in the 21st century through its graduates.

PRINCIPLE: *ACU is committed to the integration of faith and learning, grounded in the liberal arts, nurtured in a context of innovation, focused on professional preparation, and undergirded by rigorous scholarship at the undergraduate and graduate levels. Out of such a context will come graduates who will make responsible and informed choices within a Christian context as they serve and lead throughout the world.*

A Commitment to a Passionate Search for Truth

At the heart of the movement, growing out of Reformation and specifically English Puritan impulses, was a desire to restore the church of the New Testament. At its best, this impulse has meant each generation has the responsibility of looking at Scripture anew. The standard for the belief and practice of any church or individual is not doctrines passed down by previous generations but what the Bible teaches. In such a context, Scripture is always open to being rethought. Minds are always capable of being changed. The belief that truth can and must be constantly rethought can lead to churches of considerable vibrancy.

At ACU, such a commitment has meant that any topic may be discussed and any conclusion constructively disagreed with. For this reason, academic freedom has a high value. This openness to rethink any belief and examine any topic is one of the greatest virtues bestowed on ACU by its heritage in Churches of Christ. As former ACU president Dr. John C. Stevens said at his inauguration in 1969, "There are no subjects on this earth,

¹³ When leaders from this type of radical free-church tradition seek to establish and support a Christian university, it presents a unique set of challenges. With no overarching organization to create cohesiveness, or even a convention of delegates, the university is left with consensus-building and persuasion as the primary ways to maintain a constituency.

¹⁴ A defining doctrine among early Stone-Campbell churches was the belief in free will. Because these churches largely emerged out of the Reformed Tradition, it was no small thing to have rejected traditional Reformed teachings concerning the salvation of only the elect and to have insisted on individual free will. They believed that the will of God is not a detailed life plan to be discovered but a path to be walked in faithfulness. Seen rightly, a belief in free will does not undercut the sovereignty of God, nor does it assume salvation by works. Believers are expected to surrender to God's authority and to receive salvation as God's free gift.

“Part of equipping you means that we must ensure that you receive a world-class education: one that will open doors throughout your life, allow you to move in and out of all kinds of circles of influence, earn a place among the leading experts and scholars in your field, and create the kinds of opportunities in which you can truly make that real difference.”



— DR. PHIL SCHUBERT, *2010 Presidential Inauguration*



or in outer space, or in the metaphysical realm, which we cannot study on the campus of a Christian institution of higher learning.”

PRINCIPLE: ACU encourages the passionate search for all of God’s truth, where every subject is open to scrutiny, where dissenting voices are respected, and where conversations on any topic may be engaged with kindness and compassion. At the heart of the search for truth are the Scriptures themselves, where each generation can and must grapple with the eternal truths within its precepts.

A Commitment to Christian Unity

From its beginning, the Stone-Campbell Restoration Movement has had a strong commitment to Christian unity. Early leaders did not want to create a new denomination but to unite believers everywhere under the authority of Christ and in response to Scripture. That this unity movement devolved into division after division is one of the great tragedies of its history. But the instincts to unity are still present and are emerging from within contemporary Churches of Christ with increasing urgency. Moreover, with global trends evident toward the “undenominationalizing” of the church, the times are right for these unity instincts to thrive.

From its founding, ACU has welcomed students of all faiths without discrimination. In recent years, an increasing number of students have come from a variety of religious traditions, several of which are non-denominational in nature. Because of the priorities outlined in these principles, ACU is in an ideal position to honor the best of its founding religious tradition in Churches of Christ, while at the same time opening its arms wide to any student who qualifies for admission. ACU has always been the fruit of visionary and generous men and women from Churches of Christ and is committed to blessing Churches of Christ and the worldwide body of Christ.

ACU is in a crucial position in relation to these efforts. As a product and steward of this unity movement, the university can serve as well as lead the church toward greater unity. Christian unity is a concern ripe for campus engagement, discussion, scholarship, prayer and action.

PRINCIPLE: ACU prizes Christian unity as a high value articulating the Christian commitments that emerge from its heritage, yet welcoming the diversity inherent in that unity, respecting others who hold differing opinions, extending and receiving hospitality, and engaging all people with grace and humility. All will be done under the lordship of Christ and the authority of Scripture.

A Commitment to Prepare Students to Live as Authentic Christians

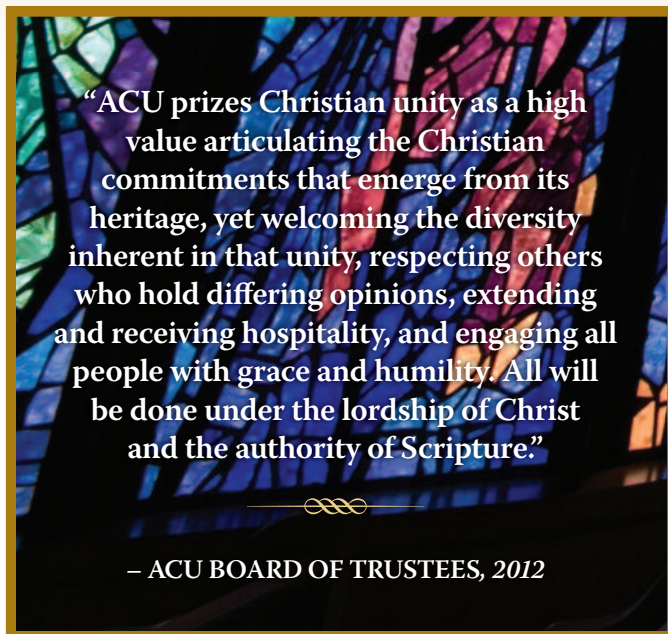
For many years, the university’s primary purpose has been summarized in these words: “The mission of Abilene Christian University is to educate students for Christian leadership and service throughout the world.” The university prides itself in producing decades of leaders and servants whose hearts and minds are shaped by their time at ACU. They are taught through the curriculum and through their activities to respect all people,

regardless of their race, nationality or circumstances. Students are taught to think globally, as they learn to understand their own culture and other cultures.

ACU is blessed to have talented and exceptionally dedicated men and women on the faculty and staff who are committed to its mission. They teach and work in an environment of innovation and creativity, which is often directed not only to academics but to the solving of problems or crises that arise in our troubled world. Through teaching and example, students are taught Christian virtues such as hospitality, generosity, stewardship of all things,

and concern for the marginalized of society – much as Jesus did. This unique blend of rigorous and innovative scholarship with Christian compassion and outreach in the ACU environment is a powerful motivator in transforming lives into the likeness of Christ.

PRINCIPLE: ACU will produce Christian leaders and servants who love God with all of their heart, soul, mind and strength, and who love their neighbors as themselves. Through teaching, example and prayer, students will be taught Christian virtues such as generosity, stewardship of all things, and concern for the marginalized of society – in the spirit of Jesus – as their lives are transformed into His likeness and fitted for eternity.



As we go forward guided by the seven principles discussed above, we do so with the knowledge, taught by experience, that pitfalls may lie ahead. The Stone-Campbell Restoration Movement and the influences that have shaped our past endow us with some less desirable qualities as well, such as an inclination towards arrogance in knowledge and divisiveness in spirit. We also know that too much emphasis on even the best of our qualities to the exclusion of others may lead to undesirable results, such as attempting to attain unity through unrestrained tolerance. Ultimately, we will accept the calling to climb higher in response to God’s call. Our faith does not allow us to live in fear of falling from the path of faithful excellence. As a Board holding Abilene Christian University in trust, we choose to move forward guided by these principles that call out the best of our past and lead us into the future with a clear sense of identity and mission.

WHAT KIND OF UNIVERSITY SHOULD WE BE?

Perhaps the most frequently quoted statement about ACU’s identity was made by former president Dr. Don H. Morris on Sept. 27, 1973, barely three months before his death, “This is no ordinary college that we have the privilege of being a part of.” Few of us would disagree. The impact of Abilene Christian University on the world, on all of us who have been touched by it, has been immense. It is truly an extraordinary university. But perhaps we need to stop from time to time and ask, in what ways is ACU so extraordinary? What are its highest values? What should our students be equipped to do and be? How should we be known? What should be passed onto the next generations? In an essay on the unique nature of a Christian university, the noted social

historian George Marsden concludes succinctly, “The central question is: what sort of community are we trying to create?”¹⁵

The answers to those questions seemed easier in decades past, when our culture appeared to be more stable, when most of our students came from the same sorts of churches, when we did not have to think so much about the state of higher education in America. But we live in the world as it is now, as former president Sewell reminds us, not as it has been in the past. We must succeed or fail in the midst of present-day conditions. And those conditions are challenging and unpredictable.

The university will have to make decisions in the next few years that will have substantial effect on its future. Faculty will have to make decisions about programs and curriculum, about new technologies and the best way to teach students who are different than they used to be. Decisions will have to be made about personnel, about how the university is organized, and even about how decisions are made. There will be decisions about budgets, recruiting, marketing and athletics. Decisions will have to be made about how to best serve a church constituency that is experiencing dramatic change. Trustees must make decisions about board policies and the best way to govern.

In such times, the impact of our decisions may be more consequential than in a simpler past. When things are moving so fast and when the landscape has so dramatically changed, taking

one path at a certain juncture may mean never being able to return to the path we chose not to take. We will not be able to pause at each decisive moment to ask about our identity and mission. We must know who we are now. To know who we are and to envision where we might go requires us to know where we came from. Then we can grasp our values. Then we can set our path forward. Such weighty matters deserve our most fervent prayers.

The purpose of this document is twofold: to be intentional about conveying our identity and mission, and to provide the groundwork for the conversations and decisions that lie ahead. There are many implications to work through. The various constituents of the university must engage in those important conversations and make those crucial decisions. But coming to grips with the *Why* that drives the many *Hows* must be done now.¹⁶

We are moving fast into a future where there are significant choices as well as consequences. Now is the time to claim our identity, to affirm our mission, and to live faithfully into our purpose and God’s promise. As the Board of Trustees of Abilene Christian University, we so commit ourselves to God, and ask for His guidance and grace in the faithful undertaking of the trust we hold. ▲

If you have comments or questions about this document for the Board of Trustees, please email identityandmission@acu.edu

¹⁵“Moving Up the Slippery Slope,” in Samuel Joeckel and Thomas Chesnes, editors, *The Christian College Phenomenon: Inside America’s Fastest Growing Institutions of Higher Learning*. Abilene, TX: ACU Press, 2012, 336. This excellent and thought-provoking article makes a careful distinction between faith-based colleges that cave in to cultural pressures over time and lose their Christian moorings (thus the “slippery slope”) and authentic Christ-centered institutions that regularly make cultural and social adjustments to hold faithfully to their Christian commitment.

¹⁶We can no longer assume new faculty, staff and students are aware of ACU’s implicit values simply by being on our campus. Many do not know the university’s story and its rich heritage in Churches of Christ, born of the Stone-Campbell Restoration Movement. To new members of the ACU community, we need to re-tell the story that has shaped our collective character and defined the values passed on to us from our heritage. We want to ensure they know our guiding principles and core values.

