

Thank you Chairman Healy, and thank you all!

What an amazing week this has been, and what an extraordinary culmination this is today!

I am both deeply honored and profoundly humbled by all of this.

It is an honor and a privilege to serve as your president, and it carries with it a humbling responsibility to get this right. To work with you effectively so that Methodist University may serve its students with excellence and may thrive for decades to come.

I wish to thank the Board of Trustees and Chairman Mac Healy, the faculty, the staff, the students, and the alumni of this great university. Thank you for this week, for the opportunity to serve you, and for the very kind welcome and support you have extended to Deborah and me from the very start.

I also wish to thank those who are visiting today: delegates from other institutions of higher learning, from Fort Bragg, from the North Carolina Conference of the United Methodist Church, from North Carolina Independent Colleges and Universities, and from city, county, state, and federal government, as well our friends and family who have traveled to be with us. Thank you so much for being here today.

To my family and friends, I owe an even larger debt of gratitude for the many years of love, support, and kindness you have given me. I especially want to mention my mother, Betty, who is watching this on live feed today, and who raised me so selflessly and so well, even when I was less than a cooperative son. I wish to thank my father, Stanley, who is no longer living but who still models for me what it means to be an academic professional; my mother-in-law, Mary, who is no longer with us, but who offered me and my children such instant love and acceptance; my father-in-law, Ron, who also has extended to us incredibly generous love, acceptance and support; and my brothers and sister and brothers and sisters-in-law, especially John, Laurie, and Bob, who are here today. Thank you for giving me a sense of belonging to a larger family and for kindly tolerating my terrible proclivity for corny jokes and puns.

To Dr. Marcello Fantoni, thank you for not embarrassing me as much as you could have – there are plenty of other stories from that trip to India, believe me. And thank you so much for your kind words this morning; it means a great deal to me. When I think of you, I think of the words of Leonardo da Vinci, who said, "I've long since known that people of real accomplishment don't sit back and wait for things to happen to them; they go out and happen to things."

Finally, I owe very special thanks to my extraordinary wife, Deborah, who is my moral compass, my best friend, my editor, and my partner in every way, and who has graciously and patiently accepted the many challenges of being married to Stan Wearden. Special thanks also are due to our children – Katie and her boyfriend Jim, Emily and her boyfriend Nick, and George and his girlfriend Kristin, who are all here with us today, as well as Henry and his girlfriend Alanah, and Joe, who were unable to join us. You are my greatest joy. You have made life challenging some of the time, but rewarding, fun, and love-filled all the time.

Methodist University. What an amazing place! A year ago, I was feeling increasingly drawn to this University. Impressed by its tradition and its growth in just a few short decades. Charmed by the beauty of the campus. Impressed too by the strength of the curriculum; the dedication, commitment, and talent of the faculty, staff, and trustees; the intelligence and kindness of the students. And fascinated by our potential.

This week's tagline has been "New Beginnings, Strong Traditions." I will confess that I am not a particular fan of taglines. Perhaps my favorite is that of the hypochondriac who had inscribed on his tombstone the tagline: "I told you I was sick." Or maybe Groucho Marx's tagline that our librarians might like: "Outside of a dog, a book is a person's best friend; inside of a dog, it's too dark to read."

Still, this week's tagline works for me because it captures what I saw in Methodist University one year ago and have come to see even more clearly since.

In a presentation earlier this week, I showed an image of the Methodist University tradition as three concentric circles. The inner circle represents the core of what I believe is our identity – a commitment to spiritual and moral inquiry in the great Wesleyan educational tradition. The middle circle represents our commitment to liberal arts and sciences. And the outer circle represents our strong professional and pre-professional programs. If I were skilled at graphics, which I am not, I also would have found a way to show that these circles are porous – permeable. The beauty of who we are is not only that we are committed to all these things, but that we are focused on the ways these areas of thought, inquiry, and practice interact, intertwine, and inform each other.

A Methodist University student receives a truly wholistic and integrated education. She leaves this place career-ready; but also capable of a high level of critical thought and creative problem solving; with a heightened sense of her own moral agency and as a skilled ethical practitioner. She is able to communicate with a high level of efficacy; and able to make better sense of life and of the world around us, to be a more effective and engaged citizen, and to derive more joy and satisfaction from life.

But this will only continue to happen if we continue to respect all three dimensions of our tradition and if we continue to teach across these dimensions in an integrated way. We must be vigilant about the creation and reification of silos. We must remind ourselves that all the things we think of as academic disciplines are, in the end, simply social constructs that emerged over time for intellectual and epistemological convenience. It is a reductionist error to think otherwise.

I am not arguing for the elimination of academic disciplines. But, I am arguing for two changes in perspective. First, given that all academic disciplines are social constructs, it is a fallacy to think that any one of them is more important than the others. All bring value to human inquiry and thought, but the greatest value stems from our ability to integrate them and use them collectively to solve problems and challenges. There are no discipline-specific problems or challenges. There are just problems and challenges – waiting to be solved. They're all best solved when they are examined from multiple different angles. We must respect one another and work together on solutions rather than slipping into smugness, superiority, or dismissiveness.

The second change in perspective relates to relevance. In every discipline, we have a duty to ensure, continuously, that the things we are studying and teaching remain current, relevant, and intentional. Given that academic disciplines are social constructs, no specific discipline will necessarily have permanent relevance. If that were not true, we would still be studying and teaching alchemy – still trying to convert lead to gold. It is therefore our duty to both test our disciplines against the standard of relevance and to change them or abandon them when they fail to meet that standard. We are not in the business of preserving silos. We are in the business of helping our students understand how best to know the world in which they live.

I've talked a bit about new beginnings already in my comments on disciplinary relevance and integrative learning. From a business perspective, this talk so far has been all about our product. And it is critically important that we keep a steady eye on product excellence. But, our product has value only to the degree that there is a market for it. And our market is shrinking in real numbers; it is changing both demographically and geographically; and it is being disrupted by the joint forces of perceived value, cost of delivery and infrastructure, and rapidly changing communication and information technologies.

We can no longer rely on our traditional market or our traditional almost exclusively face-to-face method of delivery.

We all know there has been a steady decrease in the U.S. birthrate. Beginning in about 2008, that declining birthrate started to affect the number of traditional high school

graduates. And it's interesting we were once able to practically ignore this market. There were plenty of students. Enrollment management used to mean managing so that we weren't over-enrolled. Now, all universities are competing fiercely for a shrinking slice of a shrinking pie.

We will, of course, remain in that competition, but we also need to diversify our student market. I have four groups in mind. First, we are adjacent to the largest military base in the world. There are many active duty soldiers and family members who could derive great benefit from a Methodist University education. There are veterans who are looking for education and training to start new careers. But we must make sure we are ready and receptive to this market. We must become a great deal more generous in our acceptance of transfer credits from military students who have done part of their studies elsewhere, and we must make it easy to award academic credit for military training credits. In addition, we must ensure that we are nimble and flexible in the learning modalities – such as online – that we provide and in the programs we offer, which should include both professional degree programs and a range of professional certificates.

The second group is community college students. Gone are the days when we referred to these schools, almost dismissively, as junior colleges. And gone are the days when some believed that most students attending these colleges were there because they were not academically prepared for a four-year school. Now, we know that most students attend these colleges precisely because they are smart. They realize they can get the first two years of college at a much lower cost and then transfer to a baccalaureate program after they finish their associate's degrees. After transfer, these students retain and graduate from bachelor's programs at a rate nearly 20 points higher on average than traditional first-time freshmen. These are good students taught by great community college faculty. To reach them, we need clear partnerships with every community college within 50 miles of Fayetteville. We need to be much, much more generous in our acceptance of transfer credits. And we need to explore dual admissions programs and even dual enrollment programs, whereby community college students can take at least a limited number of Methodist University courses at their community college tuition rate.

The third student market group I am thinking of is online learners and adult continuing learners. In an age when I can manage virtually my entire life from my digital devices, why can I not also take most if not all of my coursework through those same devices? To some degree, this is appealing to traditional college-age students, but it is even more appealing to adult learners who have jobs, households, families and lives to manage and for whom face-to-face learning is a near impossibility. We need a robust selection of online programs – both degree programs and certificates – and we must begin to position ourselves as a university for life. We should not have students and alumni. We should just have students at various levels of engagement and activity. At any given moment, some

will be taking courses and some will be temporarily inactive until they need us again as their careers and interests shift. And this means we need to develop the customer service infrastructure and communication strategies to remain in contact with these students over the course of their lifetimes. And, we need to ensure that we are continuously ready with curricular upgrades so we always have the product in place to serve these students.

The fourth group on my list is international students. American higher education is still the crown jewel of excellence. There are still many international students who would like to study in the United States. And there is tremendous value in having them here, aside from the fact that they represent a valuable market. We live in an age of global economy and global polity. We need an increase in cross-cultural understanding and greater empathy across cultures, and there are few better ways to do this than by having international students on our U.S. campuses and by encouraging our domestic students to spend some time learning abroad.

We will never cease to be a faith-based liberal arts and sciences university at heart. Those values will continue to infuse all we do, regardless of student market or learning modality. I am really just talking about extending the Methodist University educational tradition – our brand – to other markets that we do not traditionally reach.

I could go on talking about new beginnings. We need to rethink how we fund and maintain residence halls; we need to examine various ways of monetizing our undeveloped land; and we need to launch a campaign to significantly increase the size of our endowment. But I have talked too long already and those are conversations we can have another day.

I want to conclude by saying that Methodist University is grateful to the community of Fayetteville and Cumberland County. A community that generously founded and continues to support this university. We believe our presence here enhances the community, but we must also rededicate ourselves as a university to supporting the community. We need to be in regular conversation not just about what the community can do for us but about what energies and talents we can give back to the community. To be an integral part of the ongoing and impressive transformation of this region.

Let me just say, again, that I am profoundly honored and grateful to be in this job, and I am both humbled and enthusiastic about the responsibilities and opportunities it brings.

Thank you all for celebrating with us today and for your patience with my comments.