

**Dean Piehl's Remarks on the CC Vision
Presented to the CC National Council Lunch 2011**

I hope you all have enjoyed your conversations over lunch. It is wonderful to see so many great friends and supporters of Christ College here, along with our current students and faculty. This sense of a sustaining bond between past, present, and future is essential to the life of any vital institution, including Valparaíso University and Christ College. We need to be aware of constant change all around us, and attentive to new environments and opportunities, even as we root all our endeavors in our core values and commitments derived from the past.

As dean, I see it as my privilege and responsibility to uphold these connections between past, present, and future, and to deepen the commitment of our constituencies and friends to the ideals that inspire us and bind us together.

As many of you know, Christ College began out of a vision of former Valpo President O. P. Kretzmann. The legend regarding the origin of that vision goes that O.P. came up with the idea while returning from a trip to Germany and Britain, where the scars of war were still evident. Gazing from the rear of the ship into the deep waters of the dark Atlantic, he brooded on the moral and spiritual collapse of Western civilization that had led up to World War II, and meditated on what he called the “crisis of the postmodern world” that had ensued. (O.P. really did go in for these highly dramatic and sweeping modes of rhetoric—but there was great deliberation and substance behind them, too!)

Well, I don't know if that legend is true, and maybe it's not necessary to know. Like many founding myths, from those of Romulus and Remus to the Pilgrims, a story of founding probably expresses something genuine in the background of a city or a country or a college, whether or not it's literally the case. What we can say is that Christ College was genuinely intended to address very large issues from the beginning. If you read O. P. Kretzmann's original “Blueprint for Christ College,” as well as some of the other early documents, it seems to me that there were three distinct problems in education and the wider culture to which Christ College was created in order to pose a kind of small counter-cultural response, and that we have attempted to realize in life and practice.

The first was the increasing specialization and fragmentation of ever-expanding knowledge and learning. However necessary in its own right, the ways in which knowledge in our modern world is increasingly specialized and segmented has tended to undermine any sense of the unity of learning, and to some degree even of the unity of life itself. Academics, and the students who learn from them, have tended to concentrate ever more on technical and professional issues that emerge within their disciplinary frames of knowledge, but at the cost of gradually losing any sense of a common vision of a larger or more unified picture of the world.

As a result, a central problem of our age becomes not so much the accelerating advancement of knowledge and technology—which we uniformly take for granted—-but the confounding issues of cultural and social disintegration and fractured communication—what we might call the Tower of Babel effect. As technology and human ambition associated with it grows ever greater, as it did in that great Genesis story, the society underlying it all starts to fragment into confusion and “babbling.”

In response to this problem Christ College was created to include students from all the disciplines and areas of learning at the University, and to develop a small, autonomous interdisciplinary faculty, drawn primarily from the humanities, who would be capable of addressing large, common questions beyond their disciplinary specialties. The idea was not so much to solve all the “interdisciplinary issues” or unite all knowledge—as if anyone could!—but rather to keep alive a vision of the unity of life and learning. CC has aimed to keep foundational human questions that transcend disciplinary lines at the heart of education—questions that the disciplinary specialties, however brilliant and wonderful, can tend to obscure. In our mission statement today, we still affirm this quest by saying that one of the purposes of Christ College is to “integrate fields of study.”

The second issue that Christ College has been intended to address was the divorce of education and learning from questions of character and community. Whether this was well defined or not by O.P.’s language about the “postmodern world,” the idea of education as a strictly individual consumer good, or as an infinitely malleable plaything, was already in the air when CC was created—and of course has grown exponentially ever since.

The response of Christ College that was envisioned was a strong emphasis on the role of community in education—learning with and from one another in an atmosphere of mutual support, engagement, and stimulation. It would try to be a community where the virtues of character could be upheld and tangibly developed as integral, not accidental, in the pursuit of genuine wisdom—as Mark Schwehn so eloquently elaborated in *Exiles From Eden*. Faculty were to be mentors as well as experts, and the design of Mueller Hall was intended to promote such interaction through its openness and common spaces. As you may know, the community was originally going to be even stronger: there were plans for male and female residences on opposite sides of Mueller, and the Refectory was going to be the regular dining space. Those plans didn’t happen, perhaps wisely so—but in many other respects, Christ College did pursue its mandate of “community building” and character building from the beginning and continues to do so. So in our mission statement, we still say that one of the purposes of Christ College is to “inspire love of learning,” and we do that partly by creating a community that is itself inspirational in character.

The third question that Christ College has attempted to address is of course the question of faith and learning: How can the resources of faith—in this case specifically the Christian faith—

continue to be brought to bear on the ever more sophisticated, autonomous, and secular advance of learning in the modern University and the modern world? And by extension, how were people of faith, who profess and practice religious belief, to connect those convictions to their lives and professions in an increasingly secular and skeptical and technological and instrumental world? And could those who do not profess faith still be led to recognize that traditional religion might have a positive role in an unprecedentedly nonreligious age?

Well, I think the answer that was held up by the founders of Christ College was to try to engage the best of the Christian tradition—especially biblical studies and Christian ethics and the arts (including theater and visual arts), among other things—with the large challenges and central problems of the modern world. And this was to be presented not in a spirit of fear or anxiety or coercion, but rather in atmosphere of freedom and mutual respect for people of all perspectives and beliefs. As the Blueprint stated, “The atmosphere of Christ College is to be one of maximum freedom in every respect.”

As Robert Benne pointed out in his book *Quality with Soul*, which briefly discusses Christ College, O.P. Kretzmann was remarkably unique among tradition-minded orthodox Protestants of the mid-twentieth century because he encouraged and welcomed a cosmopolitan engagement with every aspect of the modern world. Unlike many religious folks in American culture of that time (and other times), Protestant and Catholic, there was absolutely no trace of cultural defensiveness or moral anxiety in the formation of Christ College—the sense of embattlement and fear of the outside world that sometimes overcomes religiously oriented people as they engage contemporary culture or witness some of its least attractive aspects.

On our campus this is perhaps best conveyed by the pervasive symbolism of “light.” whose deepest derivation comes from Valparaiso’s motto from Psalm 36:9: “In Thy Light We See Light” This sense of light is seen first of all with the conception and design of the Chapel of the Resurrection, which lets all the light flow into the worship space. Subsequent University architects have picked up on this, so that we see in our places of study and work an embodiment of the idea that the goal is never to separate the church-related college or University from the world, but really to let everything in and engage it even as we draw on the richness of religious tradition.

So Christ College was intended to be, and remains, a place where people of faith would ask the hardest questions possible, where they would welcome all comers, and where all ideas and ways of life would be thoughtfully considered..

There have of course been limitations on our vision. For a long time College spoke the language of “Western civilization” only—with only minimal awareness of non-Western world. The questions of interfaith relations and dialogue that are so vitally important today were not much on anyone’s radar screen. And questions of finances hardly appeared at all. When Dean Baepler

worried about accepting the deanship because of insufficient funding, O.P. wrote in reply that “the questions of economics are ones with which Christ College need not be concerned.” (Ah, those were the days!)

Of course a small honors college like ours cannot “solve” any of these great problems, which if anything have grown greater since CC was created. I need not detail for you all the challenges we face as educators and citizens in our world today: the debasement of mass education at the primary and secondary levels, even in the humanities, into the most rigid and narrow kind of training and “teaching to the test.” It is a tragedy that some of the best teachers are being driven out of primary and secondary schools because they no longer see genuine education valued there.

There is deep political polarization and reduction of much of our public life to harsh polemics and sometimes vicious jostling for advantage. And there is the economic crisis that still weighs so heavily on everyone.

But I do think that we have stood, and can still stand, as a visible place and symbol addressing those three principles: the focus on fundamental human questions and the integration of knowledge; the importance of character and community to learning; and the intellectual and practical relevance of faith, hope, and love in an instrumental and skeptical and even sometimes cynical world.

We must continue find new to uphold that vision, as represented by things like the Lilly Fellows Program—which has helped to reinvigorate Christian higher education across the United States—and CC’s alliance with Elizabeth Lynn’s Project on Civic Reflection, which brings the resources of the humanities into public life and institution. It is reflected in our support for the emerging interfaith initiatives and conversation on our campus, as we join in Valpo’s vision of a “Lutheran University constituted by people of many and various faiths and beliefs.” And it is above all in renewing our commitment to teaching and serving the students who come to us every year. They arrive as scared freshmen, and eventually become our wonderful seniors, our devoted alumni and friends like you.

Each year I look into the faces of those freshmen and see that fear. But I also remember the words of one CC student who reflected on her experience at Valpo and CC and wrote about herself and fellow students, “Faces and voices from the past rose up to surround and encourage us, and we gradually became aware of how the college’s history and tradition supports us in the present community.”

Many of you alumni here are those voices and faces from the past that have encouraged those in the present. And I hope that the seniors here—like all CC students of the past and future—will feel that invisible spirit and power that moves and sustains us in our enterprise.

I thank you all for coming, and wish you God's blessings as you carry out your own vocations that began in this special place.