

May 11, 2020

In these difficult days for all of us I pray that you experience the “grace, mercy, and peace from God the Father and Christ Jesus our Lord.”

I am reaching out to you today to share some exciting news about Calvin University’s vision and direction for the decade to come. I hope you will forgive the length of this message, but the goals we have are complex, and I would rather you have the full picture than a few bullet points. Please feel free to distribute this to your church council, leadership teams, Christian Education committee, or anyone else who may be interested.

Two years ago at Calvin, we stepped back to assess our strengths and weaknesses as we developed a strategy for the next decade. Our analysis included many of our strengths, including a strong Christian liberal arts foundation for all learning, breadth and depth of program offerings that are among the widest in Christian higher education (everything from classical studies to engineering), and rootedness in a Reformed Christian tradition that confesses that Jesus is Lord and seeks understanding in every field of knowledge.

Our analysis also observed that we have some opportunities for improvement. In this message, I want to share three of them with you because they may have a bearing on your understanding of Christian higher education.

- First, we observed that our faculty searches often turned up highly qualified academics from top Ph.D. programs, who also modeled a sincere, heartfelt love for Jesus. But, many of these candidates had never had the opportunity to integrate their Christian faith explicitly as they went about the task of teaching. Calvin provides a one-month seminar on the integration of faith and learning each January for these new faculty, but faculty stated that they wanted more training and development as they seek to build a bridge from the truth found in God’s special revelation to truths that can be discovered in God’s general revelation. ***As the next decade approached, we wanted to do more to invest in the Reformed Christian capacities of our faculty.***
- Second, we also observed that our criteria for evaluation of faculty after hire were based on three areas of performance that are quite conventional in higher education: teaching, scholarship, and institutional service/advising. In addition, faculty filled out a “compliance form,” which was more like a checklist that indicated compliance with the creeds and confessions, Calvin’s church membership requirements, and indicated that the faculty member sent their children (if they had any) to Christian schools. This approach ensured compliance but did not explore the beliefs and commitments that we hope animate the behaviors indicated by the compliance form. While this was never intended, it reduced church membership and Christian education to matters of compliance and did not persuasively explain the principles that animate congregational life or explain the assumptions that make Christian education so vital and necessary as we seek to

raise the next generation in the faith. ***As the next decade approached, we needed to broaden and deepen the principles that animate our faculty expectations so that Calvin could advance its Reformed Christian witness more effectively.***

- Third, we recognized that we had no strategy for church engagement in our community, nationally, or globally. As you know, Calvin University was founded by the Christian Reformed Church in North America, and we are completely committed to assuring that Calvin meets the mission that the CRCNA established for it. The university's primary engagement with the CRCNA has been through the church's oversight at the synodical level. This emphasis on governance is appropriate, but a sole emphasis on governance overlooks the rich opportunities for partnership and relational connection to local congregations that support and form our faculty, staff, and their families. The church membership requirements have always encouraged Calvin faculty to attend a CRCNA church while at the same time allowing them to attend a church in ecclesiastical fellowship with the CRCNA. Our staff, who provide support for our educational mission, are required to be committed Christians and live out their faith in a Christian congregation. ***As the next decade approached, we recognized the need for a more coherent congregational strategy to deepen and strengthen Calvin's connection to churches around the corner and around the world.***

With this and many other challenges in mind, the university approved a vision and strategic plan to guide us through this decade. At the heart of our mission, "to equip students to think deeply, to act justly, and to live wholeheartedly as Christ's agents of renewal in the world," is our sense that we are called to become a leading source for Reformed Christian thinking in the world. While it may be countercultural, we believe with all our heart that the world needs a Reformed Christian transformational vision. Calvin has long aspired to honor God's sovereignty over all things and to work in and under the broad, covenantal reach of Scripture. To that end, we are expanding on our commitment to teach from a Reformed Christian perspective to become a resource for Reformed Christian thought leadership. Equipping Christian faculty to meet this vision is a central task.

To this end, Calvin University is launching several key initiatives and strategic changes to advance this vision:

- **To invest in the biblical and theological understanding required for faculty** from every discipline, we announced the receipt of a substantial gift that will enable faculty at every level to achieve our faculty development goals for faith and learning. This gift releases faculty from some teaching responsibility to take courses that will advance this understanding, provides time to develop curriculum and scholarship to enable Christian thought leadership, and offers an opportunity to receive mentoring from faculty who are further along on this journey. The Kuyper Global Faculty Development Institute will train every faculty member to think deeply about the integration of faith and learning from a Reformed perspective and help them implement the best practices in doing this important work. No other Christian college has a resource like this Institute. It will assure that Calvin remains a leader in providing the finest Reformed Christian education.
- We are **also developing online resources to invite Christian educators** from across the country and around the world to join us in this discovery. We are committed to sharing the fruits of this abundant harvest with pastors and church staff members. Our new suite of short courses on Christian Witness and the COVID Crisis and the Certificate Program in Bible Instruction are just

two current examples of the collaboration we hope to see in the future. Like the Calvin Prison Initiative, these programs are offered in concert with our oldest and most trusted partner, Calvin Theological Seminary.

- The Calvin University Board of Trustees and the faculty have unanimously approved new expectations for faculty development and performance. These expectations add a new category for faculty performance to teaching, scholarship, and service called “Reformed Christian Commitment.” This new category makes many of the **values that have long been implicit in our community much more explicit:**
 - 1) Trustees, administrators, and faculty members will continue to be expected **to understand and affirm the historical creeds and Reformed confessions** contained in the Covenant for Faculty Members.
 - 2) Trustees, administrators, and faculty members are expected **to engage in Christian practices that are sustained by membership in a congregation of the CRCNA, a church in ecclesiastical fellowship with the CRCNA, or a Calvin University-supporting Protestant congregation.**
 - 3) Regarding Christian education, the faculty expectations now require a Calvin faculty member to **“articulate a Reformed Christian view of education and describe how one actively supports Christian education.”** Calvin’s entire reason for existence depends on this premise. In the past, the only required evidence of this was that a faculty member checks a box in his or her compliance form, and if they had children, they sent their children to Christian schools (although there were many exceptions to this requirement). Now, more consistent with Article 71 of the Church Order of the CRCNA, a faculty member at the time of reappointment and tenure will be asked to articulate this commitment and to explain how he or she actively supports Christian education.
 - 4) **Demonstrate an understanding of diversity and inclusion** that is consistent with Reformed Christian theological ideas and contribute to the university’s diversity and inclusion goals.
 - 5) **Demonstrate dispositions that mark a life of Christian faith and service** and support students and colleagues in doing the same.
 - 6) And Calvin University faculty members are expected **to integrate Reformed Christian perspectives** into their teaching, scholarship, and service.

We believe that these expectations deepen and strengthen our Reformed Christian witness and enhance our capacity to fulfill our mission in the decade to come.

- Calvin University recognizes that we must be more visible, proactive, and intentional if we are to **fulfill our hope to continue to be a trusted partner to the church, congregations, schools, and organizations in our communities.** It is our belief that we need to renew, deepen, and strengthen these connections with the churches and schools where our faculty and staff congregate and educate. Over the next two years, we will begin this effort by sending out representatives of the university to the churches where our faculty and staff worship in an

effort to understand how we might encourage one another and to invite the **local congregations to affirm the calling of its parishioners who are faculty and staff at Calvin University.** We are eager to partner with you in the Christian formation of faculty and staff, learning about the worship, discipleship, and pastoral care opportunities offered by your local congregation and how we can encourage our faculty and staff to take advantage of them.

In the same way, we also desire something similar to the Christian schools in our region. Our faculty and staff depend upon local churches and Christian schools to raise the next generation of children to love Jesus Christ. Calvin intends to deepen and strengthen the Centers and Institutes that support your organizations, including the Calvin Institute on Christian Worship and the Calvin Center for Faith and Writing. In addition, **Calvin will continue to provide financial assistance** to support our faculty who send their children to Christian schools. This benefit is an important statement of our solidarity as Christian educators.

I want to thank you very much for reading this far into my long message. Calvin University's mission is essential, partnership with you is critical, and our ability to map out a mutually supportive future depends upon all of us. I would be pleased to speak with you if you should have further questions. In this unsettled season, I do hope that you experience the love and grace of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

Sincerely yours,



Michael K. Le Roy
President
Calvin University