

"Witnesses"

Remarks at the Ceremony of Naming and Dedication
The Wanda A. Howard '81 Black Student Union Center
Huntingdon College, Montgomery, Alabama, October 24, 2020
J. Cameron West, President of the College

When you walk through a campus this old, this beautiful, this historic, this -- well, both for better and for sometimes worse -- this traditional, you are surrounded by witnesses. Witnesses from the past, speaking a message to the present and guiding us into a more just, more grace-filled today and tomorrow. These bold, courageous, faith-filled witnesses are members of -- in the words of the Epistle to the Hebrews -- a "great cloud of witnesses."

As I have walked this campus night and day over the last six months, I have heard clearly the voices of a persistent, urgent cloud of witnesses who are saying this: "Now is the time. Now is the time to claim what is holy, what is God-inspired, what is just about our Huntingdon traditions and make room for them to guide the College fully into a new day that cannot, that will not be reversed."

Who are these witnesses? They are countless, many from the deep past, many from the near past, and now many from the present who are poised to create not only a better present but also a hope-filled vision for the future.

The Countess of Huntingdon -- a wealthy white evangelical Englishwoman, a supporter of the Methodist preacher George Whitefield -- who was so inspired by the religious poetry of the enslaved young black woman Phillis Wheatley that she paid for the publication of a book of poetry by Miss Wheatley in 1773, the first published book of poems in the English language by a person of African descent. And thus was inspired John Wheatley to grant Phillis Wheatley the freedom in this world she had always known in the Kingdom of God by faith.

And on down the years -- forgive me if I name Methodists all: Nelle Harper Lee, author of *To Kill a Mockingbird* and *Go Set a Watchman* (need I say more?). The Reverend Claude Shuford, who worked a full time job as a grocery store meatcutter to pay his way through Huntingdon in pre-ministerial studies preparing for seminary at Emory and ministry in the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church, and who 15 years ago made it possible for a young man in his church to attend Huntingdon, graduate as valedictorian, go on to medical school, and now practice medicine. I remember that young man's Commencement on The Green when I handed him his diploma and then announced him as the most outstanding academic student in his class. I also remember his face, and Claude Shuford's face, in a sea of black faces when I -- the only white person present -- preached at an AME Zion worship service at the Lomax-Hannon Conference Center in Greenville. I was there because Claude Shuford had introduced me to his Bishop, James McCoy, over lunch in the Huntingdon Dining Hall and then encouraged Bishop McCoy to invite me to Lomax-Hannon. What I remember most about that day was the hospitality I felt, the unconditional love, the embrace by 500 black men and women with whom I shared something that our difference in color could never conquer -- our Christian faith and our

commitment to a just world. A great cloud of witnesses. I could go on and on. I'll mention one more.

Wanda A. Howard, Huntingdon Class of 1981, formed by holy and righteous and courageous forbears in the crucible of a devout family and a vibrant community of faith, Weeping Mary AME Zion Church in Tuscaloosa County; a founding mother of the Huntingdon College Black Student Union in 1980, 40 years ago; a mentor to the Black Student Union 40 years later. You know her through her life. Read about her life in today's program, and give thanks to God.

To what are all these people, formed in the Methodist tradition and inextricably linked in The Huntingdon Family, to what are all these people witness? To what do they call us in "the present age" (to borrow language from Charles Wesley)? To what do they call us at this time, our time? To borrow more language from Mr. Wesley, what is "our calling to fulfill"?

It is a calling to live into a way of life rooted in the Hebrew prophets and in the lives of Jesus and the Apostles, a way of life borne out in the work -- yes, work, for that is what a way of life is -- the work of two other holy Alabamians who spoke often of what they named "The Beloved Community." They were Baptists, but holy nonetheless (!) -- the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and Congressman John Lewis. These witnesses call us to live into The Beloved Community. In the Beloved Community, we:

1. Offer radical hospitality to everyone, as an inclusive family rather than an exclusive club;
2. Recognize and honor the image of God in every human being;
3. Recognize and affirm, not eradicate, differences -- for we are all created in the image of God, different though we may be;
4. Foster empathy and compassion for others;
5. Tolerate ambiguity, realizing that sometimes a clear-cut answer is not readily available and must be sought carefully, patiently, humbly;
6. Acknowledge conflict or pain in order to work on difficult issues;
7. Speak the truth in love, avoiding physical aggression and verbal abuse;
8. Resolve conflicts peacefully, without violence, recognizing that peacefully does not always mean comfortably;
9. Focus energy on removing evil forces and unjust systems, not on destroying persons;
10. Persist in an unyielding and unwavering commitment to justice;

11. Foster dynamic and active spirituality, recognizing that God is dynamic and active, not passive;
12. Gather together for table fellowship, remembering that it is at table where we most fully recognize God in the faces of others;
13. Work to create a non-racist society;
14. Share power and acknowledge the inescapable network of mutuality among the human family;

(I am grateful to the writing of Dr. Arthuree Wright for teaching me these
marks of The Beloved Community)

15. Remember and affirm that Black Lives Matter.

It is The Beloved Community to which we are called by Scripture, by the holy heart of our College's tradition, to witness today just as those who have come before us have witnessed when they were true to our Judeo-Christian heritage and to the true meaning of what being a Huntingdon Hawk is all about. May the Black Student Union be a continuing witness to The Beloved Community, and may this space which we set aside, name and dedicate today -- The Wanda A. Howard '81 Black Student Union Center -- be a place where that witness faithfully happens.