

Oriented to Love

**A contemporary vision
for faith formation
at Goshen College**

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GOSHEN  COLLEGE

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Executive Summary

As a faith-based learning community, Goshen College (GC) has an unwavering commitment to our core values, including Christ-centeredness, and to our Mennonite tradition. At the present time, we are also challenged by a number of factors, both internal and external:

- Demographic changes associated with immigration and birth rates
- Shifting generational values, shaped in part by technology and the pandemic
- Eroding trust in churches and higher education
- Streamlined structures in our denomination and college
- The rise of Christian nationalism
- Persistent social inequalities.

We stand in the crossroads of context and calling.

Drawing upon research, scripture, the voices of Goshen College constituents, and Mennonite understandings of the way of Jesus, this white paper attempts to provide a contemporary vision and framework for faith formation at Goshen College. After reviewing our current expressions of Christ-centeredness, the paper speaks to a number of questions about why and how Christ-centeredness remains essential to Goshen College, and how faith formation can become more lively as we have become more multicultural. Our beloved rituals and expressions also point us to several focal scripture passages that we can look to for particular light and guidance.

As educators and companions in the diverse and unfamiliar terrains that life presents, we provide metaphorical maps that help us orient toward life in Christ, which is love. A framework is proposed to clarify the meaning of Christ-centeredness as our animating core value and to focus our intentions about faith formation in all aspects of life at Goshen College. In summary, the framework claims that in Christ we are:

- **Beloved:** Experiencing in our bodies and souls what it feels like to be loved uniquely and treated with dignity.
- **Empowered:** Called and liberated to participate in the ongoing abundant life of the Body of Christ.
- **Learning:** Seeking with passion and humility, trusting that God reveals and embraces all that is true.
- **Practicing love in action:** Following the way of Jesus.

The paper concludes with aspirations and recommendations for how we might embody authentic Christ-centeredness in the Goshen College context today.

“I pray... that you may be strengthened in your inner being with power through his Spirit and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love.” (Ephesians 3:16-17)

Introduction

A Challenging Context

In January 2020, five working groups of administrators, faculty and staff began discerning a strategic plan for Goshen College (GC). Three months later, all the work of the college was shifted to be remote to mitigate the mounting COVID-19 pandemic. Nevertheless, after a pause, the working groups persevered through the challenging context of 2020-21 to deliver a set of aspirations, goals and objectives that has guided our work over the past four years: *Where Everything Connects, a strategic plan for Goshen College, 2021-2027*.¹

Introducing this plan, we wrote:

“This plan builds upon our founding cornerstones of Christian faith and commitment to ‘Culture for Service,’ as well as our recently renewed vision and mission... Claiming our Anabaptist-Mennonite heritage and inspired by the life and teachings of Jesus, joy, growth and purpose will characterize our learning and service.”

We also emphasized:

“Teaching and learning *about* diversity and *through* our diversity is foundational to our academic excellence, real world experience and active love for God and neighbor. We want Goshen College to be known as a place where people go out of their way to learn to know one another and to make others feel welcome.”

Indeed, as we have implemented this plan, GC’s journey to become more diverse and inclusive has continued. Our student body became “majority minority”² and in 2023 we were designated a Hispanic-Serving Institution.³ To reflect this inclusivity, faculty promotion processes were shifted to focus on the core values of Goshen College⁴, rather than the “Confession of Faith in a Mennonite⁵ Perspective,” because it excluded

¹ **Goshen College’s Strategic Plan 2021-2027**, Goshen.edu, <https://www.goshen.edu/about/leadership/president/strategic-plan/>. The concise version of the plan published on our website is elaborated in a longer document with detailed objectives and targets.

² Meaning that less than half of our students are White U.S. citizens.

³ **Hispanic-Serving Institution**, Goshen.edu, <https://www.goshen.edu/about/diversity/hispanic-serving-institution/>

⁴ Goshen College, *Goshen College’s Five Core Values*, described in the next section. They are: Christ-centeredness, Global Citizenship, Servant Leadership, Compassionate Peacemaking and Passionate Learning.

⁵ Here and throughout this paper, Mennonite refers to those in Mennonite Church USA, which is one denomination within a broader variety of Anabaptist-Mennonites.

LGBTQIA+ people and felt too doctrinal, even for our Mennonite faculty. We set goals around diversifying our faculty, and we have hired and/or promoted several excellent scholars who are from other faith traditions and who also resonate with, and support, our Mennonite values.

Meanwhile, the global pandemic disrupted habits of church-going, and accelerated disenchantment with organized religion. Gallup's annual national survey of trust in institutions has been tracking a steady decline in trust in the church or organized religion. The proportion of Americans who expressed "a great deal/quite a lot" of trust in the church has fallen steadily from 60% in 2001 to 32% in 2024.⁶ This decline of trust in institutions is generalized and widespread – Americans also have steadily lost trust in the government, business, newspapers, education and more.

Adding further challenge to our embrace of Christ-centeredness is the rise of Christian nationalism. This is particularly difficult for Mennonites, whose Anabaptist roots were deeply formed in a theology of the separation of Church and state. Mennonites particularly abhor the political and social movements afoot that seek to merge Christian and American identities. As described by our colleagues at Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary,

"Christian nationalism exchanges the church's loyalty to the Lord of Peace for a false god fashioned by the myth of American exceptionalism. [It] is a form of political idolatry that distorts our knowledge of God and neighbor through a xenophobic, racialized and militarized gospel that is at odds with the life and teachings of Jesus."⁷

How can we embolden our Christ-centered faith identity when the very name of Christ is being co-opted to increase the wealth and power of a movement that is predominantly White and male?

Meanwhile, our Mennonite Church USA (MC USA) denominational structures have become smaller, and as I write this in early 2025, the Mennonite Education Agency is sunseting its work as an agency of MC USA. The church's focus on education will be incorporated into the work of the Executive Board and its staff. The most recent process of creating new Statements of Arrangements with the Mennonite Church focused mostly on finances and services, with less time and attention paid to faith articulation, alignment and church-school collaborations.

⁶ Gallup, "Confidence in Institutions," *Gallup*, <https://news.gallup.com/poll/1597/confidence-institutions.aspx>.

⁷"What is Christian nationalism?" <https://ambs.edu/learn-now/what-is-christian-nationalism/>.

Tight budgets at GC over the past ten years have also decreased the number of staff whose effort is singularly devoted to our Mennonite Christian mission. We no longer have a staff person in advancement whose effort is entirely devoted to church relations. Staffing in campus ministries was reduced to one half-time pastor. These changes have certainly been challenging, and increase the need for Goshen College as a whole to own our faith identity and intentions around faith formation.

An Unwavering Commitment

In the midst of these many changes, the college's commitment to our core values, including Christ-centeredness, has been unwavering. Our strategic plan, as well as our refreshed mission and vision statements embrace our Mennonite tradition and Christ-centered values with passion. One goal within our aspiration for "Thriving Students" was to:

"Develop a more explicit model for student development, including faith development, and align GC practices and programs to support the model."

And speaking to our employee experience, we committed to:

"Increase familiarity with Anabaptist-Mennonite faith and practices for all employees, regardless of religious orientation."

These would not be *strategic* statements if we felt complacent about our faith identity. There are real tensions at play. Decreasing size and cohesion in Mennonite congregations, faculty and students mean that Goshen College's faith identity can no longer ride the tide of Mennonite denominational identity, nor can we depend on the denomination to define our distinctly Mennonite faith identity for us. Our embrace of religious pluralism and inclusion can make us become squeamish about claiming Christ as the center of our life and mission and hesitant to truly explore what that means.

In moving toward these strategic goals, we began by listening carefully. We have held conversations about GC's faith identity with various stakeholder groups, adding up to more than 100 hours of recorded or transcribed narrative from our community.⁸ Here is how Goshen College expressed in our words the strategic need for a bolder articulation of our faith identity and story:

⁸ All of the quotes from Goshen College faith identity conversations are identified in a purple font, and attributed to the group that held the conversation, not to specific individuals. See [Goshen College faith identity conversations and retreats, 2022-24](#) for a fuller description of this source material.

“GC needs to be more explicit about what we believe and why. We don’t like putting our faith into words and would rather live it out. But we are at a turning point and should no longer be shy about our strengths.” (Alumni Council)

“We need to be more evangelical by telling people who we are and why we are... We need to talk more about why we value what we do and where it comes from.” (Student Life Staff)

“Many students don’t understand their faith identity when they arrive, so we need a structure that invites students to ask those questions; we need spaces on campus for students to work through their faith identities and name doubts.” (Faculty)

“GC is an opportunity to explore faith from all angles. The faith at GC is part of what makes coming here a transformative experience.” (Student).

“GC is very good at deconstructing faith. This is eye opening for those coming from different spaces. We struggle with (re)construction. To sustain our faith identity, we can’t just focus on deconstruction but also on faith formation.” (Cabinet summary)

In sum, we need to meet the faith-related goals of our strategic plan for the most existential reasons:

In a business sense, to be more explicit and transparent about our faith identity is strategic because our Mennonite faith tradition has the potential to help us stand out in the competitive marketplace of higher education today, and particularly in our subsector of small, faith-based liberal arts colleges. We cannot afford to make any assumptions about what people understand of Christianity or the Mennonites – if indeed they have ever heard of Mennonites.

In a spiritual sense, to probe deeply into our roots of faith is what will keep us alive in the wilderness of the moment – with the unrelenting and depressing media narrative of the church and higher education both in decline. Jesus came *that [we] may have life and have it abundantly*.

Telling the Old, Old Story in These New Times

Shirley Showalter, president of Goshen College from 1997-2004, wrote that “When our stories seem ‘stuck,’ the answer is not to retreat, but to create more and better ones.” In some moments, it has felt to me that GC’s uniquely Mennonite story of Christ-infused liberal arts has lost its way, not so much in the *doing* but in the *speaking, claiming and explaining*. We have gotten ‘stuck,’ if you will, in the crossroads of context and calling.

Jesus, the Torah-loving Jewish rabbi who broke the good news to *all* people, knows this crossroad. Jesus *lives* at this crossroad (and many others).

After several years of working with the Goshen College community on the faith-related goals of our strategic plan, I had the privilege of taking three weeks away from campus in the Sonoran desert near Tucson, Arizona to review our many campus conversations, writings by others, to wander miles of trails amongst the mighty saguaros, and listen to the Spirit with the goal of articulating our Mennonite Christ-centered mission and values in a new way. How might we tell the “old, old story... of Jesus and his love”⁹ in these new times?

⁹ Kate Hankey, "I Love to Tell the Story" (1866).

Learning Process and Resources Used

Writing this white paper¹⁰ has been a learning process. I have often felt inadequate. I am a scientist, not a theologian or a pastor. But I am educated in the liberal arts tradition, I am a researcher, I connect ideas well, I have a lively life of faith, and I care deeply. In responding to the challenges we face (laid out in the introduction), I have mainly synthesized the wisdom of others: writers, researchers, Christian college communicators, and the words of the Goshen College community. I have also prayed, discerned, journaled and tested key ideas with colleagues. To make this process as transparent as possible, this section summarizes key sources.

Research on the Generation We Are Serving Today

During late adolescence and early adulthood, people explore and forge their identities, develop autonomy and critical thinking skills, and seek out relationships. While I hope and intend for faith formation to be relevant and lively for all of us at all life stages, I write with our traditional undergraduate students especially in mind, as our face-to-face teaching and learning centers primarily around this age group.

The great majority of our undergraduate students are part of Gen Z, the generation who were born between 1997 and 2014, following the millennial generation. They have spent their entire lives immersed in technology and the digital world, and were in school throughout the COVID-19 pandemic.

The business consulting firm EY studies Gen Z as customers and employees,¹¹ and finds that one of Gen Z's highest values is authenticity. Gen Z are greatly concerned about people being treated badly because of their identities, even more so for others than for themselves. Gallup's national sample of Gen Zers placed a higher value on happiness and quality of life than career or material outcomes.¹² Gen Z also experience a higher burden of depression and anxiety than previous generations, and they care deeply about well being.¹³

Roberta Katz, a scholar who studies Gen Z, describes the generation in this way:

“In summary, a typical Gen Zer is a self-driver who deeply cares about others, strives for a diverse community, is highly collaborative and social, values flexibility,

¹⁰ I have struggled with what to call this, but have settled for now on “white paper,” because it presents research on a complex issue and attempts to help readers understand and issue or solve a problem.

¹¹ EY, [Gen Z Finding Meaning Study](#), accessed in March 2024.

¹² Walton Family Foundation, *Gallup Survey of Gen Z Voices, Year 2 Annual Report (2024)*.

¹³ Ibid

relevance, authenticity and non-hierarchical leadership, and, while dismayed about inherited issues like climate change, has a pragmatic attitude about the work that has to be done to address those issues.”¹⁴

These generational characteristics are salient as we think about faith formation today. Our approach must be authentic, respect diverse identities, and contribute to our students’ sense of well being and agency in a scary world.

The Faith and College Life Study

Last year, the Lilly Network of Faith-Based Colleges and University published a large mixed-methods research study that involved more than 2,000 students from 34 faith-based institutions, including Goshen College¹⁵. Their primary research questions were:

1. What do students attending church-related colleges/universities value in their spiritual and intellectual lives?
2. How does a church-related liberal arts education enhance or diminish students' faith commitments?
3. What do students see as the purpose of a church-related college/university?

The study found that students at faith-based colleges value spirituality, and three-fourths of them said that they have grown spiritually in college. Most of the students said that their spiritual beliefs influence their identity, their goals and their whole approach to life. The students strongly expressed that they want to be intellectually formed in their faith. The intersection of classroom learning and life learning matters to them. And while the Christian nature of their colleges was not a top influencer of their college choice, the sense of community on campus drew them to a faith-based college and has continued to form them. In fact, three-fourths of students said that the sense of community at their college was very important, and this was about equally true for students from Christian, minority faith and non-religious backgrounds.

The Faith and Life Study also found that close relationships with peers and with faculty strengthened students’ faith at faith-based colleges, along with coursework that introduced them to new ideas about faith, religion, the Bible and each other. This held true regardless of religious background. In contrast, the things that were found to

¹⁴ [Stanford Report](#), "Gen Z Are Not 'Coddled.' They Are Highly Collaborative, Self-Reliant, and Pragmatic, According to New Stanford-Affiliated Research," January 3, 2022

¹⁵ Hannah Evans and Keri Koshiol, [Faith and College Life](#). (Springtide Research and the Lilly Network of Faith-Based Colleges and Universities, 2024).

weaken students' faith were feeling forced to do or think things, and also feeling isolated if they don't believe or do the *right* things.

Goshen College Faith Identity Conversations and Retreats, 2022-24

Beginning in 2022, in response to our strategic plan, we have held numerous conversations about our faith identity. In 2022 we hosted open-ended conversations with teaching faculty, administrative faculty, student life directors, the student senate, the alumni council, the president's cabinet and the board of directors. The conversations focused on these two questions:

1. What are the most important and formative ways that you experience(d) GC's faith identity?
2. What are the factors that you think are most essential to sustaining our faith identity?

In total, these conversations included well over 100 person-hours of conversation. All of the conversations were recorded, either in minutes or by voice recordings. These were summarized into themes by an experienced narrative researcher¹⁶, and quotes that particularly illustrated themes were highlighted verbatim. These summaries, themes and quotes have served to ground this white paper, and are used to give voice to Goshen College today throughout the paper.

In addition, we held two retreats (in 2023 and 2024) that gave invited groups of faculty, staff and students the opportunity to elaborate further on the questions above and also (in 2023) to distill what our students need most in support of their faith formation. These were also documented and have been useful in grounding this paper.

All of the quotes from these Goshen College grounded sources are identified in a purple font, and attributed to the group that held the conversation, not to specific individuals.

Other Readings

In 2022, I gathered an interdisciplinary group of GC faculty with expertise in the Mennonite faith tradition to talk about how we might best move forward to renew and re-articulate our faith identity. I needed their counsel, as I reckoned with the realities and challenging context that we face. Joe Springer, then curator of the Mennonite Historical Library and GC archivist, put together an annotated bibliography for that meeting, citing the seminal works on Mennonite higher education that had been written by leaders throughout the past 50 years. He then went on to say that in producing this bibliography,

¹⁶ I am deeply grateful to Grant Miller for accomplishing the documentation and identification of themes from these narrative data. Some of the quotations are verbatim from individuals, and others are Miller's summaries of the sense of the conversation.

it was his considered opinion that this time calls for something more than a summary of what has been written in the past. We need to say something new.

From that bibliography, the one book that I have studied while attempting to write something new is the 2011 book, *Teaching that Transforms: Why Anabaptist-Mennonite Education Matters*, by GC Professor Emeritus of History John D. Roth.¹⁷ This book was written at the behest of Mennonite Education Agency, and was intended to inform all of Mennonite education – K-12 schools as well as higher education.

In the foreword to this book, Ervin Stutzman, then executive director of the Mennonite Church USA, celebrated Roth's conviction that Mennonite schools "will be shaped by a Christ-centered understanding of relationships with other people, and a Christ-centered view of the church as the visible form of the resurrected Jesus in the world today."¹⁸

Roth's description of Mennonite education 13 years ago foreshadows this white paper in many ways. Roth wrote:

"Mennonite education is in the midst of a significant religious, cultural and economic transformation that poses some daunting and complex challenges for the future."

He described the challenges of holding a commitment to the Anabaptist vision "with its strong emphasis on discipleship, community and an ethic of love," while the Mennonite Church itself was undergoing profound transformation away from its "embarrassing particularity" and "otherness" of past eras. He also described how Mennonite education was embracing outreach to new constituents who were not European-American Anabaptists, bringing tensions with our identity of the past but also "the potential to enliven and renew the tradition itself."¹⁹

I also delved into the work of other writers who represent a variety of traditions grappling with Christian faith formation. These and other sources are cited along the way, but I'll say a bit more about four books that shaped my thinking and how each one found its way into my hermitage in Arizona.

1. Louis M. Savary, *The New Spiritual Exercises: In the Spirit of Pierre Teilhard de Chardin* (Paulist Press, 2010). I've admired Pierre Teilhard de Chardin for many years, and my friend and spiritual director Dwight Judy recommended that I engage Teilhard through the work of the Jesuit author, Savary. This book and its

¹⁷ John D. Roth, *Teaching that Transforms. Why Anabaptist Education Matters*. Herald Press, Scottsdale PA, 2011.

¹⁸ Ervin R Stutzman in Roth, p 10.

¹⁹ Roth, pp 19-22.

exercises helped me to envision the “Christ Project” and its ever-evolving work in the world. The exercises also grounded me in the astonishingly loving presence of Christ.

2. Elizabeth Conde-Frazier, S. Steve Kang, and Gary A. Parrett, *A Many Colored Kingdom: Multicultural Dynamics for Spiritual Formation* (Baker Academic, 2004). The authors describe the book as an experiment and an exploration, as they describe their experiences and learning as Christian cultural outsiders in American higher education.
3. Meghan Larissa Good, *Divine Gravity: Sparking a Movement to Recover a Better Christian Story* (Herald Press, 2024). Mennonite Pastor Meghan Good represents a clear voice of new Anabaptism, and is involved with the Jesus Collective, which focuses on Jesus at the center – as the revelation of who God is, as the inspiration for how we live and lead, and as the giver of the Spirit who guides and empowers us. Good’s writing is earthy and inspiring, and makes me laugh, which is why I’ve quoted her quite a bit.
4. Willie James Jennings, *After Whiteness: An Education in Belonging* (Eerdmans, 2020). Jennings writes about theological education from a Black perspective. He also explains that European (especially German) theological education gave birth to *all* of American education, and the same distortions exist in both.

Lastly, as I have written this white paper, I have read the Bible. Not the whole thing, but in particular the Gospels of Matthew and John, and numerous other scriptures that I was led to through my readings of other sources and my own Biblical memories.

Other Peer Institutions

Others Affiliated with the Mennonite Church USA

Goshen College is one of six higher education institutions affiliated with the Mennonite Church USA (MC USA)²⁰. Arising from a common religious tradition, our schools share Anabaptist theology and implicit values, and our faculty, students and leaders interact across the schools through a variety of collaborations. It was informative to read how our Mennonite peer institutions describe our common and yet context-specific faith identities.

²⁰ Bethel College in Newton, Kansas; Bluffton University in Bluffton, Ohio; Hesston College in Hesston, Kansas; Eastern Mennonite University in Harrisonburg, Virginia; and Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary in Elkhart, Indiana. All material quoted here was taken from their public websites in January 2025.

Several themes come through clearly across the faith statements of all of our Mennonite peer institutions. One prominent theme is the *practice of our faith* as followers of Jesus Christ, through acts of service and peacemaking within our campus communities and also in the world.

Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary (AMBS), provides the most comprehensive description of their faith commitment and faith formation. This is expected given their depth of theological expertise as a graduate teaching faculty, and that they are appealing to an audience that is primarily the church and its present and future leaders. The emphasis on practice shines through:

“We cultivate the following core values as a learning community and commit to deliberate practices which shape a Christ-centered faith. The integration of these values and practices marks us Anabaptist and guides our Christian formation...

We practice forming communities of shalom by embodying the saving reign of God, being the visible body of Christ, and practicing Spirit-led engagement with the world. We practice witnessing to the reconciling power of the Spirit by communicating with respect and confidence in cross-cultural, interracial and interreligious contexts.”

Bethel College (Kansas) explicitly links the active practice of faith to college and life skills, as they invite students to:

“Focus not on what but rather how to believe – while building relationships and learning to work with people who are different from you, skills essential for success in college and beyond.”

In these statements from our Mennonite peers, there is also a strong emphasis on a *journey following Jesus*, rather than other more specific beliefs.

Hesston College’s strategic plan aspires for the college to be centered on Jesus Christ:

“Where we start a distinct journey toward the healing of our relationship with God, ourselves, friends, enemies and creation, nurtured through an invitation to faith formation and service to the world.”

Eastern Mennonite University (EMU) states:

“We lead lives following Jesus’ model of faith in action – crossing divides, seeking peace and justice, and shaping communities and a world where all can thrive...”

They refer especially to Micah 6:8:

“EMU’s vision is a challenge to commit ourselves to offering healing and hope in our diverse world by doing justice, loving mercy, and walking humbly with God.”

Goshen College’s statements align with these themes from our Mennonite peers. I explore our own statements in greater detail at the start of the next section, [What We Say Now](#).

Peers that Demonstrate Counterpoints

There are many Christian colleges and universities from other denominations, or that are no longer affiliated with any particular tradition. It was illuminating to encounter statements about faith identity that offered counterpoints to the Goshen College of today. In citing these, I do not intend to imply that they are false or wrong for their context. Rather they serve to illustrate directions that seem poorly aligned with GC.

One counterpoint is a type of statement that emphasizes right belief. Bethel University (Mishawaka, Indiana), associated with the Missionary Church denomination, provides an example. They describe their mission in the form of a statement of faith, with five *Belief Statements*. This is followed by instructions of who to contact if you have alignment concerns that are worthy of investigation, and a quick link to an email form to reach the right authorities.²¹

In contrast, the affiliation between the MC USA and Goshen College does not constitute a hierarchical relationship in which beliefs are enforced.

A second useful counterpoint is a type of statement that emphasizes Christian exclusivism. Taylor University, a non-denominational university, states:

“100% of TU students, faculty, and staff make a profession of faith before entering the University. That means everyone you meet on campus — classmates and Taylor employees alike — claim Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior.”²²

²¹ Bethel University, [Mission, Institutional Profile, and Statement of Faith](#), accessed February 3, 2025.

²² Taylor University, [Mission, Distinctions, and Beliefs](#), accessed February 3, 2025

In contrast, Goshen College does not aspire to enroll exclusively Christian students, nor do we ask all of our students and employees to make a specific profession of Christian faith. We celebrate our diversity, including religious diversity, as one of the ways that our learning community is enriched.

Both Bethel University and Taylor University describe themselves as Christ-centered, are founded in the liberal arts tradition, and have many aspects and aspirations for the student experience that are similar to Goshen College. We know each others' campuses, as we compete in the same conference of the Crossroads League, which is the only specifically Christian conference in the National Association of Intercollegiate Athletics. I draw these counterpoints with respect for our peers.

What Do We Say About Christ-Centeredness as GC's Central Core Value?

What We Say Now

Our theology of Christ-centeredness comes through strongly in our [vision and mission statements](#), although in different words.

From our vision statement:

“Rooted in the way of Jesus, we seek inclusive community and transformative justice in all that we do.”

From our mission statement:

“Shaped by Anabaptist-Mennonite tradition, we integrate academic excellence and real-world experience with active love for God and neighbor.”

In describing [our faith identity](#), we explicitly reference our five core values and embrace Christ-centeredness as the first in our list of five core values:

“We intend to create a community of faith and learning built on five core values: Christ-centeredness, passionate learning, servant leadership, global citizenship and compassionate peacemaking.”

In describing our [core values](#), we explain that Christ-centeredness has both interior (reflective) and exterior (active) dimensions. Christ-centeredness means:

- A reflective faith that nurtures spiritual growth in individual and corporate contexts.
- An active faith that informs all life's choices.

All of these are strong and good statements. However, in the present ambiguity about what exactly we mean by the words “faith” and “Christ,” I believe we can be bolder and clearer about what we mean in our value of Christ-centeredness. Faith in what? What does active faith mean? And who is this Christ?

Our explanation of Christ-centeredness as a core value also leaves unspoken how Christ-Centeredness relates to and fuels the other four core values. When our five core values were first discerned more than 20 years ago, it was clear that the value of Christ-centeredness was *central* – giving rise to the other four core values and being

expressed through them. How might we be clearer about that in our understanding, communications and practices?

What We Teach in Our Curriculum

Our core values are also expressed through our core curriculum, the GC Core. In the words of one of our faculty:

“The Core is our public statement about what we believe liberal arts education at Goshen College is about. It bears the weight of our identity.”

In 2021, our faculty approved a refreshed version of the core curriculum, explicitly aligning it with our core values through learning outcomes. In areas most directly related to faith formation, our curriculum encompasses Biblical literacy, interfaith religious understanding, and theories and practices of peacemaking. Our core learning outcomes with regard to Christ-centeredness and compassionate peacemaking are expressed as follows:

In keeping with these core values, all Goshen College students will:

1. Reflect on their own identities, gifts, and privileges in relationship with other people and communities.
2. Articulate their spiritual and ethical commitments in conversation with the Christian story and principles of nonviolence.
3. Apply their faith commitments and ethical reasoning to their personal, professional and spiritual lives.

Here again, Goshen College affirms the interior (reflective) and exterior (articulated and applied) aspects of our faith.

Questions Arising Today

Can We be Christ-Centered and Also Inclusive?

In 2021, at a gathering of educators focused on interfaith dialogue, a question was posed to me as a panelist, after I made a statement about our core values: “How can you be inclusive if you are Christ-centered?” It is a relevant and challenging question²³.

²³ I wrote more about this gathering here: *Goshen College*, "Do Inclusion and Christ-Centeredness Go Together?" last modified November 10, 2021, <https://www.goshen.edu/president-blog/2021/11/10/do-inclusion-and-christ-centeredness-go-together/>.

Our Christ-centeredness seems to exist in some tension with our diversity statements and the many times we attest to the ways in which diversity in all of its forms, including religious diversity, contributes to our learning environments. How do we cultivate and celebrate Christ-centered community while also staying true to our realities and aspirations around being a diverse community?

My response to this challenge is that Christ is our north star when it comes to being inclusive. Jesus of Nazareth reached across boundaries of race, ethnicity, gender, disability, religion, sect, socio-economic class and political persuasion to create relationships.

“I am going to your house today,” Jesus said to the oppressive tax collector, Zacchaeus (Luke 19:1-10).

“Will you give me a drink?” the Jewish man Jesus directly asked a Samaritan woman without marital status in a public place (John 4:7-9).

Jesus actively connected with people – **all sorts of people**.

Being Christ-centered does not mean that we seek experiences that are exclusively Christian, and certainly not exclusively *like us*. Faith formation also requires what we see in the gospels as *the crowd*. Theologian Willie James Jennings describes the importance of the crowds in the gospel stories:

“The crowd was not his disciples, but it was the condition for discipleship. It is the ground to which all discipleship will return, always aiming at the crowd that is the gathering of hurting and hungry people who need God... We have failed to see that this is the ground of theological education and of all education that aims at the good. It is the crowd – people who would not under normal circumstances even want to be near each other, never ever touching flesh to flesh, never ever calling in unison upon the name of Jesus, never ever listening together to anything except Roman edict or centurion shouting command, now listening to the words of Jesus... The crowd is the beginning of a joining that was intended to do deep pedagogical work.”²⁴

This is illuminating language as we think about the crowd that gathers for chapel twice monthly, our athletic teams, the Commuter Student Association (as one example of a student group) or many other contexts where diversities rub up against each other at Goshen College. *The crowds* on our campus are not (all) Jesus’s disciples, but our

²⁴ Willie James Jennings, *After Whiteness: An Education in Belonging* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2020), 13.

diversity creates the conditions for discipleship that is intended to do deep pedagogical work. In Jennings vision for Christian education, *the crowd is us*.²⁵

An implication of this vision is that as we become disciples, we must actively reflect upon and resist our (various) ethnocentric biases that want us to pay attention and celebrate only the forms of discipleship that resemble our own.

For Anabaptist Mennonites in North America, the majority are White and descended from European settlers. That was certainly true of the Mennonite leaders who founded Goshen College. But that is no longer true of all of us within the Mennonite Church, and the many followers of Jesus in our communities and around the world are gloriously diverse. This is crucially important in this time when national *powers and principalities* are encouraging us to conflate White forms of Christianity with our national identity.

An important question that we must probe through this renewed articulation of our faith identity is: How can we deepen our Christ-centered identity — that is, be ever more rooted in the way of Jesus — while actively opposing White Christian dominance over people of other faiths and colors? We are not called to be centered in White Christianity as we see it being proclaimed in the name of purity and privilege.

As Goshen College becomes more multiracial and multicultural, it may be time for our approach to Christ-centeredness and faith formation to be centered less in certainty and more in companionship²⁶, belonging²⁷ and wonder. To take this approach is not to forsake truth, but to embrace a new understanding of how truth is revealed.

Parker Palmer speaks eloquently to this approach when he claims:

“Reality is a web of communal relationships and we can only know reality by being in community with it.”²⁸ to be centered in Christ is to experience Christ as our companion.

To be a faith-forming and truth-seeking community is to journey as companions and to belong to one another. Wonder is the natural response when the reality is too great for any of us to comprehend in its entirety. And as Socrates famously said, wonder is the beginning of wisdom.

²⁵ Willie James Jennings, *After Whiteness: An Education in Belonging* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2020), 13.

²⁶ The origin of the word "companion" is to break bread with.

²⁷ Jennings, 10.

²⁸ Parker J. Palmer, *The Courage to Teach: Exploring the Inner Landscape of a Teacher's Life* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 1998), 95

In early Christianity, on the tide of rapid expansion of Jesus-following that ensued from Jesus' death, his resurrection appearances, and the eruption of the Spirit at Pentecost, Jewish Christians had to confront the challenge:

“What is to be done with these aliens [meaning non-Jews] who are taking hold of the Kingdom?”²⁹

This is a challenge to embrace! The last thing God needs is for us to devote our energies to preserving what has become stale in Western Christianity or our Mennonite tradition. The spirit of Christ is continually propelling us forward, Jurgen Moltmann spoke to this holy unrest fifty years ago:

“The unrest of the times points it to this inner unrest of its own. The social and cultural upheavals of the present draw its attention to that great upheaval which it itself describes as ‘new creation’, as the ‘new people of God’, when it testifies to the world concerning the future of ‘the new heaven and the new earth’. What is required today is not adroit adaptation to changed social conditions, but the inner renewal of the church by the spirit of Christ, the power of the coming kingdom.”

A transformation of our approach to faith formation toward love and belonging may be among the precious gifts that the multicultural student body of our time is offering to Goshen College.

“The emphasis on social justice is about inclusion for all. This is an expression of the Sermon on the Mount and a model of the kingdom of heaven. It is expressed in the commitment to diversity, equity and inclusion, stemming from these biblical values. The constant desire, in persons and the institution, to improve in diversity and inclusion reflects that love of Christ.” (Faculty)

Are We Ready to Embrace the Holy Spirit?

Our Christ-centeredness also makes room for the ongoing activity of the Holy Spirit. While the Anabaptist-Mennonite tradition is especially known for peacemaking, service and the practical ways that we live out our faith, many of us also have a rich experience of the Spirit in our lives, offering us comfort, guidance and power. A simple description is that the Holy Spirit is the way that Jesus is present with us now, after his death as a human being. Our orientation to Christ embraces the living, embodied sense of the Spirit moving within us and through us.

²⁹ Gary A. Parrett and S. Steve Kang, "Lord of the Nations," in *A Many Colored Kingdom: Multicultural Dynamics for Spiritual Formation*, ed. R. Stephen Conde-Frazier, S. Steve Kang, and Gary A. Parrett (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2004), 59.

In the Gospel of John, Jesus explained to his followers when he realized he was going to be killed:

“I tell you the truth: it is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the Advocate (or Companion, Comforter, Helper) will not come to you, but if I go, I will send him to you...” (John 16:7)

“When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth.” (John 16:13).

The Holy Spirit matters to our spiritual vitality and to our learning. We pray with the Apostle Paul for strength in our inner being with power through the Spirit (Ephesians 3:16). We embrace the Holy Spirit in our lives by teaching and learning spiritual practices of prayer, singing, contemplation, and communion with nature.

Gradually, we learn to sense the direction and guidance of the Spirit as we discern the very real ways that God speaks:

- **Truth** in our confusion
- **Comfort** in our sorrow
- **Love** in our shame
- **Direction** toward peace and well-being, for ourselves and others.

What About the Bible?

These concise statements about Christ-centeredness and our faith identity do not speak to the Bible or its role in our lives. And yet it is clearly important to us, because Engaging the Bible (Core 120) is one of the few core courses that is required of all Goshen College students³⁰. In a time when the Bible means many different things to different people, it would be helpful to state clearly and simply what the Bible means for us at Goshen College.

For a guiding statement about the Bible, we may look to our current Statement of Arrangements with MC USA, which we renewed in 2024. This statement is not confidential, but it has not been publicized. Along with all of the other MC USA-affiliated colleges and universities, our agreement states:

“The College agrees that the Bible, when interpreted through the lens of Jesus’ life, teachings, death, and resurrection, is the foundational authority for guiding their educational mission. Discerning the Bible’s meaning for different contexts

³⁰ The others are Core 100: Identity, Culture, and Community; Core 104: Career and Calling; Core 110: Academic Voice; and Core 115: Wellness for Life.

and times requires prayerful, skilled, and humble work... The College also commits to... actively listen for what the Spirit is saying to the church today.”³¹

As I write this in January 2025, we are celebrating the 500th anniversary of the Anabaptist movement, and the publication of a new Anabaptist Community Bible that invites us to “renew our engagement with Scripture through a Jesus-centered lens.”³² It is an historic moment to make our relationship to the Bible more explicit as a source of inspiration and wisdom.

What I observe and experience at Goshen College is that we honor and cherish the Bible as an inspired and inspiring canon of stories, poetry, songs and instruction. An essential component of a liberal arts education in our Mennonite tradition is to engage and study this sacred collection of scriptures with respect, curiosity and discipline.

We also use the Bible in worship, and in doing so, we join multitudes of seekers and followers from many Abrahamic streams of faith across many centuries. The Bible, interpreted through the lens of Jesus, convicts, encourages, and transforms us as a faith community with shared language, metaphors, images, teachings and stories.

Why Christ-Centered, and Not Jesus-Centered?

It is worth pausing to consider whether our most central core value is best expressed as Christ-centered or Jesus-centered. To some, Jesus-centered seems more Anabaptist, and a clearer affirmation that the one whom we follow was a human rabbi born to Jewish parents who lived in Nazareth³³. Christ-centered language is widely used across many streams of Christianity, some of which seem less Jesus-centered than ours. Jesus-centered might be more distinctive.

³¹ The full statement is: “The College agrees that the Bible, when interpreted through the lens of Jesus’ life, teachings, death, and resurrection, is the foundational authority for guiding their educational mission. Discerning the Bible’s meaning for different contexts and times requires prayerful, skilled, and humble work. *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective* adopted by MC USA and the *Shared Convictions of Global Anabaptist* adopted by Mennonite World Conference offer community-discerned faith statements that guide this work. These, along with other historic Mennonite confessions, provide rich layers of scriptural, practical, and moral wisdom. The College agrees that these confessional documents are valuable for framing teaching and learning and commits to engage them as guides for educational formation. The College also commits to examine how well time-bound confessions and convictions express the word of God revealed in Scriptures, and to actively listen for what the Spirit is saying to the church today.”

³² *Anabaptist Community Bible*, MennoMedia, accessed March 6, 2025, <https://www.mennomedia.org/anabaptist-community-bible/>.

³³ James E. Brenneman, “The Way Forward,” *Anabaptist World*, 2022, <https://www.anabaptistworld.org/the-way-forward>. Now president of American Baptist Seminary of the West, and former president of Goshen College (2006-2017), Brenneman did a great deal of work to institutionalize GC’s core values in campus rituals and his own writing and speaking. He prefers Jesus-centered to Christ-centered language.

To claim Christ-centeredness *and* Jesus-rootedness³⁴ is to embrace a paradox. We follow the life and teachings of Jesus, a rural Jewish rabbi who lived in the particular material context of occupied Palestine. And through the transcendent Christ, we experience a God “whose center is everywhere and whose circumference is nowhere.”³⁵ God’s love transcends time and place, and like Jesus, we necessarily orient our lives to love in a particular human context. There is deep mystery in this – especially for academics formed in Western enlightened thinking and our striving for “the myth of certainty.”³⁶

In the opening of the gospel of John, “the Word” is used to describe the Wisdom of God, which has existed from the beginning of time (John 1:1-5):

“In the beginning was the Word
and the Word was with God
and the Word was God.
The Word was with God in the beginning.
Everything came into being through the Word,
and without the Word
nothing came into being.”

I believe that we can continue to use the term Christ-centered in a sense that is fully inclusive of the historic Jesus of Nazareth, while also claiming that Jesus was the Messiah – the Christ – for all of time. Jesus Christ is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation (Colossians 1:15.)

Theologian Barbara Holmes explains that “the particularity of Jesus does not obliterate the universality or the everythingness of Christ. Moreover, the cosmic scope of the Christ is not light-years away, but in every cell of our star-born bodies.”³⁷ God holds this paradox, and God holds all of us. In Christ we are reconciled.

³⁴ Goshen College, *Vision Statement*, “Rooted in the way of Jesus.”

³⁵ Thomas Merton, *Seeds of Contemplation* (New York: Dell, 1957; originally published 1949), 52. I learned this phrase from Thomas Merton, however he may have borrowed it from much older philosophical texts about God.

³⁶ Daniel Taylor, *The Myth of Certainty: The Reflective Christian and the Risk of Commitment* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1999).

³⁷ Barbara A. Holmes, [Jesus and the Universal Christ](#) (Center for Action and Contemplation, 2021).

Focal Scripture Texts that Arise from our Current Statements and Rituals

Embracing our Biblical tradition, I would highlight several Scriptures that are already central to our mission, vision, pedagogy and campus rituals.

The Greatest Commandment (Matthew 22:36-40)

The first scripture is from Matthew:

“Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?”
 Jesus replied: “‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.”

When we crafted our mission statement in 2019, this scripture emerged as essential for us. It was distilled into the final clause of this sentence:

“Shaped by Anabaptist-Mennonite tradition, we integrate academic excellence and real-world experience with active love for God and neighbor.”

At the time, one of our campus pastors, Dr. LaKendra Hardware, commented that for many people the meaning of *Anabaptist-Mennonite tradition* was unclear or unknown. Including the phrase “active love for God and neighbor” resonated with everyone as a reference to Matthew 22, and expressed concisely the synthesis of inner and outer commitments of our tradition.

Follow Me (Matthew 9:9, Mark 2:14, Luke 5:27, John 1:43)

The second is another of Jesus’ favorite sayings found in all four Gospels: “Follow me.”

Early Christians were known as followers of the way. This is what we mean when we say in our vision statement that we are *Rooted in the way of Jesus*. Through the stories of Jesus throughout the Gospels, we pay attention to what Jesus did, how he related to people, saw people, healed people, and his teachings. We are students of Jesus’ ways.

Come and See (John 1:39)

This simple invitation is repeated by Jesus several times in the Gospel of John, for example, (John 1:39-46). Mennonites are often said to be better at acting out their faith than explaining it. Jesus too, wanted his students to come and see – in addition to hearing good sermons, stories and other teachings. The invitation to *Come and see!* incites curiosity and offers students the opportunity to test what they think and hear using their own experience, senses and critical thinking skills. *Come and see* expresses the essence of Goshen College's emphasis on experiential and real-world learning in the Elkhart County Jail, on performance stages, in the prairie and the woods, through a microscope or a snorkel, at the hospital bedside and in communities around the world.

When we educate toward global citizenship and our motto, ***Culture for Service***, we say "Come and see!" on one of our study-service terms.

God is Love (1 John 4:7-11)

This Scripture has been read annually at *A Festival of Carols* to our gathered community and thousands of guests for more than 20 years. To my knowledge, no other scripture is used so prominently at Goshen College. This scripture is also foundational to an understanding that for us, to be Christ-centered is to be centered in love. The following is taken directly from the Festival of Carols script.

"The writer of 1 John exhorts us to love one another:

Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love. This is how God showed love among us: By sending the one and only Son into the world that we might live through him. This is love: not that we loved God, but that God loved us and sent the Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another."

A Framework to Engage and Renew our Christ-Centeredness

This framework synthesizes the foregoing concerns, commitments, and voices to respond to these questions:

- What do we mean when we say that Christ-centeredness is our foundational core value?
- How might we be more intentional and coherent in faith formation in all aspects of life at Goshen College?

I want to open with three points about how to consider this framework. First, any framework, and certainly this one, is **a useful simplification** of something with much more depth and complexity than the framework itself. The map is not the terrain. And yet a simple map can be very helpful as we navigate through the terrain of life, which is, after all, the terrain of faith formation. Every journey is unique, and each person's story will be shaped by their heritage and the particularities of their life. What is offered is a simple set of concepts that can guide our activities, conversations and emphases as a learning community centered in Christ.

Furthermore, this framework is offered as **a flexible structure** for engaging mysterious and complex topics. As we engage with it, the framework can and should evolve. Many of us will bring expertise and depth to a particular area where this framework is too simple. Please do so.

Finally, this framework is also intended to be **relevant and clear in this time**, especially to people who were born in this century and have been shaped by immersion in technology, diversity, growing economic and social inequalities, accelerating climate change, a global pandemic, loneliness, anxiety, and disenchantment with organized religion. We know they are looking for us to be authentic and they want us to share their concern about their well being³⁸.

So with these considerations in mind, what does it mean to be Christ-centered? It is to orient one's life to the way of Jesus, which is love.

In a nutshell, as we journey to follow Jesus Christ at Goshen College:

- We are known and we experience in our bodies and souls what it feels like to **be loved** uniquely and treated with dignity.

³⁸ See Learning Process and Resources.

- We are **empowered** and called to participate in the ongoing abundant life of the Body of Christ.
- As Jesus' disciples, we continually **learn** with passion and humility, trusting that God reveals and embraces all that is true.
- We practice **love in action** as we follow the way of Jesus.

In the context of Goshen College and the faith formation of our students and each other, to be centered in Christ is to be known and loved wholly, to be empowered, to continually grow and learn, and to act in love (Figure).

The continual (re)orientation of our lives to the love of Christ is formed and practiced as we grow in these four dimensions. These dimensions do not exist in any sequence. Rather, our faith journeys loop and spiral through these arenas repeatedly, as we confront new challenges, learn and gain new insights.

Quoting Meghan Larissa Good: “God’s opening moves are flexible.” God is always ready with a “next move” for us.

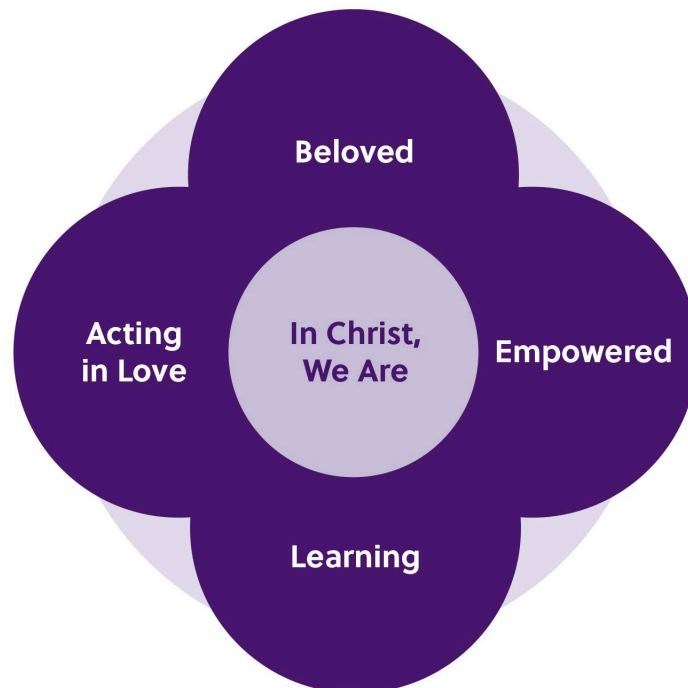


Figure: A Proposed Framework for Christ-Centeredness at Goshen College

The four dimensions are described below, using a structure. First, using the metaphor of orienteering³⁹, each dimension is illustrated by *crossroads* that are opportunities and catalysts for Christ-centered formation in those dimensions. The *crossroads* are examples of the fundamental dilemmas and challenges that characterize our human journeys. They are unavoidable and necessary to being human, and they come back around at us repeatedly. Having more or less *resolved* them in one time and place, they are likely to surface again in new ways and new circumstances.

The crossroads listed here are not exhaustive, but simply illustrative of the many dilemmas and dimensions of being human – the terrain of life. I hope that acknowledging crossroads in this way evokes compassion toward ourselves and our students. Being human is hard.

The crossroads are stated as binaries, but are not intended to be viewed as good versus bad. They pull us in different directions and create tensions in our lives, but the way forward in a given moment might not always be the same.

Using examples from the first dimension, **We are Beloved**, the crossroads of inclusion/exclusion may evoke a different response depending on the circumstance. While we desire inclusive community, there are moments when we may need to be exclusive for a variety of reasons – to avoid distractions, for our own healing, or to minimize harm.

You can likewise imagine when it is appropriate or necessary to experience fear, or to practice conformity. What is developmental about these crossroads is that they are features of the terrain in which we are formed, we hope, in love.

In the face of these recurring crossroads, the *core affirmations* remind us what an orientation toward love looks and feels like. They are drawn from broadly Christian and particularly Anabaptist-Mennonite theology, and especially from the stories of Jesus and the New Testament. Whether we doubt them or believe them in a given moment, they give us something to remember, push against, or launch off from. The core affirmations are listed together in the [Appendix](#), and are intended to help us focus our attention and activities as we work toward faith formation together, in many parts of the college.

Each dimension is further illustrated by the language we already use in Goshen College's current institutional statements. (These are publicly available on the *About GC*

³⁹ [Orienteering](#) involves using a map and compass to navigate from point to point in diverse and usually unfamiliar terrain... This metaphor for faith formation or faith journeying is explored more in the next section, "What is our approach to faith formation at Goshen College? Two guiding metaphors."

and *Who We Are* pages of our website). Thus the framework explicitly builds upon our vision, mission and core values.

Finally, the four dimensions of faith formation are brought to life through the words (verbatim or summarized) of Goshen College community members during the past three years of conversations as we have probed our faith identity. The framework thus responds to what we have been hearing in wide-ranging conversations about our faith identity with Goshen College students, faculty and staff, leaders and alumni.

Dimension 1: In Christ, We Are Beloved

The Beloved dimension orients us amidst these crossroads of life:

- Fear/Security
- Exclusion/Inclusion
- Isolation/Community
- Failure/Forgiveness
- Conformity/Authenticity
- Suffering/Healing

The Beloved dimension is expressed in these core affirmations:

- God loves you.
- Everyone who loves is born of God and knows God.
- Christ offers us forgiveness and calls us to forgive others.
- You will be seen and known and treated with dignity in this community.
- Joining together to create the beloved community is both the means and the goal of God's work.

And is supported by these institutional commitments:

“At Goshen,... that sense of a caring community extends to our residence halls, classrooms, weekly chapels and convocations, as well as the friendships we form among students and faculty.” ([Our faith identity](#))

“As we teach, learn and seek truth together, our diversity invites us to see in new ways, to recognize new problems, to imagine new solutions, to realize our strengths and to claim justice.” ([Vision for Diversity, Equity and Inclusion](#))

“Arising from Anabaptist-Mennonite tradition, we value and honor the inherent dignity of each person.” ([Vision for Diversity, Equity and Inclusion](#))

We are Beloved is described in these words from the Goshen College community:

“GC is a space where you can enter in as yourself. The way you are treated, the way you are made comfortable, the ability to fit in anywhere and feel safe.”
(Alumni Council)

“I’m from a totally different faith. I expected to be in my own zone all the time. Every course I took I felt that there’s this respectful space that’s present but not necessarily spoken about that everyone has their own faith identity, and we don’t expect you to change that. That added to my own attachment to my faith identity, that GC has that space that got me to attach to my own faith identity and not shy away from who I am. There was this common respect regardless of who you are.” (Student)

“At other places, it feels inappropriate to talk about faith. However, talking more about faith and what motivates us is a crucial step in breaking down the fear and animosity surrounding religion in society. Openness about faith creates richness, in religious or secular institutions. And holds relevance for our current day as well as the future.” (Cabinet)

“Students are not just intellectual beings at GC but spiritual ones. GC nurtures the whole person.” (Cabinet)

“Students are ripe for exploring the integration of faith and sexuality. Discussion with students, faith stories, and conversations. With both students and faculty, conversations about faith are not taboo.” (Faculty)

“Faith formation often happens in moments of crisis, loss, pain, broken relationships.” (Student Life Staff)

Dimension 2: In Christ, We Are Empowered

The Empowered dimension orients us amidst these crossroads of life:

- Helplessness/Agency
- Weakness/Strength
- Oppression/Liberation
- Reactivity/Creativity

The Empowered dimension is expressed in these core affirmations:

- God liberates and empowers you to love, to act, to heal, to lead, to create.
- Christ’s love is at work in the world and within you.

- You are gifted with a purpose in the ongoing work of Christ's love in the world.
- The Holy Spirit strengthens your inner being.
- Jesus came so that we can live abundantly and joyfully.

And is supported by these institutional commitments:

“Goshen College will cultivate joy, growth and purpose, preparing students to thrive in life, leadership and service.” (Vision statement)

“Goshen College transforms local and global communities through courageous, creative and compassionate leaders.” (Mission statement)

“*Servant Leadership*: a leadership ability that empowers self and others; a healthy understanding of self and others that is reflected in relationships of interdependence and mutual accountability.” (Core values)

***We are Empowered* is described in these words from the Goshen College community:**

“The growth that happens at GC is about how you compose yourself in this big world and hold tight to being an authentic person who holds/lives their values, even if the surrounding culture does not uphold those same principles.” (Alumni Council)

“GC must give students the stamina to live alternatively in society. We point to something larger and deeper that sustains and feeds you. GC fosters an inner life; reflecting on what is life-giving. Professors should engage students in these questions.” (Faculty)

“Meeting and engaging with people who are different from you is important. SST and the preparation for it are crucial expressions of this.” (Student)

“GC's faith identity is experienced in how it operates which is counter (upside down kingdom) to how the world operates: global emphasis vs nationalism; speak peace in war; promote common good instead of what is just right for ourselves; care for creation; advocacy for those who are marginalized; critical analysis of the world. The connection between these things and our faith is unique.” (Cabinet)

Dimension 3: In Christ, We Are Learning

The Learning dimension orients us amidst these crossroads of life:

- Deceit/Truth
- Ignorance/Knowledge
- Self-centered thinking/Thinking *otherwise*
- Doubt/Sensing the Sacred
- Fracturing/Integration

The Learning dimension is expressed in these core affirmations:

- All of life is a learning opportunity.
- The more you become honestly aware of yourself, the more you are able to love others and use your gifts in the world.
- The Bible, interpreted through the lens of Jesus, convicts, encourages, and transforms us.
- Spiritual practices, such as prayer, music, meditation and retreats, are tried and true ways to open your mind and learn from the Holy Spirit.
- In Christ all things are reconciled.

And is supported by these institutional commitments:

“Shaped by Anabaptist-Mennonite tradition, we integrate academic excellence and real-world experience with active love for God and neighbor.” (Mission Statement)

“Goshen College will cultivate joy, growth and purpose, preparing students to thrive in life, leadership and service.” (Vision statement)

“Christ-centered: a reflective faith that nurtures spiritual growth in individual and corporate contexts.” (Core Values)

“Passionate Learning: the mastery of a major field of study as the basis for life-long learning, service, relationships, and work in a socially and culturally diverse context. And, an extensive foundation of knowledge, skills, processes and methodologies derived from a liberal arts curriculum that are required for systematic study and problem solving.” (Core Values)

“The College agrees that the Bible, when interpreted through the lens of Jesus’ life, teachings, death, and resurrection, is the foundational authority for guiding their educational mission. Discerning the Bible’s meaning for different contexts and times requires prayerful, skilled, and humble work... The College also

commits to actively listen for what the Spirit is saying to the church today.”
(Statement of Arrangements with MC USA)

We are Learning is described in these words from the GC community:

“[My] first encounter with GC was in my non-judgmental interview. It is a place open to ask questions.” (Cabinet)

“The role of professors is crucial in maintaining GC’s faith identity. They model the values and are the primary agents who communicate faith on campus. They are the most important part, creating a space where everyone is invited but not expected to change. They are also mentors.” (Alumni Council)

“Professors share their faith without forcing it on you. They are open and willing to share their faith in class, certainly more than students. This encourages students to understand how faith relates to them, even if they are non-religious. It is an invitational rather than prescriptive approach, asking broad questions that encourage students to fit in their own answers.” (Student)

“[Faculty can ask] the big/deep questions because often students don’t, but this is what allows us to understand each other and learn from one another.”
(Student)

“Anabaptism is a holistic framework that holds a lot of things together which other places struggle to do.” (Faculty)

Dimension 4: In Christ, We Are Acting in Love

The Active Love dimension orients us amidst these crossroads of life:

- Achievement/Service
- Self-care/Solidarity
- Oppression/Liberation
- Violence/Peace
- Division/Reconciliation
- Despair/Hope

The Active Love dimension is expressed in these core affirmations:

- God is bringing about Shalom – peace and well being of body, mind and soul – for all people.
- When we follow Jesus the whole world is reordered; No aspect of life is untransformed.

- When we serve people who are marginalized by society, we serve Jesus.
- God calls us to care for one another in mutual aid.
- Christ gives us the ministry of reconciliation.

And is supported by these institutional commitments:

- Culture for Service (Motto)
- Goshen College transforms local and global communities through courageous, creative and compassionate leaders. Shaped by Anabaptist-Mennonite tradition, we integrate academic excellence and real-world experience with active love for God and neighbor. (Mission)
- Rooted in the way of Jesus, we will seek inclusive community and transformative justice in all that we do. (Vision)
- Christ-centered: an active faith that informs all life's choices. (Core Values)
- Compassionate peacemaking: a personal integrity that fosters the ability to resolve conflict and to promote justice; and a commitment to diversity in all of its forms both conceptually and in practice. (Core Values)
- Global citizenship: an intercultural openness with the ability to function effectively with people of other worldviews; and a responsible understanding of stewardship for human systems and the environment in a multicultural world. (Core Values)
- Only in working together toward inclusion, connection and equity do we gain the knowledge and skills needed to succeed in life, leadership and service, and to create a more just, civil and joyful society. ([Vision for Diversity, Equity and Inclusion](#))
- At Goshen, we surround ourselves with those who believe in discipleship – a life consistent with Jesus' teachings and call. ([Our faith identity](#))

***We are Acting in Love* is described in these words from the Goshen College community:**

“Our Faith is rooted in what we are doing. What we do is rooted in faith.”
(Faculty)

“The faith of GC is exhibited in caring for one another. Going above and beyond in caring for students. God's love is practiced in how we live our lives and interact with students.” (Faculty)

“The faith at GC is perhaps most profoundly experienced in the care for one another, particularly in the ways professors care for students and employees care for each other. This care is borne out in the concern for access that manifests itself in many ways (teaching, inclusion efforts, etc.) It is also in the kindness and friendship extended through the GC community—it is the way GC reflects Christ.”
(Faculty)

Formed on the Journey: Two Guiding Metaphors

The English word educate draws from two roots: *educere*, which implies the bringing out of something potential or latent, and *educare*, which means to train or mold.⁴⁰ We are created in God's image, with the potential to live in love, or in the words of early Christians, to live *in Christ*. Our formation in the way of Jesus is the life-long process of drawing out and shaping this potential.

Echoing these roots, when we speak of faith formation, two metaphors can guide our imaginations and approach. The first is that of clay; we are formed like a potter forms a pot. The potter centers the clay on the wheel, pulls up the clay and applies pressure to shape the clay into something beautiful, stable and useful. This is a good metaphor; it is familiar, tried and true.

However, being formed like a pot on a potter's wheel makes us the object of someone else's power. While *the clay always talks back*,⁴¹ clay does not move on its own. While it responds to forces like gravity and centrifugal force, the clay on the wheel does not have free will or make choices.

An evocative and complementary metaphor for our time is orienteering, which involves an individual or a team using a map and compass to navigate from point to point in diverse and usually unfamiliar terrain. We cannot control the terrain of our students' lives. Indeed we cannot begin to know the whole of it. But we can strive to provide our students with maps and a compass that will continually orient them in the mind of Christ toward love – in the midst of and through the realities of being human. And we can be companions on the journey, ones who break bread together, which is the root meaning of the word.

Faith formation as orienteering is akin to how the World Council of Churches describe their Pilgrimage of Justice and Peace program:

“Pilgrims on their way are moving... They are open for surprises and ready to be transformed by encounters and challenges on the way. Everyone who will walk with us with an open heart and mind will be a welcomed com-pan-ion (“the ones we share our bread with”) on the way.”⁴²

⁴⁰ Bass, Randall V.; Good, J. W. *Educare and Educere: Is a Balance Possible in the Educational System?* Educational Forum, The, v68 n2 p161-168 Win 2004.

⁴¹ Mark Goertzen, quoted in personal correspondence with Suzanne Ehst.

⁴² World Council of Churches, “Invitation to the Pilgrimage of Justice and Peace,” quoted in Fernando Enns and Andrés Pacheco-Lozano, “Were Not Our Hearts Burning Within Us? The ‘Pilgrimage of Justice and Peace’ Continued: Towards an Ecumenical Theology of Companionship,” in *A Pilgrimage of Justice and Peace: Global Mennonite Perspectives on Peacebuilding and Nonviolence*, ed. Fernando Enns, Schroeder/van 't Schip, et al. (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2023), 23.

Navigating through life's terrain is never linear. The faith journey involves false starts, switch-backs and on occasion, back-tracking, as we learn and discern. It is necessary for us to make mistakes. We are changed, and we learn and are formed as we are injured and healed. No one's path through the terrain is the same, because we start from different points, and we confront challenges from within and from without that are unique to the unfolding of our particular lives. But with the use of a good compass, maps and the skills to use them, our moves through the many crossroads of life, over time, take us toward wisdom and integration.

In our Christ-centered faith journey, **our compass is Jesus**, who is the most reliable and complete teacher, companion and role model of a life centered in love. There are many inspiring people, alive now and in history, who serve as powerful role models for us along the way. But as Christians, we believe that Jesus is *the Christ*, who saved us, is saving us and will save us in the future. We can learn to sense the presence of Christ through the Spirit as we orientate through the diverse and unfamiliar terrain of our lives toward love. We can learn to use this compass.

In addition, **we have maps**. Maps are not only lines on paper, they may take the form of stories and knowledge by which we recognize signs and signals. Think of native Hawaiian wayfinders learning ancestral stories and the skills of how to read the winds, the waves and the currents of a vast ocean. We too learn to rely on stories and skills. We realize we are not alone, because we dwell in a story that is both ancient and newly unfolding, and a story in which we discover that a beloved community dwells. We are living that story forward. As we learn and gain experience, we can discern familiar patterns even in the unfamiliarity and newness of the challenges we confront. And we can ask for help from others on the way and from the Holy Spirit.

Alongside stories and knowledge, people who are mentors, teachers and role models serve as a kind of map. We experience their companionship and we are allowed to break bread together and journey with them. We listen and learn as they describe the terrain of their life, the crossroads they encountered and the moves they made. People who can share their lives authentically, with honest regrets, gratitudes and self-reflection, become living maps that we remember, refer to, and perhaps seek out years later to understand how their story informs ours.

Furthermore, the church provides maps. Anabaptist churches tend to be small and non-hierarchical. Christ-centered, Jesus-following people come together to map their way in the world with a *strong sense of belonging to Jesus and their loyal support of*

each other.⁴³ Jesus wanted his followers not only to believe his teachings, but also to have a strong sense of belonging to each other, like a family. Christian community provides courage to interpret and follow the way of Jesus especially when the surrounding culture, economics and politics are directing us otherwise.

Anabaptist scholar and pastor Takashi Yamada describes the distinctive quality of both early Christians (meaning Jesus-followers in the first 300 years after Christ) and the early Anabaptists: “That they met in small groups where they confronted each other and made each other strong enough to confront the world.”⁴⁴

Such a community provides not only guidance but also courage to act with love, even when the world is hostile.

⁴³ Palmer Becker, *What is an Anabaptist Christian?* Missio Dei #18 (Newton, KS: Mennonite Mission Network, 2006), ISBN 1-933845-30-9.

⁴⁴ Quoted in Palmer Becker, conversation with author,

Aspirations and Recommendations

As educators, a framework can provide a guiding structure as we draw out the Christ-centered potential imprinted as the image of God in every one of our students and one another. A framework is not a blueprint. Across the breadth of activities and expertise within Goshen College, each part of the organization is continually learning how to embody the mission of Goshen College, which includes our most central value of Christ-centeredness as it is expressed in our vision and mission. Furthermore, every student's journey is unique, and each one's story will be shaped by their heritage and the particularities of their life.

I offer here a set of aspirations for our work at Goshen College that will require our attention if we seek to embody the faith formation framework described in this white paper. They are implications of the framework to guide our programs and community life. They are our distinctive gifts and emphases as a Mennonite learning community explicitly centered in Christ and actively forming faith in our diverse students and one another.

These aspirations hold relevance for all of us, because in a college setting, we all educate one another – faculty, staff and students, constantly learning, constantly drawing out each others' potential. We form one another. At the same time, some of us have faculty and leadership roles and responsibilities that hold particular influences on how and whether these aspirations are met.

Aspiration 1: Authentically Encounter Jesus Christ

Students and employees of Goshen College must have the opportunity to encounter Jesus Christ – both the historic person Jesus of Nazareth, and also Jesus the Christ universal, the transcendent Word with God in the beginning and through whom everything is reconciled. We must teach about the Bible in formal curricula and in less formal Bible study settings through the lens of Jesus. Our rituals and worship and repertoire (on and off stage) must tell and sing stories of Jesus. We need to share some understanding and to continually learn more about what we mean when we claim that our vision is to be rooted in the way of Jesus.

We aspire that people who are in our campus community and who interact with it will be invited to encounter Jesus as a joyful and thirst-quenching wellspring of abundant life (John 4) and through material care and mutual aid (Matthew 25:35-40).

One of the four consensus themes of the 2023 faith formation retreat was that students need contemporary encounters of Christian faith in action. The terrain of life is hard and we all need maps – stories told and lived out. Through excellent guest speakers and lecturers, and most of all through each other, we teach and learn the ways of interpersonal and social change that bring about peace, justice and flourishing.

We are living in an era of disenchantment on all sorts of fronts, but also a time of spiritual hunger and seeking. We teach and learn the spiritual practices of prayer, meditation, singing, walking, retreating, resting, dancing, artistic expression, gratitude and more. These skills are critical to our orienteering and wayfinding, and they also create the openings of our hearts in which God pierces our consciousness and Christ offers us springs of living water. Spiritual practices cultivate a life of joy, which is not only an end in itself, but opens the mind and heart so that learning can happen and the Spirit may be heard on many levels.

It is important to understand that the Goshen College campus community of employees and students is a church-related community, but it is not a church. We do not claim that everyone in the GC community is a committed follower of Jesus. But the GC community is intentionally led by Jesus-followers in key organizational roles, and we embody a mission, vision and core values that are Christ-centered.

Aspiration 2: Be the Crowd

Goshen College is part of the *hurting and hungry people who need God*.⁴⁵ Recognizing this in ourselves and our community is honest and an essential part of our being salt and light to the world. We are hurting and hungry Christians and non-Christians. We do not need to pretend to ourselves or others that we are pure, that we have it all together, or that we know it all. In our humanity, honesty and authenticity, we create the conditions for learning and true discipleship.

An aspect of following Jesus is paying close attention to others in the community, to notice their behaviors and responses and be curious about them. Jesus models this again and again. Especially if someone is vulnerable or suffering, we need to know how to ask: What are you going through? What do you need?

It merits restating here what we have already said in our vision for diversity, equity and inclusion:

⁴⁵ Jennings, 13.

“Our diversity invites us to see in new ways, to recognize new problems, to imagine new solutions, to realize our strengths and to claim justice. Only in working together toward inclusion, connection and equity do we gain the knowledge and skills needed to succeed in life, leadership and service, and to create a more just, civil and joyful society.”

As Jennings has eloquently reasoned, Jesus created the conditions for the crowd to come together. By rubbing up against each other in our diversities, we experience “good conflict” and how conflict can lead to better understanding and decisions, or alternatively, to separation, discrimination and violence.⁴⁶ Similarly we need to learn the skills of genuine invitations to gather, of *setting the table* with and for others, and the commitment to show up in fellowship. We need to learn how to make others feel at home with us.

“Faith formation often happens in moments of crisis, loss, pain, broken relationships.” (SL staff)

“Students like chapels the most when they see their identities reflected.” (Student Senate)

“Relationships are a special part of what is good at GC, and faculty are committed to it in a special way. They stick with students even in conflictual things, advocating for their voice even amidst disagreement.” (Cabinet)

Aspiration 3: Continually Cultivate Community

Our connected and gracious community is one of our greatest strengths. Time and again, students who choose Goshen College say that the sense of community they experienced while exploring their college options played a key role in their decision. For our students, and also reflected in the large student sample in the Faith and College Life Study,⁴⁷ this sense of community at college is very important to their faith formation. This was true for students from Christian, minority faith and non-religious backgrounds.

Palmer Becker, in his seminal description of Anabaptist Christianity, names community as one of three distinctives: “Jesus wanted his followers to not only believe in him, but

⁴⁶ *The Good Conflict*, accessed February 14, 2025, <https://www.thegoodconflict.com/>.

⁴⁷ Hannah Evans and Keri Koshiol, *Faith and College Life* (Springtide Research and the Lilly Network of Faith-Based Colleges and Universities, 2024).

also to have a strong sense of belonging to each other.”⁴⁸ Students experience the art of belonging at Goshen College.

We are a community that sees and celebrates the multi-layered and various identities and heritages of our students and employees, and respects the dignity of each person. Our community calls forth student leadership, providing opportunities for students to try out ideas and practice skills, and supporting them with mentors and the tools for reflection and learning. When we encounter abuse or suffering, we strive to practice restoration and forgiveness to the extent possible, and provide mutual aid to one another.

In the poetic voice of Mary Oliver:

“I know, you never intended to be in this world
But you’re in it all the same.
So why not get started immediately.
I mean, belonging to it.
There is so much to admire, to weep over.”⁴⁹

Practicing community rooted in the way of Jesus at Goshen College will serve our students well in the many communities they will enter, create and lead throughout their lives. Goshen College’s mission is to transform local and global communities through courageous, creative and compassionate leaders. Meghan Larrissa Good goes even further, stating: “A new community is both the means and the goal of God’s transformational activity.”

In this time of challenge for faith communities, how might we more strongly and frequently invite our students to experience *church* communities?

“Attending chapel can never replace meaningful conversations of faith.” (Student Life staff)

“Faith is experienced in how we relate to one another.” (Cabinet)

“The faith of GC is bound up in doing — a benevolence that seeks to serve and care for others. It is an obligation as well as a desire to join others in both their joys and sorrows.” (Cabinet)

⁴⁸ Becker named the three distinctive traits of Anabaptism as 1) Jesus is the center of our faith. 2) Community is the center of our lives. 3) Reconciliation is the center of our work. Palmer Becker, *What is an Anabaptist Christian?* Missio Dei #18 (Newton, KS: Mennonite Mission Network, 2006), ISBN 1-933845-30-9.

⁴⁹ Mary Oliver, “The Fourth Sign of the Zodiac,” in *Blue Horses: Poems* (New York: The Penguin Press, 2014).

“Students need a variety of safe, well-structured, regular spaces for gathering that provide meaningful experiences of beauty, joy, inspiration, and goodness.” (2023 faith formation retreat)

Aspiration 4: Speak Courageously and Clearly

These days the calls for free speech are loud, and calls for protection from discriminatory speech are equally loud. Our words can easily entangle us in conflict, even when that is not our intent. Conversations become dangerous and we are tempted to divert to bland subjects. We become shy about matters of faith for fear of being misunderstood.

Religious terms (for example, Christ-centered or evangelical) can be used with multiple meanings, and words having to do with our dignity and humanity (for example, diversity or intersectionality) are being used to divide and politicize. Nonetheless, and perhaps because of this, one of the consensus themes of the 2023 faith formation retreat was that students need clarity on Goshen College’s identity as an Anabaptist-Mennonite faith based institution.

Faith formation today requires a particular attention to language and words. As difficult as it may feel sometimes, I believe that we need to speak with boldness and go to extra efforts to explain what we mean in the simplest words possible. We need to do the best we can to ensure that we are all actually talking about what we mean to talk about! This takes time, and academics can get hung up on it, but the time we devote to clear expressions also builds relationships and sustains community.

Essential to this vision is the art of conversation. Community is created when we speak carefully and clearly, face-to-face, and ask good questions that build understanding rather than shut people down. The art of conversation includes attention to the pace of conversation, and self-awareness of our body language and speech habits, and how they affect others in the group. It entails listening deeply and committing not to interrupt.

In a collegiate setting, it is also important that we develop the capacity to read texts deeply, to connect ideas across texts, and to explain our own thoughts in writing. This skill is an academic one, and it is also formative to our faith, as so much of religious thought and wisdom is learned, developed and conveyed through the written word, including but not limited to the Bible.

“Truth is the eternal conversation about things that matter, conducted with passion and discipline.”

– Parker Palmer⁵⁰

Recommendations

My hope is that this white paper will encourage continuing spirited conversations about how we embody faith formation at Goshen College. In the spirit of truth as an eternal conversation, here are four recommendations.

1. Create more opportunities for faith formation for GC people of all life stages

I hope that we will create opportunities for conversations and discussions about this framework, and more importantly, about faith formation in general. All members of our community need this, in shorter and longer formats. For example, we might create shorter discussion formats in orientations for student leaders, and more extended formats like faith development cohorts or retreats that provide opportunities to practice, reflect on and refine what is here in greater depth, for people of all life stages.

2. Increase our clarity and enthusiasm about our spiritual gifts at Goshen College

I hope that we will use and adapt this framework, or iterations and revisions of it, to speak more clearly about faith at Goshen College on our website, in admissions materials, with each other, with our students and with the church. Goshen College, shaped by Anabaptist Mennonite tradition, has a particular charism, or spiritual gift to bring to the world, and I hope that we can proclaim it with more clarity and enthusiasm.

3. Enable and empower our faculty, student life professionals and coaches to implement this framework

I hope that this framework might enable and empower our faculty to think and speak about our core curriculum and core values in newly Christ-centered ways. This might mean becoming more explicit about what is already designed into our distinctive core curriculum, or it might mean that the concepts presented here inspire new curricular revisions.

Likewise, I hope that this framework might enable and empower our student life professionals and athletics department to think and speak about our core values and co-curricular programs in newly Christ-centered ways.

⁵⁰ Parker J. Palmer, *The Courage to Teach: Exploring the Inner Landscape of a Teacher's Life* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1998), 104.

4. Continue to attend to our hiring and orientation processes

I hope that we continue to attend to our hiring and orientation processes for employees so that they understand and feel connected to our faith identity and become a part of the faith formation journey at GC in all its dimensions. This is especially true for faculty, but is relevant to all employees and student leaders as well.

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Appendix: Christ-Centered Affirmations

Christ-centeredness at Goshen College means that we orient our lives and the life of our community to the way of Jesus, which is love. As we seek to continually form our students and one another in Christian love, we intentionally develop these dimensions:

The Beloved Dimension is expressed in these core affirmations:

- God loves you.
- Everyone who loves is born of God and knows God.
- Christ offers us forgiveness and calls us to forgive others.
- You are seen and known and treated with dignity in this community.
- Joining together to create the beloved community is both the means and the goal of God's work.

The Empowered Dimension is expressed in these core affirmations:

- God liberates and empowers you to love, to act, to heal, to lead, to create.
- Christ's love is at work in the world and within you.
- You are gifted with a purpose in the ongoing work of Christ's love in the world.
- The Holy Spirit strengthens your inner being.
- The way of Jesus is abundant and joyful.

The Learning Dimension is expressed in these core affirmations:

- All of life is a learning opportunity.
- The more you become honestly aware of yourself, the more you are able to love others and use your gifts in the world.
- The Bible, interpreted through the lens of Jesus, convicts, encourages, and transforms.
- Spiritual practices, such as prayer, music, worship and retreats, are tried and true ways to open your mind and learn from the Holy Spirit.
- In Christ all things are reconciled.

The Active Love Dimension is expressed in these core affirmations:

- God is bringing about Shalom – peace and total well being of body, mind and soul – for all.
- When we follow Jesus the whole world is reordered; No aspect of life is untransformed.
- When we serve people who are marginalized by society, we serve Jesus.
- God calls us to care for one another in mutual aid.
- Christ gives us the ministry of reconciliation.