Centre: A Place That Matters
Synod of the Living Waters Meeting, Franklin, Tenn., January 2008

By Dr. John Roush, Centre College President

I am delighted to be with you today. Having the chance to be before the Synod of the Living Waters was an opportunity I judged not to be missed. The title of your group alone caught my attention!

I also count it a privilege to serve as President of Centre College, one of 65 Presbyterian-related colleges across this great nation. In the time that I have with you this morning, I intend to speak to three points. I want to share with you 120 seconds worth of Centre College. On our campus, we refer to this as the “elevator speech.” Two, I want to visit with you about the importance of church-related colleges in contemporary America. And, three, I will finish my remarks with a very brief comment on today’s young people and the reasons why they give us much reason for hope.

First, Centre College in 120 seconds. Centre is now an undergraduate college of about 1,200 students that offers a nationally-recognized experience in the arts and sciences. Centre, along with four other Presbyterian-related colleges – Davidson, Rhodes, Macalester, and Lafayette - is a top-50 national liberal arts institution. And, while I have been critical of the rankings each fall by the U.S. News and World Report, they do tell us something about the strength of America’s undergraduate colleges and universities. Thus, it is a very good thing that Centre College and the four other Presbyterian-related institutions I mentioned are considered in such high regard by educators across the nation.

In addition to being a place of high achievement, Centre remains a place of high opportunity – where 60 percent plus of our students receive need-based aid. This combination of high achievement and high opportunity has become increasingly rare among the nation’s best colleges and universities, and we are proud to claim it. One other ranking of value that I would call off is Centre’s number one ranking as the “best value” among all liberal arts colleges by Consumer Digest. This ranking is not without its critics, of course, but it does send the right message to young men and women about Centre – a place offering personal education, promising extraordinary success, and providing access to high-achieving young people from less-advantaged homes.

Finally, you should know that Centre is a place where students now are being prepared for lives of work and service in a global context. More than 85 percent of our students study abroad at least once before graduation. Over 80 percent of our students graduate in four years, which would place us among the nation’s leaders. The experience we offer our students in the visual and performing arts, another key component of being liberally educated, is of remarkable quality. And, finally, Centre is a place that has not stepped back from the challenge to educate its students in all areas - intellectual, physical, social, and spiritual. Centre is a place where faith still matters. And this takes me to my second point.
My second point, arguably more important than my first, is to identify why church-related colleges are important in the life of this nation. Beyond the historical fact that most of America’s first colleges and universities were founded by churches of varying denominations, and have been those places where innovation and creative change have characteristically taken place, the most important reason that church-related colleges need to be encouraged is because they remain places that make no apology for being interested in and concerned about the spiritual welfare of their students. At a time when many public and some independent institutions feel they can no longer be concerned with matters of faith, church-related colleges and universities have, in fact, an obligation of sorts to care about this dimension of the human experience. This is clearly true at Centre College, where all of our graduates are required to have taken two courses in religion, where we have an active chaplaincy program, and where students during the course of their four years are encouraged to consider matters of faith as a part of what it means to be an educated person. This is not to suggest that there is some established doctrine or set of expectations for the faculty, staff, and students at Centre. Centre is a place that invites and encourages open inquiry, welcomes people of all faiths and no faith, and is comfortable with the tension that exists in being a place that is church-related and also honors the principles of free and open inquiry. Repeating what I said earlier, being a church-related college orients us to care about matters of faith, and I judge this focus to be an integral part of our educational program and an important dimension of the liberally-educated, informed citizen.

My third point, and I’ll be brief, relates to the future. There are many folks who seem to delight in speaking poorly about today’s young people. I am not one of those folks. Part of my optimism about the morrow is that I find today’s college students, those who are with us now and have been on our campuses the past decade or so, represent a breath of fresh air. These young people possess an attitude about life, their role in a global society, and their responsibility to make a difference for good that is extremely positive and strong and encouraging. If you find yourself feeling discouraged about the future, then let me invite you to visit Centre College! Come to one of our classrooms, sit around the dining table at lunch or dinner, or engage one of our students in a conversation about almost anything. And, while I would never suggest that today’s young people only make good choices, I find them to be making many right choices, caring deeply about the future not just their future, preparing themselves for inspiring lives of work and service. Tomorrow’s citizen-leaders are readying themselves to do much that is good. I close with this and invite you to come see us at Centre – learn more about what goes on at your Presbyterian, church-related colleges. Visit us and be encouraged, invigorated, and … inspired, even!