LAUNCHING THE NEW YEAR
All Saints’ Chapel
August 25, 2015

We renew this afternoon in somewhat altered form an old Sewanee tradition. Though not strictly speaking an Opening Convocation, today’s gathering of the community reminds us of the start of a new academic year and affords an opportunity to chart our course for the year ahead.

I begin with a simple word of welcome – to our new students, the Class of 2019, to our new faculty and staff colleagues, and especially to our new Dean of Students, Marichal Gentry, as well as to those returning students and faculty: welcome back, welcome home. I begin also with a simple, inadequate, word of thanks to our support staff. While many of us enjoyed a slower summer pace, our friends in physical plant, in ITS, in the library, in dining services, and in the many other offices that support our work toiled on. We return to a campus strengthened and made more beautiful by their work, energized by their commitment. Thank you, our staff, for all you do for our University.

I would note in particular the work carried out in this, the second of a three-year Campus Infrastructure Renewal Program. Our physical plant is in remarkably improved condition, and this effort will continue next summer. Construction has begun on a new residence hall on the site of Van Ness Hall. This new facility will be ready to greet the Class of 2020 next fall.

Yet in the midst of change, at a place like Sewanee we are also struck by certain continuities. That something involves, as I said to the Class of 2019 last Sunday afternoon, an awareness of history (look around you in this Chapel); a sensitivity to place (what a blessing to inhabit a 13,000 acre domain); a respect for the natural order; a commitment to honorable conduct in all that we do; and, not least, a love of the God who created all things. We acknowledge before that God our own human limitations and imperfections – this University surely knows what it means to inhabit a fallen world.
For the past several years, on this occasion I have stated my belief that this University has reached one of those moments in its history that may or may not prove to be defining, even transforming, but that is, at the very least, infrequent, if not rare, as the lives of institutions go. Thanks to the prudent management of our resources, we are in sound financial shape. There is more I wish we could do – more on that in a moment – but that is always the case in places like this with high aspirations. If we can exploit the opportunity presented by the present moment, our stature will continue to grow, our profile to rise, our reputation at long last to catch up with reality, our resources to increase.

My confidence has many sources, but arguably the strongest of these can be stated by a few simple, profoundly important facts. The first has to do with a spirit of boldness so clearly present in a series of decisions setting tuition and fees that continues to make The University of the South a true “value proposition” while allowing families, because they know those charges are guaranteed over four years, to plan. Just yesterday the officers of a mid-size institution not far from here spoke with me at length about how our tuition decisions have affected our admissions numbers, our retention, and our financial bottom line. Other institutions continue to flounder when they attempt to explain how they set their price. Our approach is simple, unique, and, above all, fair.

Moreover, such data as might be cited to support or refute my claim tends overwhelmingly to the positive side. Last year’s budget was balanced, and our reserves, which had been drawn down, have been replenished. Our bond rating remains A+. Our endowment performance is strong. Advance commitments during the still “silent phase” of our Capital Campaign now top $133 million. This is $44 million more than reported on this occasion a year ago.

So there is every reason for optimism on the giving front. Of the $44 million in new commitments, $16 million has been designated for financial aid, $1 million for renovations to the library, almost $2 million for the School of Theology, and $750,000 for faculty support and compensation. McClurg Dining will also benefit from a gift of $250,000 to update and modernize preparation and serving facilities. Finally, almost $10 million in unrestricted planned
gifts will provide our successors with flexibility in meeting new challenges as they arise in time to come.

Still more encouraging are the indisputable data concerning enrollments. We have, as you know, admitted to the College classes of record size in three of the last four years. We have gone from 410 in the Fall of 2010 to 433, to 453, to 488 (when we had expected 460!), to last year 466 freshmen. This year’s entering class, chosen from an applicant pool of record size (up more than 50% over a year ago), includes 469 freshmen and 17 transfers. But the best news of all is the retention rate, from freshman to sophomore year, which hovers at or above 90% from freshman to sophomore year. In the world of higher education, anything above 90% is the gold standard. One can only conclude that our hardworking Admission office is finding students who are coming to Sewanee, having a good experience, finding success, and staying. I would contend that there is no other measure more indicative of institutional health than that.

And the same is true for the School of Theology. As much of the Church wrings its hands over the future of theological education (and the rest shrugs its shoulders), the University of the South is preparing the next generation of leadership for a church now more than ever in need of something more than sound-bite theology.

These statistics tell us much that is good and encouraging. But even more important, it seems to me, is our ability, as an institution, to identify, then embrace, then pursue goals that, when achieved, speak to clarity of mission, unity of purpose, and a common commitment to improve our corporate life. We are guided still by our Strategic Plan, developed four years ago in a process of broad consultation, discussion, and debate. That Plan is not gathering dust on a shelf. It contains four broad themes:

1. Creating an exemplary learning environment.
2. Realizing the potential of the Domain.
3. Extending the reach of the University globally and locally.
4. Fostering a diverse, cohesive, and inclusive community.
Virtually everything I will report or announce today ties back, in some cases quite specifically ties back, to one or more of these themes.

In recent years, at this event, I have presented a series of institutional goals, usually numbering four or five that, derived from the Strategic Plan, would constitute operational mileposts for the coming year. By way of reminder, last year’s goals included the following:

1. RECRUITMENT, broadly defined. How might we more effectively attract the strongest students, faculty, and staff to the University? And what ought we to be doing to make the prospect of becoming a part of the Sewanee community not simply attractive, but competitive?

There is much to report on this topic. The Admissions Office has completely revamped campus tours. The Provost’s Office has completed a comprehensive campus housing plan and revised the rental pool policy in accordance with that plan. The home page, and much of the University’s website, has been remodeled and updated, and clear responsibility for maintenance of information on the site has been assigned. Keeping in mind that a vibrant Sewanee downtown will play an important role in drawing people here, we have engaged a town planner and begun work on a downtown master plan. Jointly with the Community Council and the Sewanee Civic Association, we are supporting renovations to Elliott Park. Finally, after one year of operation, the Sewanee Inn has been an enormous success, operating with occupancy rates higher than projected, realizing revenues that exceed costs, and rated by Trip Advisor as tops among all hotels in the state of Tennessee. The Inn has truly been, to use an overworked term, a “game changer.”

Finally, of course, the proof of success lies in results. The Admissions results speak for themselves. And a similar degree of success in faculty and staff recruitment would certainly seem to indicate that our recruiting efforts are bearing fruit. That said, recruitment properly understood cannot be viewed as a box to be checked off. It is a recurrent, annual challenge, and thus must remain on our list of goals for the coming year. There is still unfinished business, exemplified in two surveys taken recently. One is the COACHE survey (Collaborative on
Academic Careers in Higher Education) and the other is the staff survey taken last year by our Employee Advisory Council. The results of these two studies clearly indicate that there is work still to be done on Sewanee as a workplace. Part of the issue is compensation and, though we have made good progress on faculty compensation in the past year, we need to continue to pursue the strategy outlined in our five-year financial planning model so as to make advances in how our faculty are compensated. This is no less true for staff. And in the coming year, we will be reviewing our staff compensation structure and policies. Please understand that this does not mean that everyone can anticipate big raises over the next few years. Though that may, in some cases be the result, we first need to identify the competitive marketplaces for positions at the University and then make sure that the compensation our staff receives places us, in those various marketplaces, in a position similar to that which we expect for our faculty. We are all in this together. This University can succeed and progress only to the degree that, as a workplace, we treat everyone fairly, hold everyone accountable for performance, and reward outstanding work. And so in the coming year, reviewing Sewanee as a workplace, for faculty and for staff, will be a major goal.

2. COMMUNICATION AND SERVICE, the second of last year’s goals. Again, there is good progress to report. The Provost’s Office launched a regular newsletter, “Inside the University,” as a way of making sure this community remains fully informed about happenings at Sewanee, and not just the what but also the why. Human Resources has implemented new software to make the hiring process more transparent and efficient and provide a more professional look. Several internal service organizations – most notably Media Services, Physical Plant, and Library and ITS – have developed “service level agreements,” making clear what services they provide and what level of expectation their “customers,” all of us, ought reasonably to expect. Chris Carlson and Nickie Peardon have helped us begin to think about others ways in which service to “customers,” internal and external, might be enhanced. Under the leadership of Coach John Shackelford, the Cornerstone committee has held events designed to bring the entire Sewanee community together, for holiday celebration, for example, and for barbecue contests, And, through such simple devices as open staff meetings “coffee on the Quad,” and this afternoon’s
Launch event, we offer opportunities to share news, exchange ideas, and simply enjoy occasions when we can all be together.

Still, communication and service are, like recruitment, not the work of a single year. These are continuing goals. And so communication and service all remain an operational goal for the coming year. My colleagues and I in the administration plan more deliberately and regularly to be out and about on campus and especially to visit specific workplaces. The Provost has already begun such a tour, meeting with our colleagues in PPS. And we will continue to seek ways to make sure that, whether those being communicated with are Regents or Trustees, parents, students, faculty, or staff, or townspeople, there will be fewer and fewer legitimate professions of surprise or suspicion when the University makes a decision.

3. OUTCOMES. As the costs of education continue to rise, and as the burden of complying with a growing list of regulations grows, ever more attention needs to be paid to outcomes, broadly defined. Parents have expectations for their sons and daughters. Students have expectations that policies will be pursued in a fair and timely way. Faculty and staff cannot lose sight of why the job each does matters, and why that work must be done with skill, commitment, and care.

Over the past year, a group led by Professors Andrea Hatcher and Doug Williams have begun to study measurable career outcomes for our undergraduates, we all recognize the importance of measuring outcomes that reflect development of the whole person. This group developed what is called a First Destination Survey, to determine the extent to which our graduates believe their first jobs are part of their intended career path. The response rate to this first survey was close to 80%. The group will have a report within the next several weeks based on its findings. The report will include recommendations about the collection and presentation of other outcome data including graduate school outcomes, a redesigned alumni survey, and how we might make more effective use of internal data we already have to measure outcomes more effectively.

Outcomes, too, must remain an issue before us, then, in the coming year. And much of that work will relate closely to last year’s fourth and final goal.
4. RISK MANAGEMENT. Last year I announced the appointment of Eric Hartman to a new position as Vice President for Risk Management. This is a topic of growing importance, and not just in higher education. Identifying and then seeking to mitigate risk is a task to which all academic institutions need to pay more attention. In preparing to assume this role, which began this past July 1, Eric has spent a great deal of time learning the issues, and the processes, involved in managing risk. One conclusion to which he and I agreed was that risk management is intimately connected to institutional effectiveness. And so his title has been augmented by the addition of “Institutional Effectiveness” to it.

In a way, of course, recruitment, communication, outcomes might all be placed under this more general rubric. But no individual, or office, can take on everything at once. So here are some things Eric has already accomplished, and some other projects at the top of the list for the coming year. So far, we have begun to “map” the University’s risks and develop a framework for monitoring and addressing them. Among the most pressing, for which detailed mitigation plan has already been crafted, are sexual misconduct, revision of the student code of conduct, student alcohol and other substance use and abuse, mental health response and management, and succession planning. Eric has also begun to meet with those many individuals involved in community engagement, where, right now, gaps, overlaps, multiple leadership, and unclear lines of authority place unnecessary impediments in the way of those many individuals and offices that seek to serve the needs of our community and the Plateau. Over the next few weeks and months, progress on these fronts will be regularly and fully communicated, and the office of Risk Management and Institutional Effectiveness will take on new tasks.

These initiatives could hardly be more timely. Adding a degree of urgency and incentive to them are two impending decennial reviews the University will undergo in the coming year. One, this fall, will be a comprehensive review of the School of Theology by the Association of Theological Schools. The other, next spring, will be a similarly comprehensive review of the College by the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS). These reviews are serious and will affect us all. To Professors Jim Turrell and Nancy Berner are owed thanks from us all for the way in which they have, for a very long preparatory period, readied us for these reviews.
They have left no stone unturned, no mission unexamined, no number uncrunched, no office or program overlooked, no syllable of compliance unuttered.

The College is expected, as part of this review, to present a Quality Enhancement Plan (QEP). Based on recommendations from the ad hoc committee on curriculum chaired several years ago by Professor Bran Potter, and emanating as well from our Strategic Plan, the College has identified “speaking and listening” as our QEP. “Speaking Across the Curriculum,” like Writing Across the Curriculum, will develop in our student the important skill of oral presentation. As an early step in this initiative, the College welcomes Sean O’Rouark, this year’s Brown Fellow, who will be our Professor of Rhetoric.

When the accrediting and affirming teams are here, during the third week in October for the School of Theology and the last week of February for the College, you will know! We will all need to be standing by as we undergo these comprehensive physical exams (perhaps a poor metaphor?). But I am confident, thanks to the fine work of Professors Turrell and Berner and also the fundamental soundness of this University, that we will receive a bill of excellent health!

As we continue to look to the year ahead, with its challenges and opportunities, I would suggest adding one additional operational goal, and then I want briefly to identify several important initiatives and tasks that lie before us.

That additional goal we might define as “health and wellness.” While this topic might find a place under one or more of the goals already articulated, it seems to me to deserve a place of its own. Under the energetic leadership of Professor Alyssa Summers, the College has taken a fresh, new, comprehensive look at our entire pre-health (as opposed to simply pre-med) program. But our interest in health and wellness is, and must be, more than simply academic. Good health practices – diet, exercise, rest, for example – must be something we encourage and emphasize if we are serious in claiming to be about educating the “whole person.” The risks incurred by substance use and abuse need to be better and more fully understood. The stresses of the workplace, whether for students, faculty, or staff, need to be understood and mitigated. For all these reasons, then, though we have not designated this a “year of wellness” (every year should
be that after all), Professor Summers and her colleagues on both the faculty and in student life will be bringing to our attentions ways in which we might think about wellness, broadly understood, and thus make ourselves a healthier, and thus stronger, community. I also expect to receive from her specific recommendations about how, on a continuing basis, we might make wellness a natural part of the lives we live and the work we do on this campus.

And now I want to turn to several specific topics that will engage us in the year ahead.

First, I want to offer some thoughts on our innovative first-year pilot project, “Finding Your Place.” For the last three years, and under the capable and devoted leadership of Professor Deborah McGrath, some of our strongest faculty have offered approximately 150 entering students an opportunity no other institution could imagine. For ten days these students engage in intensive study, during which they are introduced to this place called the Domain. At the end of this period, and led by a faculty member who also serves as their advisor, these students have completed a half-semester of work; they have been introduced to the rigors of academic work; they have made friends and begun to build community; they have become rooted at Sewanee; and they have had what for years, and as recently as our faculty retreat last week identified as a best practice, a common experience.

For the rest of the course, until October Break, these students will, in sections directed by their advisors, explore the idea of “place” in a wide variety of settings and applications.

It is hard for me to imagine, after three years of demonstrated success, why any doubts should linger about the value of this program. Yet it remains on probation. That needs to change. The issue is not financial resources. That has not been, and will not be, an impediment. The issue is our willingness, as a faculty, to allow our colleagues to continue to participate in an innovative, Sewanee-specific undertaking, which exemplifies all the things we hold dear. No one should be forced to teach, or to enroll, against their will. But we must cease thinking of FYP as a threat to, or a competitor against, other start-of-school activities. And we must acknowledge that, in a world of competing priorities, at an academic institution, academics come first.
Next, after 43 years of distinguished service, George Core will be retiring as Editor of the *Sewanee Review*. Over the course of his career, George has maintained the *Review*’s position as, quite simply, the best literary journal of its kind, thus reinforcing Sewanee’s long-standing reputation in the field of letters, a position dating from the *Review*’s founding in 1892. A search has begun to identify George’s successor, and a Leadership Advisory Group, to be chaired by Provost John Swallow and comprising a distinguished group of writers, critics, and editors, will carry out the search and recommend an appointment to me.

Next, after a year or more of informal, ad hoc discussion, a group of faculty has recommended that we undertake a formal review of the University calendar. I fully recognize the perils of such an undertaking, and also the likelihood that any changes will more likely be the result of a marathon, not a sprint! The starting point of this discussion will be the consideration of whether Sewanee ought to adopt a third, 14-week, summer term. But that is just the beginning, the prompt, to discussion that must be broadly consultative and that must, in the end, bring us to a place that enables us to do most effectively those things that lie at the core of our mission and purpose. At the same time, any change to calendar ought to increase rather than reduce the flexibility of scheduling. The Provost will be assembling a group to work on this topic and begin to present ideas for what a revised calendar might look like.

Next, though I might have hoped we might by this point be farther along in carrying forward our campus master plan, we are where we are, and this topic merits considerable elaboration. First the School of Theology. If you go back to the Strategic Plan, you will discover that much attention is paid to the School and its future. Included in that consideration is the desire to bring the School and the College into closer relationship.

Some background here is necessary. The version of the move of the School of Theology that I have been told is not so much that the School desired to move but rather that, after the closing of the Sewanee Military Academy in the early 1980s, something needed to occupy Hamilton Hall, and the SoT was a prime candidate. Certainly faculty who were here in that time have told me that, though not entirely involuntary, the move was not one undertaken with great enthusiasm. St. Luke’s Hall, of course, needed renovation. The cost of doing that for instructional purposes
seemed prohibitive, and additional College residential space was needed. The teaching spaces at
Hamilton were clearly superior – at least 30 years ago they were.

In the 30 years since, Hamilton Hall has become increasingly problematic. It is not energy-
efficient. Its spaces no longer suffice for offices and classrooms. And the Program Center, along
with the study carrels, were deemed by several of our Regents who recently toured them as,
simply, an embarrassment. With these concerns in mind, we developed a space program and
discussed with our campus master planners how that space might be accommodated within
Hamilton and the Program Center. The response was that the Program Center was simply not
salvageable, and that the cost of building anew plus refurbishing Hamilton would be quite high.

It was at that moment that the idea of returning to central campus arose. I will not belabor the
details, but the findings were pretty clear: that more and better space could be secured, at
considerably less cost, by, essentially, wrapping a new School of Theology around a never-very-
successful Bishops Common (and incorporating into that space a much-needed 250-seat
auditorium, something less likely to be used if placed on Tennessee Avenue but quite likely to be
used by the entire University if sited on central campus). Furthermore, St. Luke’s Chapel
remains consecrated space. Its capacity is sufficient for the daily use of the seminary. Larger
events could be accommodated in All Saints’. We will always have one chapel more than we
may need. All living donors to the Chapel of the Apostles have been contacted and are
comfortable with the decision to relocate – none are opposed.

So – for perhaps $10 million less, we get a whole lot more. And we reaffirm our historic
relationship with the Church and place the School of Theology on a site of far greater visibility.
There is of course a risk. But if we mean to be not just a survivor among a dwindling number of
seminaries but in fact a leader, we would have a hard time sustaining that claim if we were to
remain in the Tennessee Avenue facilities.

Finally, there will linger the question of what to do with Hamilton Hall. In the short run, it will
be “swing space” for our fundraising office, which will need alternative quarters while work
commences on the Thompson site. And I suspect you know as well as I that any decision about
Hamilton Hall made now will, first, be a distraction; second, be challenged; and third, over the 5 years or more before we can actually do anything with it, be changed. So I have said that that decision is for another day and can be made in the fullness of time.

Over the next twelve months, we will formally engage an architect, develop detailed renderings and a budget, and continue our efforts to raise funds for the new School of Theology, for which we have, already received commitments of more than $12 million.

Which brings us to the University Commons. A broadly representative program planning committee developed for us over the past year the programming needs for a new space. With those plans, the Board of Regents conducted a competition and selected Centerbrook Associates to be the architects for the new Commons. The preferred site initially identified for the Commons was Thompson Union, which is where, of course, the Student Union had once been located.

Then last spring, and in the wake of the Rebel’s Rest fire, the fire chief said to me that Fulford Hall was a fire risk. Indeed, of the many wood frame buildings that once existed on campus, buildings meant to serve a temporary purpose until more permanent stone buildings could be erected, all but one had succumbed to fire. Concern over fire, as well as structural problems with some of the load-bearing walls and beams, led the University to vacate Fulford as the Vice-Chancellor’s residence and, at that time, to consider the future of Fulford (for a wonderful history of Fulford, and the many changes made to it over the years – and there have been many – one might profitably read an essay by Waring McCrady written in 1988 for the Franklin County Historical Society. The final paragraph of that article includes the following:

“the time may be nigh to lay the century-old monument to rest, respectfully and decently, saving every detail that can reasonably be used in a more serviceable building.”).

Still, and in spite of credible evidence that Fulford Hall may well have reached the end of its safe and useful life, the University has continued to occupy, and indeed to need, this graceful old building, with its wide and welcoming porches, its large (and drafty) windows, and its lovely wainscoting.
Any responsible trustee, however, being warned of the hazards of continuing to occupy a potentially unsafe building, must summon something more than nostalgia in response. And that is why, in June, with the full support of the Regents, we undertook an evaluation of the safety and soundness of Fulford Hall. The evaluation comprehensively examined the condition of Fulford, its possible future uses, and whether the costs, respectively, of replacement, renovation, or relocation were justified. Further, we conducted the study with an open mind, prepared, in the best tradition of the University, to let evidence inform conclusions rather than the other way around.

We have just received a draft of the report. Based on its findings, I am now able to announce that the option of taking down Fulford Hall is off the table. The Regents will continue to consider the best long-term use of Fulford, but it is now safe to say that the building can, and will, at reasonable cost, be renovated to serve the University for many years to come. We hope to make the final version of the report available soon, once we have received it.

This whole process is but the latest reminder that we all are blessed to be part of a special community. Over the past few days, as we have welcomed new students and faculty and staff, we have stressed to them that our understanding of diversity here includes diversity of opinion. When accompanied by honorable behavior, when insisting upon civil discourse, and when assuming and expecting the best of intentions, rumor is stifled, ill-will suppressed, petty grievances subdued. It is not, and should never be, “we” versus “they,” and we should identify such usages for what they are: a threat to the most basic values of civic responsibility. All of us in this community are working together for a great and shared purpose. Let us not lose sight of these fundamental things as we go about our work in the coming year, work that will inevitably challenge us and test us. And when we are tempted to assume the worst or pass along gossip or post something for all the world to see, let’s remember that the rest of the world is watching, and judging.

I said to the entering students last Sunday afternoon, “try to find, in the subjects you study and the people you meet, examples worthy of emulation.” And, “if we do our job right, the education
that takes place will remove self from the center of the universe while developing traits of intellect and character that, tempered with humility, will send you forth, in the words of our liturgy, marked forever as one of Sewanee’s own. And so all of us, and all of us are educators, of our students and of one another, might think of ourselves as models worthy of emulation and exemplars of selfless servanthood. Were these to be the sole accomplishments in the year ahead, we will have done much good work. I am confident that they will be the conspicuous byproduct of even greater achievements.

I hope you share my excitement about the year ahead. I close with a quote and then a story. The quote comes from a prayer offered by Bishop Polk at the laying of the cornerstone of the University. In it, he prays, on behalf of all those gathered, for “wisdom to plan and strength and skill to execute … till the whole structure rise in due proportions and finished beauty [and] be instrumental forever in enlarging knowledge and promoting the peace and happiness of mankind.” May this be our prayer as we take up our work in this new year and begin to frame, as Eliot would put it, this year’s voice.

And now the story, and one that many of you know. Willie Six is a Sewanee legend. For 40 years he served as an athletic trainer. According to the University history, “he worked tirelessly to keep Sewanee men on the field, whether as stars or as scrubs.” Upon his retirement in 1947 this beloved figure was made an honorary member of the “S” society and received a varsity athletic letter. Willie Six Road memorializes his service to the University.

A reporter asked Willie, at the time of his retirement, what was the best year in Sewanee athletic history. This man, who had seen many great teams and many great moments answered without hesitation: “the best year? The best year is the one comin’ up.”

I like that a lot. Willie Six refused to look back, refused to live in the past. His comment neither denied nor demeaned that past. But that was the past. The best was yet to come. Willie Six, even in retirement, looked forward to the year “comin’ up.”
And so we take up our work in this new academic year, hoping in the end to be found faithful servants, striving to build a place where the worth and dignity of every human being are respected, where freedom does exist in proportion to wholesome restraint, where education does take place around the clock, in all venues, and where, even when the fog closes in, a kindly light still leads us on.

And so – let us take up our tasks for the year, as our liturgy puts it, “with gladness and singleness of heart.”

The best year is “the one comin’ up.”

John M. McCardell, Jr.