

From Crisis to Hope through Love — A Paradigm for Presidential Ministry

(The Rev. Canon) Hugh R. Page, Jr., DMin, PhD, LHD

Good afternoon. Thank you, Provost Yontz, for that gracious introduction. Bishop Dillahunty; faculty, staff, students, alumni/ae, and friends of Wittenberg; members of the greater Springfield, OH community; distinguished guests; and all participants in today's inauguration—it is a pleasure to be with you. To my colleague and friend, President Brady—congratulations and best wishes to you, your wife—Professor Elizabeth Brady—your daughter Isabel, and all in your family as a new chapter in your lives opens. It is an honor to be present as you celebrate the beginning of your presidency.

It goes almost without saying that this is a challenging time to be an academic administrator. It is particularly daunting for those taking on the duties of a college or university chief executive. The normal day-to-day rhythms of the job—strategic planning, recurring meetings, informal conversations, dealing with intermittent crises, and the like—take on added intensity when issues like dynamism in our regional and national economies, fluctuating enrollment, and a rapidly changing regulatory landscape figure into the equation. Today's presidents are often asked to possess the savvy of a Fortune 500 CEO, the boundless energy of a marathon runner, the patience of Job, the diplomatic acumen of an ancient sage, and both the healing and homiletical skills of a biblical prophet. Moreover, they are expected to make few, if any, errors—*via* omission or commission. With such unreasonable expectations, it is a miracle that anyone would willingly accept such a position; and no small wonder that the typical tenure of presidents today is around six years, according to one recent study.¹

¹ See the article by David Jesse (Jesse 2023).

By contrast, this afternoon's gathering signals something different. It is a pledge to support *and* accompany a new leader. It calls attention to a critical season of growth in Wittenberg's development as the nurturing "academic grove" envisioned by Ezra Keller, this university's founder and first president. It is another station stop on an unfolding pilgrimage of grace-filled work in the world consistent with your identity, mission, and history—all of which are grounded in faith and bold decision making. It is an opportunity to celebrate and affirm the values at the heart of your common life: the centrality of liberal learning, holistic education, communal learning, an open and welcoming Lutheran heritage, "global citizenship," vocational "discernment," "creativity," "service," "compassion," and "integrity."² You welcome your new president—Dr. Brady—into a community conscious of its rich legacy and excited about its future prospects as a sanctuary of learning. Today's is such a heartening event for these reasons. It is also exciting because it affords us an opportunity to dream and to think *together* about a transformational *paradigm* for the work of a university president and a university community at large.

I have taken inspiration for this model from the two biblical passages—from the books of Lamentations (3:19–24) and Revelation (21:1–5a)—read a few moments ago. In the former, Lamentations, we hear the juxtaposition of despair and profound hope expressed amid calamity and devastation. This poem, like many others in the ancient lament genre, was designed to allow realistic depiction of current realities, a therapeutic outpouring of emotions, and—to the extent possible—affirmation of a Divine promise, however tenuous. Everything in the mind of this poet rests on two verities. One is God's *hesed*—a word variously translated as "mercy" (KJV), "steadfast love," (NRSV), "kindness" (CEV), or "great love" (NIV). Another is the Lord's *emunah*, rendered in several English translations as "faithfulness" (KJV, NRSV, and NIV). Both enable this individual to invite a dispirited 6th Century BCE

² See the "About Wittenberg" webpage — <https://www.wittenberg.edu/about/mission-values> (accessed 15 October 2025).

audience to acknowledge the harsh realities of a decimated Jerusalem and its environs and to affirm the apparently inconceivable—that the connection between God and God’s people is indissoluble. Such was for this visionary soul neither facile nor delusional. It was a forward-looking claim coming from a heart rooted—like a modern Blues artist—between anguish and toxic positivity. We hear this same confidence expressed so eloquently in Thomas Chisholm’s classic early 20th Century hymn “Great is Thy Faithfulness” sung just moments ago.³ In the latter passage, from Revelation, hailing perhaps from the period of 1st Century CE Roman imperial occupation in Judea, we have what might be termed an apocalyptic cosmogony—a compelling vision of a second creation, a new Jerusalem, and a refashioned universe where the perennial battle between life and death has been won, once and for all. Christ — *Alpha, Omega*, Love incarnate, the One sitting on the celestial throne—has triumphed and entrusts this timeless testimony to posterity. Martin Luther’s poignant 16th Century hymn, *Ein Feste Burg*, celebrates the power of this victory and its implications for those that embrace it.

So, what lessons might we derive for 21st Century academic administrators, university presidents, and university citizens, from a 6th Century BCE Hebrew lament, an early Greek apocalypse, and two classic Christian hymns? What do they suggest about leading, especially during moments of unpredictability and disruption? I propose three things for us to ponder in the days ahead.

The first is that leadership is ministry—a collaborative ministry—in which shared values are affirmed, distinctive voices and perspectives are uplifted, and community bonds are strengthened. We are enacting the basic tenets of such a ministry as we celebrate the beginning of Dr. Brady’s tenure as Wittenberg’s 16th President. The readings and hymns rehearse a few of the touchstones for such ministry: a clear sense of current realities, the ability to invite others to

³ See—https://hymnary.org/text/great_is_thy_faithfulness_o_god_my_fathe (accessed 15 October 2025).

reflect on those matters, however painful, and the capacity to inspire others by leveraging a *poetics of hope* with deep and abiding spiritual wellsprings.

The second is that leadership—in a real sense—is everyone’s responsibility. Certainly, there are specific areas of oversight belonging to presidents. However, institutional effectiveness depends on the mutual collaboration of trustees, presidents, provosts, department chairs, faculty, staff members, students, *alumni/ae*, and institutional fellow travelers. Ancient poets like the author of Lamentations and apocalyptic visionaries like the author of Revelation were formed by and worked within communities of support where their worldviews were shaped, their imaginations honed, and—no doubt—their thoughts preserved and passed on. Academic leaders today are, in a comparable manner, formed within the communities they are called to serve. Their effectiveness and success depend—at least in part—on the networks within which they are embedded and nurtured at their home institutions.

The third, and most important, is that effective leadership is perhaps best anchored *in* and animated *by* the great *mystery* of love. The *lexicon* and cosmic dimensions of love are key to understanding the context-specific and timeless truths at the heart of Judaism and Christianity. It is the basis of hopefulness subtly woven into the prosodic texture of Lamentations. It is the source and sum of the Divine faithfulness manifest daily to those that wait patiently for it, as did its author, in times of trouble. It is the hearth from which visionaries like the author of Revelation received warmth and inspiration. Now, some might ask what such love has to do with the management of institutions of higher education—with budgets, student services, personnel, and the like—especially in times of substantive disruption and change. My answer is, in a word, *everything*. Love invites us to think prayerfully about the motivations for our decisions. Love challenges us to look closely at our priorities. Love demands that we ask whether we are honoring

the golden thread that connects all of life and that makes us responsible—ultimately—for everyone and everything we touch.

So, in closing, I invite you to join me in congratulating Dr. Brady as he begins his presidential ministry at Wittenberg; to support him as he shoulders the distinctive responsibilities of his office; and to accompany him as stewards of Wittenberg's legacy. May the days ahead find you witnessing to the ways a university community can leverage its teaching, research, learning, and service to lead a fractured world from crisis to hope through the power of a love through which all things—even the inconceivable—are gloriously possible.

Thank you and God bless.

REFERENCE

Jesse, David. 2023. Portrait of the Presidency: They are less experienced than ever — and eyeing the exits. *Chronicle of Higher Education* (14 April 2023). Accessed 13 October 2025.