

PRACTICING THE PRESENCE OF GOD
Christian Higher Education in Asia

Chung Chi College Assembly
Chinese University of Hong Kong
April 13, 2012

Thank you for the kind introduction and for your generous invitation to address this assembly of Chung Chi College. What an honor for me!

Congratulations to Professor LEUNG Yuen Sang, College Head, and to all of the Chung Chi College community – faculty, administration, staff and alumni/ae– as you continue to celebrate the College's 60th anniversary! A special word of congratulations, also, to all of the students whose achievements are being saluted in this honors assembly!

Today we celebrate **two** anniversaries: 60 years since the founding of Chung Chi College, and 90 years for the United Board for Christian Higher Education in Asia – with intertwining roots that stretch deep into the history of Christian higher education in greater China. And so I congratulate, also, Dr. Wu Ching-mai, chairman of the United Board; Dr. Nancy Chapman, president; and all of the trustees and staff of the United Board for their leadership and service. It is a special privilege to mark these anniversaries with distinguished members of the CCUAA, whom I met just before this talk; you represent the long history of the Christian colleges in China, and we are honored by your presence in the Chung Chi College Chapel today.

I bring greetings from all of my colleagues at the Henry Luce Foundation in New York – where we are currently celebrating our 75th anniversary. A third thread is woven into this strong cord!

Why do we mark an anniversary? There are at least four reasons:

- To remember and honor the founding motivation
- To lift up all of the accomplishments of the intervening years
- To consolidate identity and build up the community
- To launch the future

In marking three anniversaries, we celebrate long-lasting partnerships and friendship. The United Board and this college are linked by a shared history and a common vision – and by a commitment to education of the whole person and service. The Luce family and foundation have been honored to participate in these proud trajectories. Today we explore the meaning and promise of these intersecting journeys.

In this presentation, I plan to address three topics briefly:

- Practicing the presence of God – the title of the address;
- Current challenges for higher education; and
- Opportunities for Christian higher education in Asian countries.

To construct a theological frame, let's go back in time, to recall the moment that Chung Chi College was founded: the early 1950s when the historic Christian colleges of mainland China were shuttered following the revolution – and when many young people and their teachers came to Hong Kong, eager to continue their studies.

Remember: these students had come from a scene of great turbulence – years of external invasion, a world war, and internal political strife. For the communities that had built the thirteen Christian colleges in China – the group of schools that the United Board had been established to serve – this was a time of huge uncertainty and dislocation, a time of loss, confusion and disarray.

To many, it seemed that the Christian tradition presence in Chinese higher education was about to be lost. But amid this turmoil, a small group of sponsors from the local religious community, the United Board and others rallied, creating THIS school in an act of courage and hope, indeed an act of faith. (In the same years, we know, the United Board helped to support parallel work at colleges in Taiwan, Japan and the Philippines.)

This memory of Chung Chi College's founding vision has a particular resonance for us in Easter week, when we recall the worst dislocation in Christian history. Since Easter Sunday, we have been reading the Gospel accounts of the days that followed the death and resurrection of Jesus. Talk about turbulence and uncertainty! The disciples of Jesus must have felt ALL of the emotions that the Chung Chi's founders knew – especially confusion and the loss of their friend and leader.

These stories are to me moving – when Mary Magdalene, for instance, encounters Jesus near the empty tomb, initially mistaking him for a gardener, failing to recognize her dear Lord until He calls her by name; or when Jesus cooks fish for the disciples after leading them to a remarkable catch.

These episodes have in common a deeply comic pattern: frustration, surprise, embarrassment, followed by great relief that in the end, through God's power, everything has turned out all right. Such a pattern is often described as the divine comedy. My favorite of the post-Resurrection narratives is probably the Emmaus story at the end of Luke's Gospel. Like the histories of Chung Chi College and the United Board, this is another example of intersecting journeys. Two disciples are on the road a few nights after the crucifixion of Jesus, walking with heavy hearts, when they are joined by Jesus whom they cannot recognize. When He asks why they are so sad, one of them says, "Are you the only one who doesn't know what's been happening?" (The reader of the Gospel is intended to laugh at their foolish question; today we would say, "Duh!") Later, when they recognize Him, they exclaim, "Weren't our hearts burning within us when He talked with us on the road?!"

Whether in a garden or on the road or in an upper room or at lake side, the disciples' core discovery is one and the same: God, in the person of Christ, is not defeated nor withdrawn: but is really right here. Although they find him hard to recognize, in every instance the witnesses come to believe that somehow Jesus is once again alive and in their midst, still in the world. No doubt, in the early 1950's the Chung Chi founders struggled in their own loss to believe in the divine comedy, yet they felt empowered by God's abiding spirit.

For us, also, that is today's discovery – and I know that it's as difficult for us to understand and trust as it was for Jesus's disciples. The mission of Christian higher education is not really to bring Christ to the world, or even to bring the world to Christ (two ways that our predecessors might have framed their task): Christ is present and alive. Our challenge is to practice the presence of Christ, that is, to engage the world, genuinely believing that God is in it.

The word *practice* has at least three different meanings: to rehearse, over and over, to get it right on the way to a public performance or a competition; to translate the theoretical into the actual ("to put an idea into practice"); and to be consistent in our customs, habits and values, so that we finally align our mission with our "best practices."

Most of us can grasp what it means for **churches** to practice the presence of Christ: that's their job description, isn't it? But what does this have to do with higher education, especially with higher education in Asian countries? Many people, it seems, would prefer to divide the **practice** of their faith from the **practical** enterprise of the university, perhaps especially so in settings where Christianity is in a distinct minority. But separating our deepest values from our daily work is perilous.

Before we consider the kinds of practice that will unleash our schools' potential in the future, we need first to acknowledge some of the challenges for higher education today around the world. The leaders of Chung Chi College and the United Board have a great deal of experience in this arena, as does the Luce Foundation which works with at least 300 schools every year. Let me name three of the challenges we currently face:

ACCESS: who gets to attend the university? Are there sufficient seats and varied options for all to be educated? How will we make more opportunities available?

COST and the reality of resource disparity: Cornell University Professor Ronald Ehrenberg believes that the economic divide is deepening. He describes the rising costs for colleges and universities, which can be attributed to such factors as qualified faculty and communications technology. These costs are then passed on to students and their faculty, who often seek shortcuts to reduce their expenditure. Ehrenberg then calls for a broad social discussion about the allocation of resources for what we see as a national and global priority.

COHERENCE: more fundamentally, we must raise the question of meaning. Are colleges really preparing their graduates to grapple with life's big questions? Duke University's President Emerita Nan Keohane cites the declining support for liberal arts education as one sign of this central challenge. Many in this room share her assessment that liberal arts education uniquely prepares a student's mind for a lifetime of change, discovery and contribution. But the trends today are toward earlier specialization, greater divides among the disciplines, and undergraduate colleges following the model of graduate education. Students feel great economic pressure to study what yields a job, what can be translated into immediate income. And for many, the focus on impersonal markets results in the discounting of the personal, the humane.

We must, then, challenge the key assumptions, and underline that the purpose of education is:

Not just information – but a larger pursuit of wisdom, even truth, “education of the heart” as our previous United Board chairman James Laney phrased it;

Not just acquisition – but empowerment;

Not just credentials – but citizenship;

Not just about me – but about the community I’m educated to serve.

Despite, even because of, these challenges, this is a time of opportunity. In a competitive market, we are called to bring an alternative values proposition: coherent, effective preparation for leadership and service through education of the whole person. In this pursuit, we can be inspired by other trends than those I cited above.

Consider the rising quality and visibility of Asian universities since the founding of Chung Chi. There is an exponential growth of higher education in this region, and with it dynamism. We see schools that engage cutting-edge technology, and model themselves on the best practices of global education, but still prize the ancient Confucian traditions of faith and learning: humility, scholarship and social responsibility.

In this region, we are witnessing a genuine explosion of the youth population – who welcome the opportunity for liberal education to become genuinely liberating education. Their enrollment in service learning programs is just one sign of the passion that animates them and that bodes so well for our common future.

In this context, what are some of the specific practices, the ways of practicing the presence of God in higher education? At our 90th anniversary, the United Board can rightly be proud to have led the way in these:

1. Inclusion – hospitality – education as a good for many, not just for the few;
2. Care for all the world – seeing the environment as creation, to be stewarded;
3. Recognizing religious diversity as a gift of God’s manifold presence; and
4. Transforming conflict into collaborative work for social justice, peace-building and reconciliation.

On Easter Sunday, I read a sermon about the disciples’ journey to Emmaus, where burdened hearts were turned into burning hearts. Our anniversaries can help us to do the same, but I suspect that our most important years lie ahead of us. Amid many challenges, we have our work cut out for us, but we can trust that we will encounter God’s presence, often in the face of a stranger, and often when we least expect.

I salute your achievement – a track record in which you can take great pride. I pray that you will thrive and remain faithful in the current scene. And I thank you for allowing me to walk with you to forge a surer path in our intersecting journeys.

Michael Gilligan