

Pepperdine University and Churches of Christ
A White Paper Presented to the Religious Standards Committee
December 9, 2014

Introduction – Historical Backdrop

On September 14-15, 2014, members of the Religious Standards committee of the Board of Regents engaged in a two-day conversation with senior administrators to discuss the relationship of Pepperdine University to Churches of Christ. Discussions focused less on a simple rehearsing of the past and more on Pepperdine engaging the present and future as a top-tier academic institution fully committed to maintaining its faith heritage and connection with Churches of Christ.

This discussion was most pertinent given a key line in Pepperdine’s historic affirmation statement: “Truth, having nothing to fear from investigation, should be pursued relentlessly in every discipline.” Given that affirmation, key leaders at Pepperdine should approach this discussion fearlessly and with studied resolve. From this two-day discussion, the Religious Standards committee members encouraged the president, provost, and vice-president for church relations to draft a white paper addressing topics and issues that surfaced during the retreat. This paper is neither solely foundational nor visional; rather, it attempts to articulate areas of opportunity that uniquely intersect Churches of Christ and Pepperdine University and to challenge the University to engage those opportunities as we progress toward our goal to become a preeminent global Christian university. The areas of opportunity noted below should inform Pepperdine’s strategic planning and critique our commitment to Christian mission. God has blessed Pepperdine with a multitude of gifts and talents; however, with great blessing comes great

responsibility. Pepperdine recognizes and acknowledges the continual call from God to examine our use of the talents he has provided us.

Pepperdine University and Churches of Christ share a rich and fascinating history. Both entities have witnessed and benefited from numerous moments of faith and courage. At times, both have struggled with maintaining balance between multiple convictions, convictions that sometimes were assumed in tension if not conflict. Churches of Christ belong to the Restoration tradition, a tradition founded upon the twin ideals of unity and restoration. Throughout their history, our churches have grappled with determining how best to achieve unity in Christ through a restoration of first-century ideals. Similarly, Pepperdine University, a top-tier academic institution fully aligned with a faith tradition, has repeatedly been challenged to demonstrate academic excellence (typically defined by the secular academy) that conjoins fully with commitment to Christian mission.

To frame the following conversation, we have chosen language central to Pepperdine University:

Pepperdine is a Christian university committed to the highest standards of academic excellence and Christian values, where students are strengthened for lives of purpose, service, and leadership.

Just as we consider our purpose as leaders and educators to be that of strengthening the lives of our students for purpose, service, and leadership, so Pepperdine's role in relation to its Restoration heritage more generally and its ties to Churches of Christ more specifically should be to serve and provide leadership (especially intellectual) where desired and to engage those pressing and perennial questions of the purpose

of Pepperdine University and its relation to Churches of Christ. Pepperdine University possesses a wealth of intellectual and spiritual resources and a willingness to share these resources with those churches with which it shares this common religious heritage. Given our conviction of the repeated manifestations of God's grace and faithfulness in the life of our University, we enter this task with joy and firm resolve, affirming that God is faithful and that the opportunities and exciting possibilities before us (both for Pepperdine and for Churches of Christ) outweigh the potential threats and negative consequences fear might induce.

The Genius of Churches of Christ and the Restoration tradition (and its relevance for higher education)

Churches of Christ, one of the three branches of the Restoration movement, celebrate a heritage rooted in a vision of historic Christianity that is non-denominational in character. The original founders of the Restoration tradition not only lamented the divisiveness and acrimony created by denominational loyalties, but they also actively worked to dismantle the walls erected by these unhealthy arguments. They attempted to recapture the unity of the early church through the placement of essential biblical principles at the center of the Christian life and denominational allegiances at the periphery. Though often challenging to maintain, this non-denominational vision has been a historic mainstay for Churches of Christ.

Today it is widely acknowledged that we are living in a post-denominational, if not post-Christian, world. Historic denominational lines have become increasingly

blurred; young people (Christian and non-Christian) express little interest in discussions relating to denominational affiliation.¹

While some might find this mindset threatening, for those steeped in the Restoration tradition, this provides us an exciting opportunity to revisit and reclaim those “essential biblical principles” central to our faith and life. True to our forebears, this allows us a wonderful occasion to emphasize the central tenets that unite us rather than divide us.

Churches of Christ and the Restoration tradition affirm several foundational theological principles that resound powerfully with the historic principles and vision of higher education. Churches of Christ affirm the centrality of the two principal sacraments of the faith: baptism and the Lord’s Supper. However, it is the vision of the Lord’s Supper as an *open table* that perhaps provides the greatest asset for faith-based education. An open table affirms that all believers are welcome; no official predetermines the legitimacy of the participants. This vision for a welcoming community is captured in an early Restoration mantra – “Christians only, but not the

¹ This changing religious landscape, coupled with changing visions of the value and purpose of higher education generally, have significant implications for Pepperdine University. Competition for students from within our fellowship is changing. Our churches as a whole regard Christian education less valuable than previous generations. While our colleges and universities improve their academic offerings and attract highly qualified students from outside the Churches of Christ, families and students within our fellowship are pursuing other higher education options, or choosing to forego college altogether. At the same time, our Christian colleges and universities are struggling to attract prospects from within the church whose parents or siblings did not attend church-affiliated schools. Most schools are reporting steep declines in participation from this critical market segment. Clearly, church-affiliated universities must find new ways to directly engage families and churches from within our fellowship so that they recognize the value of a Christian education.

only Christians.” With a theology of an open table centered in the gracious gift of God, it is an easy step to acknowledge not only the necessity of diversity in thought and background of the community but also the celebration of that diversity. True diversity creates genuine dialogue and increased understanding; the multiplicity of stories among the varied community members is not merely tolerated but celebrated. In a community that is daily committed to restoring the essentials of the faith, diversity of opinion will be welcomed, resulting in a community of respect, a community characterized by charity and humility.

The theology of an open table meshes seamlessly with two additional key tenets of biblical Christianity: the priesthood of all believers and congregational autonomy. Churches of Christ take seriously the declaration that we *all* are a “royal priesthood,” personally responsible for our relationship with God. At the corporate level, we similarly affirm that each congregation must take responsibility for living out its faithful calling as a community of believers located in a particular time and culture. We acknowledge no central authority to determine and designate the contours of congregational life. Such a theological vision has the potential to energize a faith-based institution of higher education. Universities historically have affirmed shared governance; institutions of higher learning are somewhat unique organizations in affirming that all members of the community share some responsibility in determining the focus and direction of the institution. While the gifts and roles of the various community members may differ, resulting in various assignments and delegation of responsibility, the larger vision and direction of the school is not relegated to a chosen few or to selected sectors of the institution. A

vision of the priesthood of all believers, coupled with congregational autonomy, provides a wonderful community resource for internal and external discussions about the role and place of the University in higher education and in its relationship to Churches of Christ.

While numerous other theological tenets of the Restoration tradition might be cited, we close this section noting the historic importance of the centrality of Scripture and its claim upon all aspects of life in the Restoration tradition. Churches of Christ affirm the authority of Scripture and its non-negotiable truth that *God is* (an affirmation weighty with epistemological and ethical implications). Honoring the authority of Scripture requires disciplined and studied attention to the texts and contexts of the biblical materials. The logical outcome of such a vision and approach to Scripture is radical discipleship. Intellectual understanding of Scripture is never the ultimate goal of intensive study; understanding Scripture should manifest itself in lives given wholly to emulating the One affirmed in Scripture. Historically, the Restoration tradition was rooted in methodologies associated with inductive reasoning and empiricism. Not surprisingly, Churches of Christ focused upon the original texts of Scripture (*ad fontes*), refusing to complacently receive interpreted versions of those materials through secondary sources. Although institutions of higher learning today recognize multiple methodological approaches, the scientific approaches of empiricism and inductive reasoning retain their epistemological power to create knowledge and analyze previous insights and discoveries, endeavors central to the higher education agenda. As a serendipitous by-product, the intended radical discipleship resulting from lives acknowledging the divine

claims upon all aspects of life engages well the contemporary emphasis upon vocation.

The Genius of Pepperdine University and its Relationship to Higher Education and Churches of Christ

While virtually all colleges and universities articulate in their promotional literature that they are “unique,” skeptics rightly note that most elements cited as unique are owned and celebrated by a plethora of higher education stakeholders. Pepperdine University shares numerous features common to both secular and faith-based institutions of higher learning. However, while hopefully not falling prey to ill-founded assertions of uniqueness, there are aspects unique to Pepperdine that distinguish it from its secular counterparts and its faith-based cohorts.

While the similarities are not inconsequential, it is perhaps the dissimilarities to both groups that are most noteworthy. These distinctives should not surprise us, given the nature and worldview of our founder, George Pepperdine. George Pepperdine was clearly a counter-cultural thinker and visionary. He fearlessly embraced an educational future that, while closely aligned with his church tradition, envisioned what *could be*; he refused to allow the risks and challenges dominating the landscape of his day to trump his vision. George Pepperdine entrusted his fortune to the establishment of a college in a post-depression climate. He placed his school in a geographical location, Los Angeles situated on the Pacific Rim, that he was convinced would one day become the center of global commerce and cultural exchange. Strikingly, this bold geographical selection situated his college far from

the population base of his faith heritage, Churches of Christ. We are the heirs to that daring faith and boundless conviction.

With such elements in its educational DNA, Pepperdine University has earned the respect of its academic and faith-based peers and colleagues, while maintaining those elements that make it uniquely Pepperdine.²

On the academic front, Pepperdine enjoys a national ranking typically associated only with research-intensive (R1) institutions. (Pepperdine is classified a doctoral research university [DRU]). More specifically, while Pepperdine questions the criteria associated with the national ranking system, the University regularly receives a ranking customarily given only to elite private institutions and heavily subsidized public institutions. No Protestant faith-based institution receives a higher academic ranking than Pepperdine. Similarly, Pepperdine competes and succeeds athletically at a level completely disproportionate to its undergraduate population.³

When considering Pepperdine's faith dimension, the University is one of a select few faith-based schools that maintain a vibrant and respected commitment to

² This linkage is reflected in our current strategic planning and vision documents. The first two goals of the University's strategic plan – advance student learning and superior scholarship; strengthen our commitment to the faith mission of the University – relate directly to President Benton's vision articulated in *Boundless Horizons*.

³ This academic reputation results in incredibly high admission requirements, presenting an additional challenge to the University. Not only is the pool of church affiliated prospects shrinking; the pool of academically and financially prepared prospects is declining. Pepperdine must find ways to compete more effectively for the top 2% of church affiliated prospects. It must clearly communicate its differentiated factors.

a Christian mission with a reputation for superb academics. The University has maintained its historic relationship with and commitment to its Restoration heritage without the monikers customarily associated with sister-schools of the heritage (i.e., southern, Bible-belt, exclusive hiring practices, regional scope). While many might consider the absence of such identity indicators potential threats and even weaknesses, for Pepperdine, they today reflect the genius of the religious heritage of Churches of Christ and the founder of the University, George Pepperdine.

While the past does not dictate the future, Pepperdine's academic and religious heritage provides rich resources for envisioning a bold future, a future infused with hope and faith rather than a future riddled with doubt and uncertainty. The prevailing demographic and economic winds may cause some leaders in faith-based higher education to focus upon the potential dangers and chart courses ultimately rooted in presumed security and safety. Alternately, some faith-based institutions may jettison their core academic and / or religious convictions hoping to weather the present. Pepperdine University refuses either option. Social, economic, demographic, or even spiritual forces will neither separate Pepperdine from its historic linkage to Churches of Christ nor derail it from its continued pursuit of academic excellence. Significantly, the very religious heritage that Pepperdine claims and that claims Pepperdine embodies the pursuit of excellence in all aspects of life and endeavor. Our heritage takes seriously the central commands of the one we call Lord:

You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself
(Luke 10:27).

True to our Restoration DNA and our University's never-ending commitment to academic excellence coupled with faithfulness to our Christian mission, we refuse to rest upon our laurels. Moving forward, Pepperdine must clarify our understanding of our Church of Christ identity, prepare for greater inclusivity, and embrace various interpretations of our heritage currently embodied within our movement. Pepperdine can smooth the road ahead for other Christian colleges and universities. By taking a lead, Pepperdine can make it safer for sister schools to take risks.

On a related front, Pepperdine should also look to other markets inside our Restoration heritage to strengthen its base. We believe this is a largely untapped market with great potential. Building upon Pepperdine's foundational platforms, the University is poised to position itself not only among the elite universities in Los Angeles, but also to be seen as the undisputed leader in Christian higher education in California and the western United States. For Pepperdine to shape the conversation around Christian private higher education, the University must form partnerships and alliances that will allow it to shorten the distance between our current status and our future leadership position.

Pepperdine embraces a future that many in higher education, especially faith-based higher education, consider fraught with uncertainty and lacking in desired assurances. Pepperdine chooses neither to deny the challenges nor be

paralyzed by the seeming obstacles in the path ahead. Rather, we choose to affirm our rich religious heritage, a heritage replete with theological resources and narratives of faith and courage from previous eras. Pepperdine chooses to embody and celebrate the faith and convictions of its founder and intellectual ancestors, sacrificing neither the Christian mission nor academic excellence as it lives out its mission in tumultuous times. Pepperdine is uniquely situated to provide an intellectual environment that courageously welcomes all participants to engage in serious and sustained dialogue about the nature and essence of God and the world God created and the unique placement and role of humanity in that world. Pepperdine celebrates the diversity that energizes such discussions while maintaining a fervent commitment to the unity that honors God in the pursuit of truth. Pepperdine eagerly accepts its role to serve and provide leadership both to the academic community and to its religious heritage. This likely will occur primarily through the educating of successive generations of young leaders willing to engage the pressing issues of the day with a theological vision that evidences courageous faith and ethical sensitivity. However, it will also occur through a myriad of ways in which Pepperdine will serve as a role model for capacious faith and gracious welcoming of all believers conjoined fully with a commitment to the religious heritage that generated such a vision. Through the relentless and fearless pursuit of truth in all areas of life and unwavering commitment to the one who is Truth, Pepperdine University will faithfully and joyfully fulfill its role as an academic institution strengthening lives for purpose, service, and leadership.