

## **Gathering Day Remarks—August 23, 2022**

Welcome back everyone, it is life-giving to see you and an honor to be in your company—you are the very people who bring life, hope, and love to our campus and to our students every day.

Thank you for your service and leadership at North Park. It is a privilege to serve you as president, and I am delighted to address you today as we gather our energy, strength, courage, and compassion to enter this new year at North Park.

This is a year when we are finally able to open our campus to our students, faculty, and staff under nearly “normal” circumstances, and we rejoice in that. This is a year of healing and building—building relationships, building trust, and building momentum as we build our future together.

Though we can never predict or plan for all that the future holds, we can be secure in the evidence of God’s protection in our past, and the promise of the plans he has for us—plans for hope and a future—as we embark on this important and pivotal year. We can stand on his promises for our school—we can take him at his living word—and pray for the grace to listen, to learn, and to trust him more and more.

For those of you who are new to our community, welcome! We are delighted you are here. Thank you for accepting our invitation to teach and support our students in your various and vital roles. We welcome several new members this fall to our faculty and staff, and we look forward to the contributions and expertise you bring to our community. We want you to be encouraged and equipped to apply your faith and your gifts to your work. We want you to grow and thrive here. What we know is that you will see the impact of your work in the lives and development of your students. This brings joy and affirmation of your calling here. At North Park, we know and respect the fact that our work has impact and lasting effect on our students. We join you in taking that privilege and responsibility seriously—and we are grateful for the role you will play in the lives of our students. Welcome to North Park!

To those of you returning for your second or your 32<sup>nd</sup> year—our exceptional faculty and staff—thank you! You have taught and nurtured our students for many years. We all know that there have been times—including recent times—that have been difficult, painful, challenging, but I deeply respect and admire your commitment to remain in service, to stay on mission, and to exercise your gifts to teach, lead, nurture, and support our students. You help to cultivate their intellect and challenge them to new thinking, you walk alongside them in multiple ways, and help prepare them to lead, serve, and succeed.

North Park faculty and staff, you are the anchor of our community and the most important champions of our emerging future. Thank you for devotion to North Park.

I pray that summer brought some time for rest and renewal for everyone here. Physical, spiritual, and emotional rest are so important to health and well-being. It can refresh our perspective and allows us to reflect on the past, while seeking hope and improvement for the future.

Of course, a great deal of work was accomplished over the summer months, including the continued recruitment and enrollment of our incoming class by the admissions staff and coaches, the retention

and registration of our returning students by our student engagement staff and registrar, and the renewal of our campus facilities and grounds, by our dedicated physical plant staff.

Plans are in place for a rich year of education and civic engagement through Catalyst along with elevation and expansion of this important program as a vital expression of our three distinctives. We are advancing in our efforts and initiatives in diversity, equity, and inclusion through the task force and its leaders, and campus master planning and strategic planning continued through the summer, as well.

My thanks to our colleagues immersed in this work and many other initiatives—for outcomes achieved and for new ideas that will come forward for our university.

Now, I know you are interested in our enrollment progress and the students joining us this fall, so let's have a look at our results to date.

As of today, we are again expecting an incoming traditional undergraduate class that exceeds 600 students. These students represent 30 states and 30 countries, five continents, and two U.S. territories. 429 come from the state of Illinois, and 281 of those from our very own city of Chicago.

Twenty-six are affiliated with an Evangelical Covenant Church (ECC) congregation, 11 will be a part of CRUX, and again this year, one-third of our incoming class are Viking student-athletes.

This incoming class of 600 means that we have put together back-to-back classes at this level, with record numbers of first-time, first-year students. In the current higher education landscape and recruiting space, this is a significant achievement and indicates several encouraging things.

North Park is a compelling university of choice for prospective students, and our recruitment staff has done a great job of identifying and cultivating our new students. Students have choices, and they are choosing North Park. They are choosing to study with our remarkable faculty in our rich, urban environment, and they are choosing to join our diverse and engaged student community, adding to the identity and the ethos of our campus. And we seek to make their education as affordable as possible.

Recruitment of course is only the start. Strong retention, healthy persistence, graduation, and career readiness are key to our full commitment to our students.

We have strong indicators of retention this year, including the fact that 72% of last year's record first year class is returning to North Park and registered full-time for the fall.

As a tuition-dependent university, these strong recruitment and retention indicators are vital factors toward improvement of our institutional economy.

We had welcome news in mid-July about salary increases for everyone on our campus and the restoration of your retirement benefits.

You have waited a long time for this relieving and encouraging news. First stabilizing North Park's financial position, and now progressively generating the funds to reinvest in our faculty and staff has been our goal.

Our plan and trajectory for the future includes continued improvement in compensation along with investment in mission and innovation. We'll give priority attention to all elements that contribute to a flourishing faculty, a supported and successful staff, and care for the people and culture that will make North Park a thriving community for all.

These will be some of our central themes as we are building our strategic plan for the future. Good work to date has been engaged by many members of our community, contributing ideas and framing for the university's plan. More work will ramp up this fall once all community sessions are complete.

Two inclusive input sessions took place earlier this summer, with two more planned this week. Thank you! As they emerge, we are identifying primary themes and pillars of priority that will build our thriving future. Departments will be engaged this fall in developing the specific work plans for their areas that will support North Park's plan.

We seek to build a financially healthy Christian institution marked by a flourishing campus community with excellent academic and co-curricular offerings. Our campus facilities must be compelling to students, environmentally sustainable, appropriately sized, and properly designed.

We seek to build the processes, practices, and resources that allow our faculty to flourish in their roles of teaching, leadership, scholarship, and service, and to build the seamless support services that allow our students to concentrate solely on their academic advancement and the rich experience of living and learning at North Park. And we seek to build an environment where the members of our staff are valued in their careers and rewarded for their service and influence.

In short, we are seeking to build excellence across our entire organization. We are building new programs that are true to our mission, compelling to prospective students, relevant to employers, and should result in new enrollment and increased net revenue, which we can then reinvest in our people and programs. Three of those were announced earlier this summer—Direct Entry Master's in Nursing, Bachelor's Degree in Supply Chain Management, and E-sports at the intercollegiate level—with more to come.

We will build excellent practices and processes along with increased resources, all to advance the people who live, work, and learn in our community.

Along with compelling new programs, we seek to build improved strategies for student success, trust, and relationships across our campus and across our city. And we seek to build partnerships—in Chicago, in the ECC, and with our alumni friends.

Through our work we will elevate and optimize our university's distinctives—they will be alive in our language and in our work—and through this strategic road map, we can rise in a most compelling and visible way.

And we have all of the gifted people we need to make this happen. The talent and intellect we need reside in the excellent faculty and staff right in this room and across our campus. Our senior leadership team is strong, strategic, forward-looking, and forward-working. Our Board of Trustees is engaged, and I know our generous alumni, donors, and friends will commit the funds we need to reaffirm and reinforce our foundational strengths, and invest in powerful new initiatives for our thriving future.

As we take on this process of envisioning North Park's future, I am delighted to share two pieces of news that show that we don't have to wait to make North Park a better place now.

We begin this new academic year with new leadership in our Seminary. We are delighted today to welcome Rev. Dr. Dennis Edwards as Dean of our Seminary and Vice President for Church Relations.

In this role, Rev. Dr. Edwards will serve as the senior administrative officer of the Seminary, as a primary liaison to the ECC, and as a member of the senior team. We are blessed to have Rev. Dr. Edwards with us to embrace this vital and multifaceted portfolio. His faith journey and professional advancement include years of pastoral ministry and administration, followed by a move into theological teaching and scholarship—a gradual transition from the pulpit that evolved into a brilliant and prolific academic career of research, writing, and professional activity. Dr. Edwards brings faithful and excellent leadership to our Seminary. I look forward to the innovative thinking and pastoral presence he will bring to the senior team. I have every confidence in his leadership and our partnership, and I know you will join me in welcoming Dr. Edwards—on this his birthday—to his new season of service.

Later in our worship this morning, we will be blessed by a word from Dean Edwards, who will speak from the fourth chapter of I John. Dean Edwards we look forward to your bringing us the Word of God—and your good message this morning.

This year we are providing an opportunity for all students, faculty, and staff to read a book in common: This year's book will be "Subversive Witness: Scripture's Call to Leverage Privilege," by Dominique Gilliard. A graduate of North Park Theological Seminary, Gilliard is the director of racial righteousness and reconciliation for the Love Mercy/Do Justice mission priority of the Evangelical Covenant Church. A scholar and author, Gilliard is active across the country in leadership development and small group engagement in church communities, business, and education. Gilliard will visit our campus community several times this academic year to engage in various opportunities for teaching and small group dialogue on our campus. Watch for more information in the coming weeks and an invitation to participate together. Many thanks to our DEI Council for their consultation with us, helping to consider and engage this opportunity.

I have a few personal thoughts to share with you. Over the summer, I devoted some time to the book of Joshua and studying in a devotional from Pastor Robert Morgan, reading, running, writing, and reflecting on God's word to Joshua and the Israelites—the Living Word of God that is intended to speak to us today. This book brings forward God's challenge and encouragement to Joshua and the people: "Have I not commanded you? Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid, do not be discouraged..."

This phrase is repeated before this book—and many times after—but it is always preceded or followed by this—"for the Lord your God is with you...be strong and courageous—do not be discouraged—for the Lord your God is with you wherever you go."

God always intends for us to go forward—to plan, to build, to dream—in preparation for stronger days ahead. We have survived challenges and seasons because of his provision, and I believe we can move forward to all the promises that he has for us. A rewarding and healthy future—to go from surviving to thriving, to claim the promise of God in Jeremiah 29, the plans God has for North Park to prosper, to give us hope and a future—when we call on him, he will answer us.

We cannot have expectations ourselves that may be beneath what God has in mind for this great school. We will try for some grand and aspirational things—we must. North Park demands and deserves our best, the best programs, practices, policies, and facilities that we can possibly generate or design for our students. The strong minds, bright intellects, exceptional work ethic in the gifted and talented people in this room and across our campus, are the people who deliver the best. We must and we will.

Every one of us is called and rooted here in this moment, for this season. I firmly believe that God has a sacred and divine purpose for each of us individually, and we can accomplish far greater things for him in our partnership together than any of us could accomplish alone. Let us prepare for what God is preparing for us. The next stage in our life as a community is before us.

Our God who has known the way through the days of COVID-19 and deficits, enrollment declines, and painful changes—also knows the way to our thriving future, our flourishing faculty, productive, encouraging, just, and inclusive community and culture.

So let us look forward with hope, commit to each other, commit our plans to the Lord. As we face the future, we do so with strength and courage because we have the promise, the Lord our God is with us. May he bless and keep you as we enter the year together. I cherish you and I thank you.

Welcome to the start of a new year!