

Garner aims to expand Wesley's vision

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about this college under the watchful eye of John Wesley. Wesley's portrait, as grim and determined as was the man himself, graces that room and casts over it the same air of seriousness that he brought to his ministry two centuries ago. John Wesley was a remarkable man. He lived very nearly the entire eighteenth century. Scorned by many in the Church for his disciplined approach to worship and faith, he nonetheless cast a long shadow on Protestantism, a shadow in which we stand this afternoon, and a shadow which together, we will lengthen through this college into the next century.

John Wesley was a man of the enlightenment, a contemporary of Thomas Jefferson, the intellectual spirit of our democracy, of Adam Smith, the architect of the market economy, and of Benjamin Franklin, perhaps the first American scientist and certainly a champion of freedom of inquiry and speech. It has been written of Wesley that alone among churchmen of the eighteenth century, he held an active interest in the subject of electricity which so captivated Franklin. He wrote medical tracts, and he experimented with scientific instruments.

Wesley lived in times of social and political upheaval. During his lifetime two revolutions, one in the country and one in France, threw over autocracy in favor of democracy and freedom. The factories that so fascinated Adam Smith had begun, by the end of Wesley's life, to stimulate movement from the farm to the industrial centers. Wesley was concerned that this movement gave rise to suffering, poverty, and social unrest.

Wesley's response to the transition around him should not be lost on us. Wesley believed on the one hand that his disciplined approach to worship would help all, regardless of social rank, discover the redeeming power of God's grace. He saw clearly that faith was an anchor in the sea of change that surrounded him. Faith was essential if individuals were to be masters, rather than victims, of that change.

Wesley also understood that education was critical to survival in a world of technological advance and political democracy. Part of Wesley's career was devoted to establishing public schools in Britain. He strove to make education accessible to those who otherwise would have been denied it. The Methodist tradition in higher education continues this witness. In the United States, there are some 128 United Methodist affiliated colleges and universities, twenty-two of which carry Wesley's name.

John Wesley's genius went beyond a disciplined approach to faith and a commitment to education. Wesley understood that the two were related. He believed that education was one entrance to the path to spiritual peace. He believed that as people

understood the world around them they would understand the true magnificence of God's creation. He also understood that through education, man could become creator, continuing God's work in a true spirit of stewardship. Education and faith in the Wesleyan tradition constitute a pathway that individuals follow to personal integrity and spiritual peace. They comprise the foundation on which communities affirm freedom and justice.

Though Wesley would surely be surprised at much of our present world, it is likely that he would be at home with the transition that now engulfs us. Technological change transformed the English countryside in the half century after Wesley's death and gave birth to great manufacturing centers. Now, it is undermining our own manufacturing strength and forcing thousands of workers to find jobs in a suddenly more complicated and uncertain world.

Make no mistake about it, we are in the midst of the most profound economic transition of this century. We are now part of a complex global economy in which economic institutions stretch across national boundaries with ease. It is an economy driven by technology. Electricity and steam drove industrial revolution in Wesley's England. Communications and biotechnology drive ours. And as technology makes production more dependent on the skill and creativity rather than the size of the labor force, we find more of us making our careers in services, in the creation and application of the knowledge base which a high technology economy stimulates and on which it depends for survival.

The evidence of economic transition is close at hand to those of us who live in eastern North Carolina. We have seen a steady decline in employment levels in textiles and in the security of tobacco as a source of income. Recent studies have confirmed what we have suspected and feared. We have relatively high levels of unemployment and poverty. Many of our fellow citizens go outside the region to work. Many of our brightest young people are eager to make their lives elsewhere. Economic change surrounds us. It compels us to change much of what we are used to. We are sometimes confused but most definitely challenged to respond.

When John Wesley, Adam Smith and Thomas Jefferson were confronted with transition two centuries ago, they responded with a call for discipline, faith, and economic and political freedom. We now come together because, through a variety of connections, we are the heirs of the Wesleyan tradition. This afternoon, as we contemplate the future of this college, we must ask ourselves just what that tradition means at this time and in this place.

Many of you are, like me, native to Eastern North Carolina. We can be

proud of having been raised in a region where hard work, family and community are valued, where the natural environment is seen as part of our heritage, to be managed responsibly and passed on to our children, where there is a strong tradition of honest, efficient local government. Others of you have moved here from other parts of the country or other countries. You have, I hope, found the region to be hospitable, the people friendly and its communities welcoming. All of us are distressed by the threat posed by the decline of our traditional economic base. Yet, all of us should realize that change can be positive. We can still hope for expanded economic opportunity for our citizens, and we still dream of that day when our cultural diversity can be a cause for celebration and strength.

For expanded opportunity to become a reality, we know the dimensions of the challenge ahead. Those regions that will prosper in a global, technology-driven economy will have one characteristic in common. They will derive economic success through knowledge, through their ability to translate new ideas into new or improved goods and services. They will be those regions whose citizens can deal effectively across national and cultural boundaries, whose horizons will be broad and whose creativity will be high. The regions that prosper will be those that take seriously their commitment to education. Education will provide the key to economic opportunity.

It is on this score that we cannot be complacent. Recent studies show that North Carolina is behind other states in education achievement. The education gap is critical, for unlike many states, North Carolina has access to technology through its distinguished research universities and access to the capital to take those ideas to market through its strong banking system. But without a skilled, creative, and adaptable labor force — without a highly educated population — those advantages will be lost. In North Carolina, just over half of our workforce is comprised of high school graduates, as compared to over 70% in states such as California or Massachusetts. Only 14% of our workforce is college educated, as compared to 20% in those states. More seriously, nearly one in four adult North Carolinians has less than a grade 8 education. President Scott, of the Community College System, has estimated that there are 900,000 functionally illiterate North Carolinians.

Our challenge is clear. It is much the same challenge that John Wesley accepted two hundred years ago, and it is the challenge that the institution that carries his names must now take as its own. We are called to educate to help our region adapt to changing global circumstances. We are called to nurture spiritual strength provide an anchor in times of transition. The

values of Wesley, Jefferson and Smith are still relevant even though the context has changed. We must take as our mission, the empowerment of individuals and the affirmation of community through learning.

Education for us must continue to be the pathway to economic self-sufficiency, personal integrity, spiritual peace, cultural literacy and political freedom. This college must serve its students and its community in ways that affirm Wesley's faith in God and the integrity of the individual. We must use the knowledge that is ours to help this region prepare a new generation of leadership, to celebrate its cultural strength and prepare to take its rightful place among those geographic regions that will have a future of prosperity.

Is this too ambitious a calling for a small liberal arts college? I think not. It is the essence of the liberal arts, and if we shy away, we abandon the noble calling that is our tradition. But, we need not fool ourselves. Our calling will require the total commitment of the resources of this college. We must commit ourselves to a liberal education for all of our students, no matter what their majors. All of our graduates should be sophisticated in their ability to read, communicate and solve problems. They should appreciate literature and the arts so that they can take their place in a rich cultural tradition. They should have a solid grounding in mathematics and natural sciences so that they can respond to the challenges of technology and be faithful stewards of the natural world around them. They must command history, politics, and other social sciences so that they can lead their communities. They must command at least one language other than English so that they can be comfortable dealing across cultures. Those who choose a professional course of study must understand not only the knowledge base of their field, they must understand the values and community responsibility that accompanies a professional calling.

To be true to John Wesley, all of our students must, as part of their education here, be engaged in spiritual as well as intellectual inquiry. We must provide an environment in which matters of the spirit are openly discussed inside and outside the classroom. Inquiry into values and individual responsibility must be an obvious part of the education experience. We should not dictate values, but we should affirm those values that we hold as part of the Methodist tradition. We must prepare our students for the choices they must make and for the spiritual journey each of them will undertake. We must, quite simply, prepare them for life.

This is not news. It should not make the headlines tonight or any other night. This is the tradition of American scholarship. In 1837, Ralph Waldo Emerson said as much as to the Harvard community in Phi

Beta Kappa Address. The educated person, Emerson suggested, was the person who was connected to the natural world around him, to the search for truth that was his heritage in the world of books and ideas, and to the world of action. Much like John Wesley, Emerson saw that our own divinity could be revealed through an understanding of our place in the natural scheme of things. He saw that our genius is released when we stop consuming the ideas of others and begin using our knowledge to create. Man reads, he said, genius creates. American scholarship mattered to Emerson for he saw it as the way that we nourish our great democracy.

North Carolina Wesleyan will not nourish this community or region if its work is contained within the walls of these buildings. Certainly our primary contribution to the region is the education of these men and women who will be its leaders. Beyond that, we must turn our attention to the world of action. We must model the behavior that Emerson found critical to American scholarship. We must go beyond reading and help create. We must use ideas to strengthen community development. We must be a partner in the search for new economic opportunities. We must reach out to form networks with other education institutions to attack problems such as literacy, school drop-outs and limited access to continued education. We must do our part to preserve and stimulate the cultural life of the region, celebrating its art and music and writing, showing the world that of which we are so rightly proud.

It seems to me that I should tell you more. And yet, there is little more to tell. Our mission is noble, our tradition strong and our challenge clear. We have begun.

Last night, I was uncharacteristically at a loss for words when the officers of the student government made a surprise presentation to Katrina and me. The heart of a college is its student body. The leadership of the SGA has through its perseverance and energy already made a great contribution to me and to the college this year. That they would go farther and make a special presentation as part of this inauguration shows what truly fine people they are.

As those of you present at our celebration know, we don't have an auditorium here, and we don't have air conditioning. But we have something more important. We have a soul. We have a commitment to teaching, to learning, to each other, to this community, and to the tradition of John Wesley. Our soul gives us strength and endurance. Those of you among students, faculty, staff and community who worked so hard on the program last night, and on the many aspects of what have been a fine celebration of this institution, deserve my thanks and my best efforts as your President. I pledge you nothing less. Thank you.