

Reformed and Genuinely Ecumenical: Hope College's Creative Challenge

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One window in the narthex of Hope College's Dimnent Chapel bears the YMCA motto Mind/Body/Spirit. Any attentive passerby during the last century could have noticed the reference to John 17:21 in the window's center. For those who know chapter and verse of Jesus' prayer for his followers (or are industrious enough to look it up in their Bibles), the words, "that they may all be one...so that the world may know that you have sent me," come as reminders—reminders especially relevant to Christian liberal arts education. From early days Hope College's understanding of its Reformed calling has been ecumenical— aspiring to live out Jesus' prayer for Christian unity—and at the same time evangelical— aspiring to equip students for Christian witness in the world.¹

Many of those who love Hope College consider it special because it pursues what we authors have called a "middle way" that seeks to unite Reformed *and* evangelical *and* ecumenical impulses. Hope's location in Holland, Michigan, situates it well to the east of the two other Reformed-Church-in-America-affiliated colleges, both located in Iowa. Yet many, both inside and outside the college, see Hope as between of its two sister institutions— not as single-mindedly evangelical as Orange City's Northwestern (which claims to offer "a focus on faith that is more than just an add-on; it's an integrated part of every class, every activity— all of campus"²) and at the same time giving a decidedly higher profile to its Christian identity than Pella's Central College (where religious organizations are listed on its "Get Involved" webpage only after scores of academic, sports, service, intercultural, and literary campus groups³). Current Hope president James Bultman's desire to assure "that Hope provides students with an exceptional educational experience in a vibrant and caring Christian environment"⁴ can be seen as a contrast both to Northwestern's "every class, every activity" approach to Christianity and to Central's more muted tone.

¹ This essay is based in large part on material from James C. Kennedy and Caroline J. Simon, *Can Hope Endure? A Historical Case Study in Christian Higher Education* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), though the incorporated material has been modified significantly. This essay focuses on issues in the interface between the RCA and Hope in the college's choice to pursue a "middle way." Even those selected issues have been treated, of necessity, in a severely abbreviated form; readers are urged to see the book for the rest of the story.

² <http://www.nwciowa.edu/academics/faithandlearning>

³ <http://www.central.edu/campuslife/groups.html>

⁴ See, for example, the statement as it appeared on the President's Office Webpage in June, 2005 <http://www.hope.edu/admin/president>.

Many members of key constituencies at Hope see the college as striking a number of balances: neither sectarian nor indifferent to its Reformed Christian identity; not creedal in its requirements of prospective faculty, yet caring about whether they have a Christian faith; as nurturing students' faith but mandating neither Christian affirmation for admission nor Christian practices after matriculation; neither wholly mainline nor wholly evangelical.

Yet, if many see Hope College's centrism as a beloved strength, others would doubt that its middle course provides sufficient clarity of direction and stability of purpose. At times Hope has found it easier to gain consensus about what Hope is *not* than to articulate explicitly what it *is*. Moreover, some have seen the studied ambiguity of Hope's self-understanding as rooted in pragmatic compromise rather than in a shared endorsement of an overarching, common purpose for the college. Questions about the viability and health of Hope College's Middle Way can be framed in light of secularizing trends in American higher education noted by many historians and theorists. Almost all institutions of higher education established before the early twentieth century in the United States were founded with explicitly Christian aspirations, yet by the late twentieth century many of these same institutions shared a widespread assumption that specifically Christian concerns were irrelevant or prejudicial intrusions in relation to academic pursuits. Hope, like almost all academically ambitious colleges in the United States, has been subjected to the forces of secularization; how has Hope resisted becoming "formerly-church-related"? Has Hope's centrism allowed it to respond to external forces creatively – to hone its growing edges while still maintaining a vivid but not rigid Christian identity? Or do the times of controversy over Hope's religious identity in the 1920s, 1940s, and in each of the last four decades of the twentieth century throw doubt on whether Hope's Middle Way is sustainable? While the future Hope College's Christian character is not assured, the Middle Way's deep roots in Hope's history and relationship to the Reformed tradition give considerable basis for optimism about the durable health of Hope College as a liberal arts college in the context of the historic Christian faith.

Early Lessons

The short mission statement developed in the late 1970s defines Hope College's purpose as offering "with recognized excellence academic programs in the liberal arts... in the context of the historic Christian faith."⁵ A document meant to function as an expansion of that brief statement, "A Vision of Hope," approved by the Board of Trustees in 1997, states that Hope is "a Christian college, ecumenical in character while rooted in the Reformed tradition."⁶ Neither of

⁵ 2004-2005 *Hope College Catalog*, 1.

⁶ 2004-2005 *Hope College Catalog*, 12.

these documents acknowledge explicitly, the evangelical enthusiasm that animates much of student spiritual experience at Hope, enthusiasm apparent to anyone who has experienced Hope's student worship service or attended any of the scores of campus student Bible studies. Hope's Christian ethos is not easily reduced to simple formulae.

In fact, like its founding denomination, Hope College has stood at the crossroads of three related theological impulses – Calvinism, evangelicalism, and ecumenism. Since the mid-nineteenth century, the Reformed Church in America sought to be part of mainstream American Christianity, albeit with regional differences in emphasis between its evangelical and mainline elements. Those regional differences stem from the denomination's early history. By 1840, the Dutch Reformed Church, with the great majority of its congregations in New York and New Jersey, had exerted a presence in America for more than two hundred years. By the early nineteenth century, it was also wholly an English-speaking denomination, relatively prosperous, educated and – if then-President Martin Van Buren may serve as illustration – a well-connected religious community. To a very large extent, it was integrated into the mainstream American Protestantism of the nineteenth century. In contrast, the wave of Dutch immigrants who came beginning in 1847, traveling west to establish the town of Holland and founding Hope College as a liberal arts college in 1866, tended to be less educated and prosperous, more doctrinal, less ecumenical, and (in the nineteenth century) less revivalistic than most of the Americanized churches of the eastern U.S. These more recent immigrants were aided financially by the Dutch-Americans in the East; thus what would become the Reformed Church in America was made up of two regionally and culturally distinct groups. In consequence, Hope was founded by western men indebted to eastern money and, though Hope College is the offspring of a single denomination, it also owed its existence to the asymmetrical – and sometimes difficult – relationship between two quite different religious communities. Negotiating the tensions inherent in bridging diverse religious impulses, constituencies, and cultural influences developed habits that Hope learned from its parent denomination early in the college's history; even before World War I such balancing was explicit in its self-conception.

Calvinism is an obvious and longstanding religious impulse in Hope's pedigree, for Hope's founders had a deeply Calvinist vision for the college they saw as their "anchor of hope" for the future. Calvinists value knowledge of God's creation because they wish to glorify God in all areas of life. The Reformed Belgic Confession cites knowledge of the "most excellent book" of natural creation as, along with the Bible, one of the two chief means we have of understanding God.⁷

⁷ The Belgic Confession, 1561 (revised 1619), Article II.

In this respect, Hope College's educational vision, valuing as it does intellectual inquiry of all sorts, has been steadfastly Reformed. Yet, while Calvinism has informed the intellectual side of the college, its influence on Hope has been more practically oriented and less intellectualist than that exerted on some other Reformed institutions. The intellectualist project of integrating faith and learning – for some a hallmark of Calvinist pedagogy – is less evident at Hope than those familiar with other Reformed colleges might expect.⁸

This is explained in part by American evangelicalism's early strong influence on the college. In contrast to more rationalistic strains of Calvinism, the religious culture at Hope has tended to stress "heart" religion – personal piety and character, with less emphasis placed on doctrine or on a systematic organization of a "distinctively" Reformed or Christian academic program. Stemming from this pietistic tradition, too, is a high commitment to the Christian ministry. In fact, Hope was founded as a place to train ministers, missionaries, and teachers for both the western United States and the wider world. Albertus Van Raalte's founding vision was to create a "school of the prophets," that is, a training ground for ministers, and Hope was proud throughout its first decades of the exceptional number of students who became ministers, missionaries, mission school teachers, and ministers' wives.⁹

But other factors besides evangelicalism's influence contribute to an explanation of why Hope, in contrast to some other Reformed colleges, has never been

⁸ While clearly evident at schools outside the Reformed tradition, the business of integrating faith with learning – of attempting to bring one's faith to bear in the practice of one's scholarly efforts – has been for some time an explicit and guiding ideal at many Reformed colleges, for example Calvin College and Dordt College.

⁹ In fact Van Raalte and others in the Holland community, for whom the American liberal arts college was a foreign construction, wanted the college to be a seminary at the same time. "Will a literary institution draw out more sympathy from the people of God?" asked Western pastor R. Pieters rhetorically in 1877, when the debate over Hope's direction was at its most animated. ("Was it Wise?" R. Pieters, *Christian Intelligencer*, August 9, 1877, 4.) Though Hope College never included a seminary, it educated many who heard the call to Christian ministry. A 1929 estimate counted 335 ministers, 114 missionaries and 49 wives of ministers among the 1,337 graduates of Hope College. The last category was new to the 1920s, when the number of women married to ministers was large enough, and considered spiritually important enough, to be included in the statistics; "Hope Memorirl [sic] Chapel Dedicated in Fine Style Last Friday Night," *Anchor*, June 12, 1929. At the beginning of the twentieth century, one source estimated that 63 percent of all Hope graduates had become ministers (John R. Mott, *The Future Leadership of the Church*. New York: Student Volunteer Movement of Foreign Missions, 1908. 112). A tally of an alumni directory published in the 1930 *Milestone* suggests that well over half of Hope's graduates had become ministers or gone to the mission field prior to the First World War (1930 *Milestone*, 272-393). In the late 1920s, it was still estimated that around 40 percent of Hope graduates (including ministers' wives) had devoted their lives to these callings – a remarkable percentage ("Hope Memorirl [sic] Chapel Dedicated in Fine Style Last Friday Night," *Anchor*, June 12, 1929).

particularly prescriptive about how Christian faith touches upon the academic endeavor. One such factor is its founding denomination's endorsement of *public* education at the primary and secondary levels. In the 1860s and 1870s, the Reformed Church in America took a strong stand in favor of the public school because it regarded it as an essential unifying force in American society.¹⁰ Given that one important aim of the college (fueled by the denomination's commitment to Christian leadership and participation in public primary and secondary education) was to produce future public school teachers, Hope College did not develop a curricular vision at odds with the public school, which would be counterproductive to its aims. Training Christians who would teach in public schools was seen as one of the college's central contributions to a Christian transformation of culture; this gave Hope *theologically* informed reasons to provide an education that was relatively nonsectarian.

This contrasted with the stance taken on education by the Christian Reformed Church, which broke away from the Reformed Church in America in 1857 and went on to develop whole school systems aimed at distinctively Reformed Christian primary and secondary education.¹¹ The split shaped the Reformed Church in America's and Hope College's centrism in multiple ways. Because the Christian Reformed Church drew the most theologically conservative of the Dutch Calvinist immigrants to itself, those who remained Reformed Church in America members were the theological moderates – and in some cases the conscious “progressives” – of the Dutch settlements in the Midwest. Reformed Church in America members tended to be irenic pietists, more interested in cultivating a personal relationship with Christ than in doctrinal purity (the latter emphasis being more characteristic of the Christian Reformed Church). In fact, the Michigan Reformed (even those who knew no Dutch) referred to the Christian Reformed derisively as the *Afgescheidenen*, or Seceders – a biting reference to the sectarian spirit for which they berated the Christian Reformed. In part because of that, antagonism, in part because of their own sincere and simple piety, many leaders of the Midwestern Reformed Church in America made it a studied practice to avoid looking or acting in “sectarian” ways.¹²

¹⁰ It should be noted that the denominational endorsement of public schools was based on the assumed common practice of the times, which would have include the Bible's place in public education. Ryskamp, *The Dutch in Western Michigan*, (Diss., Univ. of Michigan, 1930), 67.

¹¹ The central issue surrounding the split was whether the Reformed Church was doctrinally pure enough to be regarded as a “true” church, an important issue to some of the most recent immigrants from the Netherlands. The initial separation between the Reformed Church in America and the Christian Reformed Church was not over the issue of public vs. Christian primary and secondary education but over attitudes toward Freemasonry, hymn singing, and Americanization (most visibly, whether worship would continue to be in the Dutch language).

¹² John M. Vander Meulen, “The Antecedents and Early Career of Dr. Dosker,” in “Memorials, Rev. Henry E. Dosker, D.D., LL.D., L.H.D., 1855-1926,” 1926 pamphlet, 40-41; in Collection, “Vander Meulen, John Marinus”; Joint Achieves of Holland (hereafter JAH).

The Reformed Church in America's aversion to "sectarian indoctrination" led Hope College early on to emphasize its commitment to a nonsectarian admission policy;¹³ it also is another reason why the Hope curriculum tended – at least outside of the Religion Department – to be less systematic in the way it worked out Christian principles. Hope's curriculum "from the beginning was not basically different from the curricula of other liberal arts colleges in America."¹⁴ Religious instruction and religious life would be important elements at the college in order to sustain Christians away from home and to prepare them for service in public life. The basic knowledge that was taught at other colleges and universities would be augmented by additional religious courses and by the Christian sensibilities of a Christian faculty, with the goal of preparing Christians for leadership both in the church and in public life. Henry Ryskamp's distinction between the Christian Reformed Church's Calvin College and Hope, drawn in 1930, still serves as useful guide in this respect:

Hope has always been a Christian College but has not been characterized by such a careful attempt to indoctrinate its products [as has Calvin]. It has aimed at a practical Christian life, its attempts to-day being not so much the development of a theoretical well-sustained Calvinistic point of view as the giving to its students of real "religious experience" as one student put it. It makes much more of inspiring talks and conferences that awaken the youth to a desire to go out and "do" things. Calvin stimulates a desire to sit down and "think it out." It has, therefore, introduced such subjects as Philosophy, Sociology, and organic science...because it is desirous that in these branches the student be trained in accordance with Reformed principles. Hope has turned more strongly to the more cultural branches in order to give its youth a foundation for the well-rounded life of a Christian man or woman. In the last few years it has become known also for its teaching of the natural sciences with a view to preparation for teaching and medicine.¹⁵

Outside of the Religion Department Hope's practically minded, rather antitheoretical Christian vision put its emphasis on Christian *faculty*, not on Christian *curriculum*. From the start, and well into the twentieth century, Hope required its faculty to be members in good standing of a Protestant church.¹⁶

¹³ See *Hope College Bulletin*, 1871-1872, 4; *Hope College Bulletin*, 1897-1898, 43.

¹⁴ Mulder, *Americans from Holland*, 208.

¹⁵ Henry J. Ryskamp, *The Dutch in Western Michigan*, 70.

¹⁶ Many faculty members were Dutch and Reformed by birth and creed – judging by the admittedly imperfect measure of Dutch surnames, they constituted the overwhelming majority of faculty throughout the nineteenth century. Between the First and Second World Wars, they numbered roughly anywhere from half to almost two-thirds of the professoriate. Outsiders who

Until the 1960s, Hope College was consciously a college that was at once Reformed, evangelical, and Protestant, concentric circles of inclusion that illustrate how difficult it is to determine an origin for Hope's broad ecumenism of recent decades. A century ago, the difference between what we now call "mainline" and "evangelical" was not very great, and the term ecumenical was often used by Protestants to mean "inclusive of other Protestant groups not too dissimilar to ours." What can be said is that from the end of the nineteenth century Hope's leadership and faculty often consisted of men and women who considered themselves progressively minded Protestants, eager for the Holland colony to shed its immigrant conservatism and engage the wider world. They held steadfastly to the forward look, more interested in (at least moderate) social progress than doctrinal purity. Academic excellence and the disinterested search for truth, free from sectarian inhibitions, were central components of this mindset, and Hope's strong academic program, particularly in the natural sciences, was nurtured in no small part by it.

As part of its "do" culture, Hope subscribed to a broader American Protestant emphasis on producing people of strength and character who put principles into action. In fact, very early in its history the college advertised itself as promoting "scholarship and development of Christian character."¹⁷ While the college's nonprescriptive stance on "integration of faith and learning" and its ecumenical impulses might cast doubt, for some, on whether Hope's educational vision was and is manifestly Reformed, its emphasis on shaping Christian character stemmed from the same Reformed impulse as its more intellectualist fellow Calvinist institutions. At Hope the point of forming Christians was so that they could transform the world. Albertus Pieters, a late nineteenth-century Hope student who would go on to become a missionary to Japan, asserted that there could only be one purpose of Christian higher education. It was nothing less than "the elevation of humanity" – an elevation that could be accomplished only through spreading of Christianity.¹⁸

taught at the college also often joined the Reformed Church when they arrived in Holland – often Hope Church, the least Dutch and most broadly evangelical of the Reformed churches in town. "To teach at Hope was tantamount to being Dutch Reformed," remembers Ross. (Transcript of Interview with Metta Ross. Oral History Project. 1977. 8, JAH.) More research would need to be conducted in order to determine exactly how many faculty chose to attend other Protestant churches in the city, but the number was probably quite low, since Reformed churches were able to cater to a wide range of Protestant sensibilities. (Edward Dimnent letter to Harry Hoff, November 20, 1918, in "Correspondence from Dimnent, 1918-1919," in Dimnent Presidential Papers, JAH.)

¹⁷ See advertisement in the *1916 Milestone*, 147.

¹⁸ Two years before traveling to Japan as a missionary in 1891, Pieters wrote in the *Anchor*: "We rejoice in our strong vigorous life, in our superior education and in our Gospel privileges. But all these things lay us under supreme obligations to our benighted brethren. All these things testify against us if we fail to use them for the benefit of mankind. The sunshine that fills our life pleads with us eloquently in behalf of those who sit in darkness. We who enjoy these gifts of God are in

It is this task – “the elevation of humanity” – that served as the conscious, driving force for Hope College in its first six or seven decades as a liberal arts institution. For most Hope students and alumni of this period, the duty to elevate others could not be separated from the essential task of evangelism and missions. But as the college grew in size, and the numbers of ministers and missionaries proportionately sank, the vision became more explicitly broad: a Christian college was needed to create Christian leaders in *all* areas of life. This task of producing Christian leaders who would contribute their talents to cultural transformation united Hope’s evangelical, ecumenical, and Reformed elements in its first century.

For decades, the balanced tension among its Calvinist, evangelical, and ecumenical impulses and their common goal of the elevation of humanity helped hold Hope to a “vital center.” Other factors also contributed: the geography and culture of its Midwestern (then “western”) locale over against that of its early benefactors, the more sophisticated and wealthy power centers in the eastern United States to which Hope College was a debtor financially and culturally; its Reformed and evangelical concern for the purity of the gospel and Christian propriety over against its abhorrence of schism and world-despising asceticism; its ethnic make up heavily influenced by its Dutch immigrant origins over against its aspiration to be proudly American. Hope College’s success depended on finding a middle way, as President Edward Dimment (1918-1931) put it in 1918, between Iowa, on the one hand, which “found fault with one of our men because he was not Calvinistic and with another because he did not lead the chapel exercises” and the East, “which finds us all to[o] ‘hide-bound’” on the other.¹⁹ That the tensions of the Middle Way were not – are not – fully resolved goes a long way toward explaining why Hope College, even now, is situated along a boundary between more liberal and conservative theological currents in American life.

From the Middle Lane to the Space Age

There are a variety of dangers inherent in a *via media*: a habit of facile compromise; a loss of any vivid sense of distinctiveness; smug self-congratulation that one has avoided the dangers of the various extremes over against which one defines oneself. During the first seventy years of its history, what protected Hope’s Middle Way from being unduly damaged by these

a measure responsible for the gloom which covers the nations. It is our duty, who have received light, to become again the dispensers of light.” Albertus Pieters, “Our Responsibility,” *Anchor*, April 1889, 100-101.

¹⁹ Edward Dimment letter to Harry Hoffs, 20 November 1918, in “Correspondence from Dimment, 1918-1919,” in Dimment Presidential Papers, JAH.

dangers was a compelling *telos* or goal for its educational program – that goal was to shape young men and women into activist Christians who would transform the world through church ministry, missionary endeavors, and service in the public sphere. At stake was not some local good of an enclave community but, with all due seriousness, *the hope of the world*. Aiming at “elevation of humanity” allowed Hope’s Calvinism, its evangelical impulse, and its progressive instincts all to pull in the same direction. The result was a coherent enterprise that allowed a high degree of specialization and academic freedom – Christian faculty, once hired, could teach the truth as they saw it, and many saw truth within their disciplines in ways indiscernible from their non-Christian colleagues at secular universities. Prior to the Second World War (and most especially prior to 1925), Hope’s Middle Way resulted in Christians teaching Christians from Christian motives and with the goal of transforming the world for Christ’s sake.

By the 1920s, Hope College would begin to have to grapple with the question of whether it could expand in size and increase its academic excellence without its Middle Way becoming more and more diffuse. Accompanying and exacerbating this challenge was Hope’s increasing tendency, evident before World War I but especially pronounced by the mid-twentieth century, to conflate its Christian mission to elevate humanity with the American goal of making the world safe for democracy. By 1945 Hope was characterized by a number of elements among which there was rising tension: the proximity of a conservative religious constituency, a convinced if nondoctrinaire Christian ethos, a rising academic reputation and increasingly professionalized faculty, and a deep commitment to participate fully in American life. Before 1945, many at the college could believe – or hope – that these various elements traveled in the same direction. However, in the years after the Second World War, many at Hope found it increasingly difficult to articulate a common vision of how academic life and Christian faith related to each other. Thus began an era for the college when tensions among its Reformed, evangelical, and ecumenical impulses would give rise to issues that needed to be debated and resolved – if at all – politically, rather than on the basis of a robust consensus about shared vision. The ever-accelerating rate of cultural change would give rise to considerable challenges for Hope’s Middle Way even under Irwin Lubbers (1945-1963); under Calvin Vander Werf (1963-70) many wondered whether the college would be forced to give up its balancing act and make a choice between academic excellence and Christian identity.

Even in the early twentieth century, President Dimnent found it a significant challenge to hire capable faculty for Hope that would please all the college’s

constituencies.²⁰ So it is not surprising, with all of the accelerating cultural shifts of the unfolding twentieth century, that by the mid-1940s Reformed Church conservatives were becoming alarmed at purported moral and religious laxity at Hope, which was undergoing a boom in enrollment and faculty hires. An overture to the Hope Board of Trustees by the Classis of Chicago in 1946 noted that “there is a growing suspicion that our College is not as positively Christian as the church to which she belongs wants her to be.”²¹ Worries about the Hope College faculty were linked with the fear that the eastern wing of the Reformed Church, which supported the denomination’s membership in the Federal Council of Churches and its post-1950 successor, the National Council of Churches, held altogether too much power in denominational institutions.²² For neither the first nor the last time in its history,²³ the college felt the effects of standing on a fault line of increasing friction between the more moderately conservative Protestantism of the midwestern RCA and the moderately progressive Protestantism of the Reformed Churches on the eastern seaboard.²⁴

In 1946 and 1953, Hope’s Board of Trustees and the conservative constituency it represented put pressure on then-president Erwin Lubbers to rid the college of

²⁰ In fielding a complaint about a faculty hiring decision, Dimnent responded, “Let me know of a man trained to physics and I’ll hand him the job at once – but he must not be a mason, he must be a church member, he must be willing to work on a maximum of fifteen hundred a year, he must not dance, play cards, frequent the theater, he must know how to use a knife and a fork and when not to use either, he must be clean in body and mind, he must be enthusiastic for scholarship, for religion, for missions. . . Big bill, eh? But do you know that we looked for several years for a modern language man who could fill those conditions and we did not get him. We made an especial effort to get a man from our church for the Physics chair and catered to him while he was here only to have him find a job with three hundred more a year in it. . . Do you appreciate the situation?” Edward Dimnent letter to Harry Hoffs, November 20, 1918, in “Correspondence from Dimnent, 1918-1919,” in Dimnent Presidential Papers, JAH.

²¹ Classis of Chicago to Board of Trustees, June 6, 1946, in Minutes, Hope College Board of Trustees, June 18-19, 1946 and Henry Bast, “An Appeal to the Ministers and Laymen of the Chicago and Iowa Synods,” (N.p., n.d., 1947), 6, JAH.

²² Bast, “An Appeal,” 7-11.

²³ The debate over theological education and accompanying issues in the 1870s, the modernist-fundamentalist controversy of the late 1920s (fed in particular by Western concerns about heresy at New Brunswick Seminary), the rift over the direction and extent of ecumenism after the Second World War, and the turbulence of the 1960s – all of these affected a denominational college that remained dependent on the good will of factions not always at peace with one another.

²⁴ One imperfect measure of this is the number of students attending Hope in the fall of 1949 from New York and New Jersey: 244 out of a total of 1124 enrolled (21.7%). Obviously, not all of them would have been members of the RCA, but the great bulk of them certainly were. “Annual Report of the Registrar, 1949-1950,” found in Irwin Lubbers, Office of the President, “Board Meeting, Fall 1950,” JAH.

suspected heterodox elements.²⁵ In 1951, at the prompting of the Particular Synod of Chicago, the college's board put into place a Committee on Instruction, largely consisting of trustees, which would screen incoming faculty. The Committee on Instruction was "to sit down with prospective teachers to acquaint them with our spiritual heritage, aims and requirements so that they may thoroughly understand before they become members of the faculty exactly what is expected of them."²⁶ Despite these screenings, many of Hope's faculty continued to feel more at home with a less conservative form of Protestantism than that represented by the midwestern Reformed Church. And regardless of their precise theological views, many faculty members resented what they viewed as intrusions by denominational conservatives into college life.

Lubbers's leadership was able, to a large extent, to balance these tensions. On the one hand, Lubbers's willingness to create internal structures for guarding the college's Christian identity soon won the confidence of both the board and the church constituencies. At the same time, his stated aim was to make Hope College "the BEST CHRISTIAN COLLEGE in America and the world,"²⁷ and his vision for Hope linked moderately progressive Protestantism with academic excellence. In a 1956 address (which Lubbers said was the best commencement oration of his presidency), former Hope president Wynand Wichers (1931-1945) lauded the college for both being faithful to its "Calvinistic" heritage as well as to the Reformed Church in America, and for having a spirit that "has never been parochial or sectarian but always ecumenical."²⁸ Hope College during the Lubbers presidency remained unflinchingly Protestant, but the college's historic stress on being "ecumenical" prepared the path for greater religious inclusivity in the 1960s, when definitions of ecumenicity in American society were widened substantially.

²⁵ Prins letter to Lubbers, "Board Meeting, June 1946"; Irwin Lubbers, Office of the President, "Classes and Synods - Report of Agent of Christian Education, Spring 1954, Classis of Zeeland," JAH.

²⁶ "Report of the Executive Committee of the Board of Trustees of Hope College to the Particular Synod of Chicago," May 2, 1951, in Board of Trustees, "Secretary's Resource Materials," June 14, 1951, JAH. Those expectations included being "an active Christian" which demonstrated itself in the "active participation in those activities which promote the Christian program of Hope College." See Board of Trustees Memorandum quoted in Preston J. Steginga, *Anchor of Hope. The History of an American Denominational Institution, Hope College* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1954), 216-17.

²⁷ "President's Report," in Board of Trustees, "Secretary's Resource Materials," May 31, 1957, JAH.

²⁸ Wynand Wichers, "A College of Distinction," in *Hope College Alumni Magazine*, October 1956, 13-14; Irwin Lubbers letter to Wynand Wichers, June 5, 1956, in Wynand Wichers Papers, "Correspondence - Post-Presidential Years, 1945-1969," JAH.

By the 1950s, the philosophy of Christian education enacted at Hope College had long been an essentially two-realms approach,²⁹ with two fundamental ways of knowing truth, one scientific or evidentiary, the other religious or revelatory. By mid-century the approach had become so ingrained as to be unreflective. Nearly everyone at Hope in the 1950s (and afterwards) thought that the ethics and spiritual wisdom that sprang from religion ought to have some role in properly *applying* human knowledge. But at the same time it was seen by increasing numbers of faculty as having little role in the actual *production* of knowledge. For many faculty, though by no means all, the Christian character of the college was best sustained by the Bible and Religion Department, in the chapel program, and other extracurricular activities. This two-realms approach, affording Hope faculty members freedom to take whatever understanding they regarded as most proper between their religious convictions and their academic endeavors, was one reason why evolution was taught at Hope during this period, and before, and only occasionally contested.³⁰

Because the college did not require or expect a distinctively Christian perspective in the academic activities of the college, as the earlier goal of molding Christians to be agents of the “elevation of humanity” became much more diffuse and faded from view and the pursuit of academic excellence was increasingly given pride of place in Hope’s mission, it became hard for some to see the relevance of faculty candidates’ faith commitments to their ability to contribute to that mission. And Hope *was* improving academically. In rising numbers, Hope’s professors and students were the recipients of outside grants; the mid-1960s in particular witnessed an impressive number of prestigious scholarships being awarded to the college’s top students.³¹ Moreover, the college itself received foundation grants and federal and state money. All of these developments in the early 1960s provided new opportunities to boost the academic programs of the college and to seek recognition of its growing quality.

As Lubbers sought to move Hope College forward academically while remaining true to Hope’s tradition, he appropriated and updated Hope’s self-conception as a practitioner of the Middle Way: “[Hope’s] course was set at the time of its founding as a middle course....Recognizing that the car which takes the middle of the road runs the greater danger of accident and even catastrophe it seeks to utilize the improved three lane thoroughfare as a means to more rapid progress, pulling out of the middle lane when signs along the way warn of danger

²⁹ See Douglas Sloan, *Faith and Knowledge: Mainline Protestantism and American Higher Education* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1994).

³⁰ Paul Fried, “Hope’s History and History at Hope,” *Anchor*, October 28, 1966.

³¹ Wichers, *A Century of Hope*, 259-64. Professor Charles Huttar remembers his first students (he arrived in 1966) as notably among his best – a view shared by others as well about the mid-1960s. Interview with Huttar, Holland, Michigan, January 17, 2002.

ahead.”³² After the Second World War, the Middle Way had now become the passing lane – the path of bold, yet not rash, innovation.³³

Lubber’s successor, Calvin Vander Werf, would find the middle lane far too slow, aiming instead for the stars. There is no better expression of Vander Werf’s vision for the college than his inaugural address of November 16, 1963. There he raised the specter of Protestant colleges “passing into oblivion, slowly miring in a morass of mediocrity” as rapid social change and accumulation of knowledge swept them aside. Vander Werf declared himself up for the challenge, though he feared “that the hour is already late for us to cast aside self-satisfied smugness.” But the necessity of upgrading technology and providing the liberal arts program with a global orientation did not mean a departure from the “eternal verities of the Fatherhood of God and the Brotherhood of man,” quite the contrary:

We are pioneers in the era of breathless change, when revolutionary upheaval is the order of the day, and we must learn to live in a state of perpetual surprise. But...we at Hope College must hold fast to the changeless, the abiding faith of our fathers which is as real and relevant today as ever.³⁴

Vander Werf believed, as had Lubbers, that religiously based liberal arts education was a counter to the misuse of the modern world’s technological might, and he had no desire to cut Hope loose from the church. But as a New Frontiersman charged with propelling Hope College into the Space Age, Vander Werf placed a premium on high-octane professional performance.³⁵ If there was a mantra of his presidency, it was that “piety is no substitute for competence” – a message he liked repeating to faculty and board alike.³⁶ Accordingly, the president set about to raise the standards of excellence at the college. This meant

³² “Hope College as a Factor in the Assimilation of Netherlanders in American Life,” n.d. Lubbers, “Addresses, 1953-9. JAH.

³³ The middle lane of this period could be used, in level places where visibility was clear, by cars traveling in either direction that wished to pass slower cars ahead of them. Such arrangements became rare, presumably as the fatality rates on such roads escalated.

³⁴ Calvin Vander Werf, “The Inaugural Address,” *Hope College Alumni Magazine*, January 1964, 5-13.

³⁵ “New Frontiersman” is a phrase I borrow from the sociologist B. Weston, who is writing a history of Center College; Weston presentation, Rhodes Consultation on Higher Education, Memphis, 3 November 2001.

³⁶ For example, Vander Werf wrote to the chairman of the board, Hugh DePree, in 1968: “We can never at Hope College allow a certain surface piety, formal church connections, or a wide variety of church activities to become a cover-up, by faculty or staff, for non-performance of duty, for incompetence, or for just plain slothfulness.” Though not as such an argument for disregarding religion as a criterion for hiring, in Vander Werf’s mind it came pretty close to it; Calvin Vander Werf, Office of the President, “Correspondence, Hugh de Pree,” letter to De Pree, January 6, 1968, JAH.

finding brain trust-quality people to work at the college, even if this required that Hope look beyond its Protestant base to get them.

There was also a growing sense among many at the college that the Protestant qualification for faculty membership was both arbitrary and unhealthy. Though the trustees did not officially modify the “Protestants only” hiring policy, by 1967 or 1968 the college was hiring Roman Catholics, and a range of other non-Protestants as well. The result was an academically stronger and more religiously diverse faculty – and more division than ever over the purposes and mission of the school, as religious liberals and conservatives found themselves increasingly at odds over these matters.

At the same time, Vander Werf did cultivate ties with the Reformed Church, and he continued throughout his presidency to think of the college as a denominational school, in the service of Reformed Church students.³⁷ For quite some time Vander Werf’s commitment to keeping RCA students coming to Hope lead him to keep tuition static, a policy at odds with his other ambitious goals.³⁸ In fact, Hugh De Pree, in summarizing Vander Werf’s performance to the Board’s Executive Committee in early 1970, credited the president with “improved relationship of the College to the Church.”³⁹

However, in many ways, Vander Werf’s commitment to Christianity in higher education was indistinguishable from his commitment to academic excellence. When the “Covenant of Mutual Responsibilities” between the Reformed Church and its colleges was being drawn up in the late 1960s, Vander Werf saw the document primarily as a place where “the real battle for academic freedom and open inquiry must be fought” and instructed Dean William Mathis in 1967 “to put more teeth into the affirmation of open discussion and free inquiry.”⁴⁰ It is likely that Vander Werf was most concerned with the 1966 General Synod’s charge to its Standing Committee on Higher Education, mandating that it draft an agreement that would ensure that “the church not feel pharisaic when it

³⁷ Vander Werf’s first-line strategy for getting additional funding at the beginning of his presidency was to “draw closer to the Reformed Church”; Minutes, Executive Committee, Board of Trustees, May 28, 1964.

³⁸ Trustee Fritz V. Lenel complained to Chair of the Board Ekdal Buys in 1966 of Vander Werf’s unrealistic determination to keep tuition low and to prevent this by, among other things, dramatically increasing church giving; Lenel letter to Buys, April 18, 1966; Board of Trustees, “Secretary’s Resource Materials,” June 2-3, 1966, JAH.

³⁹ Hugh De Pree memo to Executive Committee, February 2, 1970, in Board of Trustees, “Secretary’s Resource Materials,” February 5-6, 1970, JAH.

⁴⁰ Vander Lugt letter to Vander Werf, September 18, 1967; Vander Werf letter to William Mathis, May 3, 1967; in Office of the President, “RCA Covenant Statement, 1967-1969,” JAH. President Van Wylen would later call this covenant a “really fine and beautiful document.” “The Church Scene,” *Church Herald*, May 15, 1987.

constructively criticizes the policies of the colleges."⁴¹ Controversies over the initial attempts to draft the covenant resulted in the formation of a special committee that included two prominent Hope College voices: physics professor David Marker and philosophy professor D. Ivan Dykstra.⁴²

The resulting covenant, approved by the Reformed Church in 1969, is steeped in the New Frontierism and revolutionary spirit of its era. Its preamble asserted that the mission of higher education in the Reformed Church was to "PROVIDE AN EXCELLENT EDUCATION IN A CHRISTIAN CONTEXT WITHIN A REVOLUTIONARY WORLD," and that the mission of the church was to "break the 'sound barrier' between the secular and the sacred."⁴³ Among many responsibilities, the colleges were to "fearlessly examine the words and works of God and man in the spirit of openness and humility," to maintain a "friendly appreciation for the Reformed tradition," and to "provide an atmosphere of search and confrontation that will liberate the minds, enhance the discernment, enlarge the sympathies and encourage the commitments of all students entrusted to them, so that each may achieve the fullest personal development and self-definition." In turn, the church pledged to assure the colleges "full freedom to pursue all truth" while encouraging "their responsiveness to the Lordship of Christ in whom the fullest freedom lies." The denomination also promised to send the colleges students and financial support.

This was all in accord with Vander Werf's view that church support for the college was welcome, but when it came to academics, the church should defer to the college. Moreover, his move to reorganize the Board of Trustees drastically ending clerical control of it, in 1968, reflected his view that a church that did not come close to supporting the college financially must give way to sponsors from business and industry who could.⁴⁴ In Vander Werf's view, the Reformed Church was abandoning its colleges more than the other way around. And in truth, church functionaries, faced with declining revenues and a denomination now badly fractured on everything from the war in Vietnam to a proposed church merger, were only too glad to loosen linkage and reduce their support to

⁴¹ Report of Special Committee on Reformed Church in America Philosophy of Higher Education. *Minutes of the General Synod of the Reformed Church in America*, June 1969, 64.

⁴² For D. Ivan Dykstra, it was "freedom of the spirit," which cultivated "the active and open mind" that was Protestantism's great educational insight. Religion gave inspiration, not content, to education. As the prominent faculty member explained in *Introduction to Liberal Education* – required reading at Hope in the 1960s and 1970s – "the only way a chemist or philosopher can do anything that can contribute toward religious belief is to point out the finiteness of all chemistry's and all philosophy's achievements. This [will] not guarantee religious belief, but...hold open a relevant place for it." D. Ivan Dykstra, "An Introduction to Liberal Education," 76-78; JAH.

⁴³ *Ibid.* 65. All capitals in original.

⁴⁴ Vander Werf letter to De Pree, January 6, 1968, JAH.

the colleges so that they could meet their financial obligations on programs that seemed to belong more to the church.

From In Loco Parentis to In Loco Avunculi

In no period of the college's history did Hope's trajectory look more like the standard one toward secularization described by historians of church-related higher education George Marsden⁴⁵ and James Burtcheall⁴⁶ than during the Vander Werf era. Changes in hiring patterns at Hope signaled a new openness that seemed – on the part of some – to shift swiftly from an ecumenism that included both Protestants and Catholics to a pluralism that found any religious preferences in hiring unimportant. These changes in hiring stemmed from the college's rising academic ambitions, coupled with a desperate shortage of qualified potential instructors caused by a national shortage of Ph.D.s. Hope's self-description, insofar as it concerned religious matters, became vaguer and more broadly humanist. At the same time, rules governing student life became more and more latitudinarian. Would Hope's Middle Way endure in light of these changes, or was Hope on its way to becoming just another formerly church-related college?⁴⁷

In discussing changes in attitudes toward rules governing student behavior, David A. Hoekema notes that *in loco parentis* had been replaced with, in some cases, a permissive stance which he dubs *non sum mater tua* ("I'm not your mother") and, in other cases, by replacing requirements with exhortation and education, a stance that he calls *in loco avunculi* ("in the place of the uncle").⁴⁸ A shift from *in loco parentis* to *in loco avunculi* has certainly been true of the history of Hope College's stance toward dancing, chapel attendance, off-campus alcohol use, and "ladylike" behavior among its female students.⁴⁹ Hoekema's categories

⁴⁵ George M. Marsden, *The Soul of the American University: From Protestant Establishment to Established Nonbelief* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1994).

⁴⁶ James Turnstead Burtcheall. *The Dying of the Light: The Disengagement of Colleges and Universities from their Christian Churches* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998).

⁴⁷ This was certainly the view of James Harvey, Hope's dean of students. Harvey wrote in April 1966, shortly before he resigned his position, that the "current policies will lead Hope to academic excellence and spiritual bankruptcy. This will happen slowly, so slowly in fact that few will become seriously aware of the erosion..." (James Harvey letter to Ekdal Buys, April 5, 1966, Calvin Vander Werf Papers, Hope College – Memoranda – Harvey, James, 1964-1966," JAH.). In 1969 Harvey would repeat this warning about the drift of RCA colleges in the *Church Herald*, an article which caused a stir within church circles. (James Harvey, "The Reformed Church and Its Colleges," *Church Herald*, December 12, 1969; for the effects of the Harvey article, see Gordon Van Oostenburg letter to Louis Benes, January 23, 1970; in Office of the President, "RCA/Church Herald, 1966-1971," JAH.)

⁴⁸ David A. Hoekema, *Campus Rules and Moral Community: In Place of In Loco Parentis* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1994), 140.

⁴⁹ There has not been space to treat these matters in this essay, but see *Can Hope Endure?* pp. 41-52, 111-12, 140-42, 165-66, 180-83.

can be extended to illuminate the change in the relationship between the Reformed Church and its colleges. As the twentieth century unfolded, the denomination became less and less able – and willing – to treat its colleges as children who could be kept in line by the threat of a withheld allowance. Historically, as financial and governance linkages between founding denominations and colleges weakened, colleges have often pulled up stakes and moved toward pluralism and secularism – uncles, after all, whether strident or avuncular, can fairly easily be ignored.

What is remarkable, then, about Hope College is not that it faced this temptation but that it continues to conceive its mission as being “a Christian college, ecumenical in character while rooted in the Reformed tradition.” Crucial decisions under the administrations of Gordon Van Wylen (1972-1987) and John Jacobson (1987-1999) go a long way to explaining why Hope College still walks its Middle Way; moreover, events in the latter part of the Jacobson administration illustrate vividly the significant challenges of continuing to do so.

From the beginning of his presidency, it was Van Wylen’s intent to create some kind of *via media*,⁵⁰ an ideal that was not dead when Van Wylen arrived at Hope, though of what that “middle” consisted could no longer be taken for granted as easily as it had been in the 1950s. Van Wylen was particularly well suited to articulate such a Middle Way. Unlike Vander Werf, Van Wylen’s “sectarian” background (he was a Calvin alumnus and a member of the Christian Reformed Church) gave him a sense that the Christian faith must be privileged in the college’s institutional policies, even if that went against the grain of prevailing academic sensibilities or of the general culture. Van Wylen’s stance in this regard earned him the gratitude of much of the college’s constituency, not least in the midwestern Reformed Church in America.⁵¹ At the same time, Van Wylen, like Vander Werf, was shaped by a long career at a research university, having risen to the head of the University of Michigan engineering school and having lived for years in Ann Arbor. His preference for “Christian” as a noun and not an adjective and his more flexible expectations for what constituted the content of Christian academic endeavor set his vision apart from those of more conservative

⁵⁰ Early in his presidency, he attempted to articulate this to a New Jersey Reformed clergyman: “The possibility of developing a liberal arts college which is of true excellence academically and which retains its commitment to the historic Christian faith is a very difficult matter. I certainly want to avoid any narrow religious approach to liberal arts education. At the same time, I want to avoid the path which many liberal arts colleges have followed, namely to reduce the Christian commitment to a vague moral or ethical dimension.” Gordon Van Wylen letter to the Rev. Albert A. Smith, February 8, 1973, Office of the President, “RCA – Correspondence, 1972-1976,” JAH.

⁵¹ Giving to Hope from individual congregations improved immediately after Van Wylen became president; one member of the board’s Church Relations Committee, Elliot Tanis, reported that “many of the more conservative churches are now welcoming the appeal from the College”; Minutes, Board of Trustees, January 18-19, 1973, JAH.

Protestant colleges.⁵² At the same time, his commitment to academic excellence was no less strong than his predecessor's.

In hindsight, Van Wylen saw himself as striving to apply an insight that he had gained from Robben Fleming, a former president of the University of Michigan. One of Fleming's guiding principles was: *don't lose the middle* – in other words, value insights to be gained from listening to those at the extremes of an institution, but look to the “solid core in the middle” to evaluate and incorporate those insights.⁵³ Thus the *via media* that Van Wylen forged in the course of his presidency was not so much intended as a resurrection of an old Hope ideal but was a new pragmatic hybrid, tested only through trial and error. Van Wylen's negotiation of two contentious issues, a mission statement for the college and the role of Christian commitment in faculty hiring, aptly illustrate his pragmatic centrism.

Very early in his presidency, in the summer of 1972, Van Wylen commissioned his own committee to write a “Purposes and Goals” statement for Hope that would update the barely used “Profile Report” of 1965. After a two-year debate over resulting drafts of the document failed to move toward a consensus, Van Wylen's pragmatism spurred him to table the project. It was not until 1977 or 1978 that Van Wylen hit upon what came to be called Hope's “Short Mission Statement,” which would find widespread support across the range of the religious spectrum, precisely because the phrase, “in the context of the historic Christian faith,” left the connection between the Christian faith and the academic programs a matter of individual interpretation.⁵⁴

Given the low weight that Christian commitment was given in evaluating faculty candidates during the Vander Werf era, the change of course that Van Wylen believed to be necessary on this issue would become a perennial bone of contention. Not a few faculty had opposed Van Wylen's candidacy for the Hope presidency, fearing his overt religious stance, which was perceived as hostile to “maintaining excellence in the secular aspects of [Hope's] educational program,” and not being sufficiently ecumenical. However, though throughout his presidency Van Wylen was deeply committed to the hiring of people “with a mature understanding of and commitment to the Christian faith,”⁵⁵ he was also

⁵² Van Wylen, “What We Owe Our Institutional Heirs,” in *Vision for a Christian College*, ed. Henry Boonstra (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 125.

⁵³ Gordon Van Wylen letter to James Kennedy and Caroline Simon, February 21, 2002.

⁵⁴ Gordon Van Wylen report to the RCA General Synod, 1978, in Office of the President, “RCA Reports - 1974-1976 [sic];” JAH. See also Gordon Van Wylen, “Mission in Action,” in Van Wylen, *Vision for a Christian College*, 57-64. “Historic” as adjective for “the Christian faith” was added later.

⁵⁵ In a letter he wrote at the end of his presidency, Van Wylen underscored that a prospective faculty member's relation to the Christian faith was one of those “issues that really count.”

cognizant that he not only had to guard against the “secularization” of the college, but also to resist suggestions that the college move even further in a “fundamentalist” direction.⁵⁶ He was able to do the latter while engendering a high level of trust among the college’s conservative Protestant constituency precisely because he was an evangelical himself. Moreover, his evangelicalism did not preclude ecumenicity. As Van Wylen observed toward the end of his tenure, “One of our strengths is that our faculty members come from a variety of Christian traditions. This provides a rich opportunity for us to learn from each other and to grow together as we seek to be all that God intends for us to be, and fulfill his purposes for us, both individually and corporately.”⁵⁷ Nor did Van Wylen’s commitment to hiring mature Christians make him unwilling to make a rare exception; most conspicuously it was his decision in 1983 to hire a religiously interested Jew whose abilities towered over those of his competitors for a position in the chemistry department.

Yet for many faculty members Van Wylen was not nearly flexible enough. Influential faculty voices advocated that no more than 80 percent of the faculty needed to be Christian in order to maintain a “critical mass” supportive of the school’s religious mission. After years of debate the eventual policy, enshrined in the Faculty Handbook of 1984, walks a middle way: the board instructed the president, administration, and faculty to “strive diligently” in hiring for tenure track positions to recruit persons of both outstanding ability in scholarship and teaching *and* “mature understanding of and commitment to the historic Christian faith.”⁵⁸ The policy asserted that such striving “does not mean the faculty should consist only of professing Christians” while insisting at the same time that “the faculty as a whole be predominantly Christian.”⁵⁹ As before 1984, the administration retained the right to veto a candidate on the basis of the

Gordon Van Wylen letter to Gordon H. Girod, May 15, 1987, Office of the President, “Correspondence – General, 1987,” JAH.

⁵⁶ Writing in 1982 to a prominent board member asking about Hope’s possible participation in the Christian College Coalition (now the Council of Christian Colleges and Universities), Van Wylen argued: “[W]e often have a difficult time articulating to people, including prospective students, the nature of our Christian commitment. On the one hand, we are committed, without reservation, to the historic Christian faith; on the other, we are not fundamentalist. We work very hard to make our position clear in our communications with prospective students, their parents and other persons. Most of the colleges in the Christian College Coalition are fundamentalistic in their orientation. Our concern is that if we joined this group, it might well be more difficult to articulate where we stand in regard to the Christian faith...” Gordon Van Wylen letter to Trustee A, Van Wylen, Office of the President, “Correspondence – General,” JAH.

⁵⁷ “Hope College” Office of President GJVW, 1974-1976, RCA Reports. (File 24)

⁵⁸ Minutes of the Faculty Meeting, January 31, 1984.

⁵⁹ “Hope College Faculty Handbook, October 1984,” B1-B2. Whether the phrase about being predominately Christian allowed for exceptions to seeking a Christian commitment in new hires or whether it rather acknowledged and protected the presence of non-Christians hired before the 1980s continued to be debated in the 1990s.

candidate's insufficient commitment to the Christian faith, and in practice it almost never saw the need to deviate from the norm of hiring Christians.

Despite the president's own evangelical pedigree, Hope not only remained a mix of conservative, moderate, and progressive religious factions that vied with each other during this period, but the religious tone of the college remained less pietistic or evangelical than it had been prior to the 1960s. The chapel program, first under Bill Hillegonds and then under the low-key but widely loved Gerald Van Heest, was generally more interested in a greater social orientation, particularly in themes of liberation movements and social justice. Evangelical students did not, as some recounted later, always feel particularly "free" in Hope's atmosphere of this period,⁶⁰ though other students found the religious mood more than Christian enough. Hope College remained throughout the 1980s a place where judgments about its spiritual character were wildly divergent – too conservative, too liberal, too religious, too secular – or just about right, perhaps in part because the school could mean different things to different people. Yet by the end of Van Wylen's presidency his administration had come closer to creating a consensus on Hope's Christian identity than had been present at any time since the early 1960s. However, even in 1987 the nature of Hope's "true" spiritual identity remained a point of sharp disagreement.

In his inaugural address, Van Wylen's successor, John Jacobson, remarked, "We Reformed Christians do not believe that ours is the only way of being Christian, but we do believe that our tradition and our faith have an important and essential part to play in the ecumenical concert that is the Christian Church."⁶¹ Under his leadership a process for formulating a Vision of Hope statement was begun and was approved by the Board of Trustees in 1997; the most often quoted phrase from the *Vision of Hope* document re-expressed this sentiment: Hope is "a Christian college, ecumenical in character while rooted in the Reformed tradition." This linkage between Hope's Reformed and ecumenical impulses became an important guiding vision for many and under-girded Jacobson's practice of rotating his choice of convocation speakers among Catholic, mainline and evangelical faculty members.⁶²

⁶⁰ A case in point is the InterVarsity chapter, which was sponsored by future-provost Jacob Nyenhuis in 1977 but was approved only after two years of "verbal jousting" with chaplain Hillegonds.

⁶¹ President John Jacobson's Presidential Speech, October 9, 1987, 2.

⁶² Simon's notes on Interview with John Jacobson, December 14, 2002. Jacobson's enactment of his sincerely held belief that Hope should be both Reformed and ecumenical was, as in so many cases, nuanced. His sense that Hope's Reformed tradition should be of paramount importance in Religion Department hires would draw criticism from some in the early 1990s (Minutes of Faculty Meeting, February 18, 1992, JAH), yet his sense that Catholics were full contributors to Hope's mission made him happy, starting in 1994, to have Catholics as two of his three deans.

Under Jacobson, the decade of the 1990s at Hope College would be one of prosperity, with the college endowment more than quadrupling and institutional advancement on a variety of fronts.⁶³ Yet, as Jacobson, would find, it was an excruciatingly difficult period in which to follow Gordon Van Wylen's advice: *don't lose the middle*. Three controversial issues are illustrative: faculty hiring policy, homosexuality, and Hope's dean of the chapel and his campus ministry program.

The debate about the religious composition of the faculty had simmered through the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s – in the 1990s it came to a boil. Jacobson, who saw himself as continuing a course that his predecessor Gordon Van Wylen had begun, insisted that the college hire only outstanding academics who were also Christians. Jacobson would have repeated debates with many faculty members over whether Hope's hiring policy, as stated in the faculty handbook, is a broadly Christian critical mass policy or a comprehensive policy.⁶⁴ A "Faculty Recruitment Study Group" of twenty to thirty participants began meeting to hammer out an institutional rationale for including a wider religious range of candidates – producing a document which based its argument in part on the Reformed Church in America Covenant of Mutual Responsibilities.⁶⁵ These endeavors failed to change John Jacobson's conviction that holding his "finger in the dike" on the hiring policy was central to maintaining Hope's Christian identity.⁶⁶

Since the mid-1980s, homosexuality had been a polarizing issue on the Hope campus. Van Wylen's centrism had lead him to defend to critics the merits of letting a 1983 speaker urge full acceptance of homosexuals within the church while at the same time sharing his written "observation" to a faculty supporter of the speaker that he found the speaker's tone too arrogant.⁶⁷ The *Anchor*, reflecting the campus debate that continued into the twenty-first century, would devote extensive attention to the subject roughly once every two years in the 1990s, with students either expressing Christian opposition to homosexuality or articulating Christian rationales for the support of homosexuals. On both sides, theological arguments dominated the discussion.⁶⁸ In 1995, in response to a "LesBiGay" week-long series of events on campus, Jacobson encouraged the

⁶³ Hope's enrollment in the fall of 1987 was 2,710; in fall of 1997 it was 2,911. The college's endowment was \$20 million in 1987 and was \$91 million in 1998. *News From Hope College*, February 1998, 7.

⁶⁴ The *Hope College Faculty Handbook* contains the official college policies regarding procedures and governance.

⁶⁵ Agenda and Minutes for October 25, 1994 Faculty Meeting, and Minutes of Hope College Faculty Meeting, November 29, 1994, JAH.

⁶⁶ Jacobson Memorandum to James Kennedy and Caroline Simon, October 30, 2002, 11.

⁶⁷ Letters in Van Wylen, Office of the President, "Correspondence – General," JAH.

⁶⁸ See *Anchor* issues in 1992, 1994, 1996, and 1998 for these discussions.

Board of Trustees to make an unprecedented moral stand, stating in a declaration that Hope College, like its parent denomination, opposed homosexual behavior as sin.⁶⁹ That Jacobson did not seek to close off, but rather to control, discussion of the subject is evidenced by a series of panel discussions, carefully crafted for ideological balance, on the theological, scientific, civil, and moral issues surrounding homosexuality offered the next year and sponsored by the provost's office.⁷⁰

Under Jacobson's leadership, Hope sought to strengthen its chapel program; as events transpired, the results of these efforts would not only transform Hope's religious ethos but demand that the college think deeply about the viability of its Middle Way. An endowment was raised to elevate the college chaplaincy to a dean of the chapel, who would have a significant budget and multiple staff. With these resources and considerable entrepreneurial acumen, Jacobson's appointment to the new deanship, the Reverend J. Ben Patterson, began what would quickly become a high-profile, high-energy chapel program. By 1996, over a third of Hope's student body was voluntarily attending one or more of the weekly services the chapel team offered; by 1998, half of Hope's students claimed to attend chapel at least once a week, and 42 percent attended "The Gathering," the Sunday evening service, at least once a month.⁷¹ The chapel program also launched annual spring break mission trips, in which hundreds of students forewent travel to Daytona Beach in favor of short-term service trips. There was more enthusiasm for missions at Hope College by the end of the 1990s, perhaps, than at any time since the days of the Student Volunteer Band in the 1920s.

⁶⁹ Many faculty were disturbed that newspaper articles about the college's position oversimplified both the college's and the Church's position, summarizing it tersely as "homosexual behavior is sin." Barton Deiters, "Students rescind invitation to gay Christian speaker" *Holland Sentinel*, March 6, 1999, A5. Hope College's August 16, 1995 statement says this, but also reflects to the extent a brief statement can, the RCA's complex position on this matter. Both the college's statement and the RCA's 1978 report (still in force) on the subject entitled, "Homosexuality: A Biblical and Theological Appraisal," makes a careful distinction between homosexuality and homosexual practice; both support the kind and fair treatment of homosexuals. However, the RCA report, which by its nature is more extensive in its treatment of the subject, emphasizes more strongly and in more detail than Hope's statement that "it is one matter to affirm that self-chosen homosexual acts are sinful. It is quite another to reject, defame, and excoriate the humanity of the person who performs them. This distinction has often been missed. It is possible and necessary on biblical grounds to identify homosexuality as a departure from God's intent. However...there are no theological grounds on which a homosexual may be singled out for a greater measure of judgment. All persons bear within them the marks of the fall"; and "The denial of human and civil rights to homosexuals is inconsistent with the biblical witness and Reformed theology." *The Church Speaks: Papers of the Commission on Theology, Reformed Church of America, 1959-1984*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985. 251, 257.

⁷⁰ Minutes of the Faculty Meeting, September 26, 1995, JAH.

⁷¹ See Seth Dale, "Skyrocketing Chapel attendance packs pews," *Anchor*, September 14, 1994; Dan Cwik and Carrie Tennant, "Crowds leave standing room only at chapel," *Anchor*, September 11, 1996; Dana Lamers, "Survey Unveiled," *Anchor*, September 30, 1998.

In spite of—for some, perhaps, because of—the rapid growth of the programs under his charge, Ben Patterson became a focus of widespread controversy, engendering both adulating praise and bitter enmity. Patterson and many of his supporters, on and off campus, regarded his conflict with his critics as essentially theological in substance—between “Christian orthodoxy” and “heterodoxy, the work of theological revisionists.” Seen in this light, Patterson was a prophet calling Van Raalte’s “school of the prophets” back to its true self. Many of Patterson’s critics also saw the issue as theological—but construed it as pitting what they took to be Patterson’s “sectarianism” against a spirit of Christian unity which deplored the elevation of passing social controversies, however heated, to the level of Christian essentials. Indeed, one might argue that some of Patterson’s critics stood in Hope’s long “nonsectarian” tradition; just as Hope’s early leadership had labeled the Christian Reformed “seceders,” Patterson’s contemporary critics saw him as pulling away from fellow Christians over matters that were not central to the gospel. Others of Patterson’s critics contended that the conflict had more to do with Patterson’s uncompromising personality. Given Patterson’s departure for the chaplaincy of Westmont College in 2000, for those at Hope College in the twenty-first century the most pertinent question regarding his ministry concerns whether its divisive effects show that Hope faced—and still faces—a forced choice between evangelicalism and ecumenism.

As we have seen, even before World War II, Hope thought of itself as not only Reformed but also both evangelical and ecumenical. During the Vander Werf, Van Wylen, and Jacobson administrations, when “ecumenical” was for the first time defined more widely than “exclusivist Protestant,” the college actually became a mix of all three. The result has been that theologically informed conversations, when they go well at the college, are enriched by a wide variety of perspectives within the historic Christian faith—Protestant (including mainline, evangelical, Pentecostal and independent), Roman Catholic, and Eastern Orthodox. But during the late 1990s at Hope, theological conversations across its theological spectrum did not, for the most part, go well. This was not just a function of personalities but revealed a significant lesson to which Hope College must attend in order to ensure an auspicious future for its Middle Way.

Upon his arrival in 1994 Ben Patterson found clusters of evangelical students who felt marginalized by Hope’s ecumenicity. These students perceived—accurately or inaccurately—that conservative Christian opinions and practices were not welcome within Hope’s vaunted openness and niceness. When these clusters consolidated and filled Hope’s chapel, the volume of their new-found voice had the effect of making more liberal Christians among Hope’s student body, faculty, and staff, as well as Hope’s relatively few non-Christian students,

feel alienated. The question still hanging over Hope in the new millennium is whether it can create genuine dialogue, understanding, and appreciation across the wide gap between the evangelical and progressive elements it has long seen itself as encompassing.

If Hope College perceives its calling to be living out a comprehensively ecumenical Middle Way, then faithfulness will necessitate cultivating mutual understanding across theological traditions with differing vocabularies and emphases. Ecumenical breadth in a liberal arts setting is a resource if administrators and faculty are willing to become theologically polylingual, in contrast to being theologically indifferent, as is too often the *modus operandi* in theologically diverse communities. At Hope this would mean that faculty should learn the salient features not just of Hope's founding Reformed tradition but of the Catholic, Methodist, Baptist, Episcopal, Lutheran, Pentecostal, and other groups represented at the college. Many at Hope need to take more seriously the challenge of the considerable work and effort involved.

Unless Hope faces such challenges, its ecumenism will all too easily become a least-common-denominator affair that renders all theological conversation at the college vapid. In contrast, what is needed in an academic institution is a robust ecumenism in which all are willing to speak from their particular Christian perspectives, ask for clarification when others' ways of speaking need translation, and work at genuine understanding – which may include informed disagreement. In the process, Hope's community will need to cultivate dialogue among conversation partners, some of whom have largely incompatible definitions of "ecumenical." Some at Hope are shaped by non-denominational evangelicalism, which has abandoned the old confessional dividing lines (on issues, for example, like baptism) but discounts anything that looks "liberal" as sub-Christian, or worse. Others resonate with a liberal religious ecumenism which finds dialogue easier with like-minded people of other faiths (or no faith) than with conservative Christians. All too often, these forms of ecumenism stand with their backs toward each other.

Hope College *needs* to retain (or finally find) a third kind of ecumenism that transcends the polarizing opposition between evangelicals and more liberal Christians and encompasses the range of Christian conviction at Hope. In fact, this is a pressing need not only at ecumenically oriented, church-related colleges but within and among many major Christian denominations, including the Reformed Church in America.⁷² It is no accident that this third form of

⁷² See, for example, an insightful pair of articles on why liberals and conservatives need one another and why continuing dialogue between them is so difficult: Barbara G. Wheeler, "Strange Company" and Richard J. Mouw, "Hanging in There," *Christian Century*, January 13, 2004, 18-25.

ecumenism is rarely enacted,⁷³ for it is far easier to insist that people ought to forget all their theological convictions for the sake of rapprochement or to assume that the only point of speaking with those who do not hold one's cherished convictions is their potential conversion to one's point of view. Yet Hope's history illustrates that the interplay between liberals and conservatives can be a saving grace. Spirited debate across the theological spectrum has not always been easy – or even civil – yet arguably has made Hope more faithful to its calling.

Two important cases in point are the debates over homosexuality and over hiring at Hope that motivate discussants to invoke denominational study documents on homosexuality and the “Covenant of Mutual Responsibilities” between the RCA and its three affiliated colleges. Controversies at Hope College about homosexuality, especially in the 1990s, sent faculty and administrators (Reformed or not) back to the 1978 “Homosexuality: A Biblical and Theological Appraisal” document. While the empirical research upon which this document was based is severely outdated, its willingness to face squarely the theological complexities of the issue of homosexuality and homosexual practice makes it a resource for common conversation – not just among those who are in fundamental theological agreement with it but also among and between those who would wish it took a firmer stand or a more latitudinarian view. Renewed interest at Hope College in the “Covenant of Mutual Responsibilities” goes back at least to the unfinished working paper produced by the Faculty Recruitment Study Group in 1994. Since then the covenant has received periodic attention in various discussions of Hope's nature and mission.⁷⁴ Moreover, in 2000, changes in college catalog copy incorporated quotations from the covenant into the “Hope's Reason for Being” and “Philosophy of Education” sections.⁷⁵ The intent of these changes – which are still extant in Hope's *Catalog* – was officially to inform members and perspective members of Hope's community that its church affiliation and Christian context were fully compatible with open inquiry. At the same time, these changes in the catalog have built an additional explicit linkage between Hope and its founding denomination.

In each of these cases, the documents in question were put to a polemical use in debates perceived to be directly relevant to the religious identity of Hope. “Homosexuality: A Biblical and Theological Appraisal” was the basis of the statement issued by the president's office linking Hope's denominational connection with the administration's stance that any appearance of endorsing homosexuality must be avoided. While one might, on the basis of this, say that in

⁷³ See Robert Benne's account of how difficult Baylor University found this to be. “Crisis of Identity” *Christian Century* January 27, 2004, 22-26.

⁷⁴ See, for example, PIC Minutes, Sept. 4, Oct. 1 & 8, 1998.

⁷⁵ Minutes of Administrative Affairs Board, March 7, 2000, JAH.

that case conversation over that document started from its use by (to speak crudely), those on the theological “right,” the “Covenant of Mutual Responsibilities” first came to the fore when cited by those on Hope College’s “left.” Yet, in both cases, these documents were substantively and rhetorically complex enough to allow for countermoves based on their content by those on “the other side” of the controversy as well. This allowed discussion of central issues of institutional identity to take place on the basis of some common ground – importantly, a denominationally linked common ground.

Irwin Lubbers, when explaining why Hope took the “middle lane,” linked this to deep features of its denominational affiliation: “The innate Dutch antipathy to extremism in any form has enable the church to hold together the most liberal and most conservative elements throughout three centuries of history. Tensions constantly arise, but differences are resolved and practical *modus vivendi* achieved.”⁷⁶ Hope’s Middle Way has thus been rooted in lessons learned from its founding denomination – lessons gleaned from observing characteristic habits of interaction within institutional life that in turn produced documents that are resources for carrying out debate that holds relative extremes together. When placed under pressure in the 1990s, both these habits and the documents they produced were resources for continuing – if heated – engagement.

As early as 1961, Lubbers claimed, “Without Hope College and the service it has rendered throughout the years, it is doubtful whether the Reformed Church as a denomination could have survived.”⁷⁷ It is just as true that without the Reformed Church, Hope College would not exist; numerous times in its first one hundred years Hope’s financial crises were solved by passing the hat among Reformed churches. Hope College is, arguably, in a better position now than it was in 1961 to discharge its filial duties of gratitude to the Reformed Church in America by contributing the intellectual expertise of its faculty and the enthusiasm and acumen of its graduates as future ordained and lay leaders. Some would argue that it is in a better position now because, while maintaining its Christian mission, it has grown in academic stature and been (and has even more potential to be) enriched by genuine ecumenicity. Hope College and the Reformed Church in America may be able to help one another, through continued frank dialogue and exhortation, seek and speak the truth in love while avoiding extremism and achieving, where possible, a practical *modus vivendi*.⁷⁸ If the Reformed Church in America has moved from being a parent to *in loco avunculi*, in Hope it has, if no

⁷⁶ Lubbers, “Hope College as a Factor in the Assimilation of Netherlands in American Life,” Addresses, 1953-9, JAH.

⁷⁷ Lubbers letter, Jan. 10, 1961. (Dancing Correspondence in Lubbers Mics. Correspondence file 8), JAH.

⁷⁸ The urgent need for a way forward in the midst of vivid disagreement is illustrated by several issues discussed at the 2005 General Synod (See *Church Herald* July / August, 2005 *passim*).

longer a daughter, a niece that attends to its advice and can, ideally, contribute to meeting the serious present and future challenges that the denomination faces. Together, and with God's grace, may they be able to fulfill their Lord's prayer for Christians: "that they may all be one...so that the world may know that you have sent me."