

Looking Back and Moving Forward

E. LeBron Fairbanks, president
Faculty and Staff Awards Banquet
August 23, 2005

The 2005 summer was the best summer since 2001 for Anne and me. You may remember that Anne had three surgeries in 2002 as a result of the recurrence of cancer within her. Senior personnel changes at MVNU preoccupied my attention in the summer months of 2003. MVNU related legal issues absorbed my thoughts and energy during most of 2004.

The quadrennial General Assembly, Conventions and numerous other international, national, regional and MVNU related activities were added to the busy schedule for the summer of 2005. However, it was a delight to participate in the many events and activities connected with the international denominational gathering.

To make things even better, Anne and I spent the first few days of August on vacation in southern Florida. While in Florida, Anne and I met my sister, who lives in Florida, for lunch. During the meal, Carolyn, my sister, mentioned that she had not returned to our home place in northwest Miami for many years. Within two minutes we had made a decision to travel to Miami following lunch. I'm so glad we did. I had traveled to Hialeah, Florida only once since 1973 when my mother died. It was an intensely emotional and spiritual experience for me as we returned "home."

Of course, I hardly recognized the city. It had grown so much since I graduated from Hialeah High School in 1960 and left home for Trevecca Nazarene College in Nashville, Tennessee.

I well remember the Cuban Revolution in the late 1950's, led by Fidel Castro. Many Cubans left their homeland. Hialeah, Florida became a gathering place for many of the Cuban refugees following the Revolution. The truth is, the Hispanic population significantly improved our city. And it was evident on our return to Hialeah.

We drove past the high school from which I graduated in 1960. We found our homeplace at 40 E. 42nd Street. We recognized only the address! The home had been doubled in size. It was so beautiful, and so different from *our* two bedroom flat roofed house with no air conditioning!

We found the homeplaces of several of our relatives who lived in Hialeah during the 1950's and 60's. What memories! We traveled to the local Nazarene church we attended as teenagers. A large Nazarene Hispanic congregation now worships in the facility. I was moved to tears as my sister and I walked into the sanctuary. The funeral service for our Mom was conducted in 1973 in this sanctuary. I recalled preaching my first sermon in 1960 as a local church "preacherboy". I still remember the text. Before Carolyn, Anne and I left the city of Hialeah, we drove by the Hialeah Hospital where, in 1973, our mother died.

I mentioned to you that it was an emotional experience for me; I also stated that the afternoon was a profound spiritual experience for me. Let me explain what I mean.

The afternoon in Hialeah reminded me quite vividly from which I came. My Dad was an

alcoholic. We didn't know how poor we were. My ninth grade career book focused on aviation mechanics. It wasn't until my Christian conversion in the summer following my junior year in high school that I wanted to attend college. I think I was the first one in an extended family of thirteen brothers and sisters of my mom and four siblings of my dad to enroll in a college or university.

The afternoon in Hialeah gave me an opportunity to "look back" and see how far God in Christ has brought me. I had nothing to offer to God but my willingness to serve him wherever He led me. If someone had told the congregation in Hialeah that LeBron would serve the Lord in Europe, Asia and at Mount Vernon Nazarene University they would have laughed and said, "He's dreaming again!" But to return to the sanctuary where I preached my first sermon and established my spiritual roots was deeply moving for me spiritually.

I was overwhelmed by the realization that as of this year, 2005, I have completed 25 years in Christian higher education administration. Surely God has a sense of humor to tap a young Christian on the shoulder in 1959-60 and show to people many years later that He can and will use ordinary people, like LeBron Fairbanks, to participate with Him in shaping Christ-like leaders for lifelong service and global impact! What a story of God's grace!

On this trip, it hit me anew. God is not finished with me yet. I look back with profound gratitude and give testimony to God for His goodness, mercy and love to me who least deserved His grace. And, looking back gives me the courage and confidence to look ahead. As He has guided me over these years, so He will continue to lead me into the future! Praise God!

Looking back has given me assurance that, as He has directed me in the past, He will lead me in the days ahead of me. When I'm down on myself, upset over mistakes of judgment and overwhelmed with decisions that defy easy answers, I can remember the past, reflect on how God has brought me through similar times in days gone by. On the basis of this "memory" of God's guidance in the past I can believe that some day He will show me how He was working in ways I did not recognize in the heat of the present moment. This countdown holds me steady, even in the middle of this decade of serving at Mount Vernon Nazarene University.

His promise IS true. "He will NEVER leave us nor forsake us." Looking back reminds us of this great promise even as we journey into the future.

Returning to your homeplace may not produce the same emotional and spiritual experience as it did within me this summer. You may have grown up nearby and you journey home often. You may have experienced other ways of igniting hope for the future as you remember the past.

Could not the experience of looking back provide encouragement for us at MVNU as we face the last half of this decade? The process of reflecting back over the university's brief 37-year history provides prospective for the difficult challenges we face each year.

I remember very vividly in December 1991 as the Cabinet was working on the budget for the 1992-93 academic year. At 10:00 pm one evening, one cabinet member asked the other members of the team, "Do you feel as sick about this as I do?"

Remember the ED Shed? The "old" art building and the counseling center? They were located

exactly where we wanted to place the planned Library/Learning Resource Center! Most everyone agreed that the new library facility should be located where it was planned. But where should we relocate the Education Department, the Art Department and the Counseling Center? And the Religion and Philosophy Division needed more space!

The Board of Trustees took a bold step forward in the mid 1990's to complete the Library as planned and also to extend the first floor dining commons, add a second floor to the expanded dining commons to house the Education Department, the Religion and Philosophy Division and the Counseling Center. It was a bold step for the Board of Trustees. There was significant apprehension. Yet it became a growth experience for them.

Enrollment was increasing every year. We had difficulty providing additional housing for the growing student resident population. Remember the trailers we brought in to cover the overflow needs of student housing? Never again!

It seemed like it took years (well, it was years) to cultivate the relationship with our neighbors across Martinsburg Road who lived on the beautiful and spacious 122 acre Pinecrest Farm. But, when the time was right, the discussions became serious. MVNU presented a proposal for the farm. The proposal was rejected. But the three brothers who owned the property wanted to continue talking with us. And God worked a miracle. We agreed on a price, and \$800,000 was secured from friends and donors within an approximately two-week period to apply toward the purchase of Pinecrest Farm.

There have been honest and intense differences among faculty and staff regarding the Adult and Graduate Studies programs for working adults, including the expansion of the program to the five off-campus sites. And, seemingly irreconcilable differences, so we thought at the time, between us on campus over policy, procedures and processes caused pain within our MVNU faith community.

Now, looking back, we remember how God brought us through each seemingly impossible, so they seemed, situation. Reflecting on the past, we can affirm that God's hand was on us even though at the time He appeared silent.

The past year was such a year. The dip in the first time freshman enrollment from 375 in 2003 to 304 in the fall of 2004 was shocking. We were stunned. We evaluated our processes, analyzed our procedures, even blamed this and that. It was embarrassing. Frustrating. And it had budget implications. Would the slip in enrollment require us to dismiss some personnel?

We knew we had good people in place in the enrollment services division. They, nor we, had been asleep. But we all jumped in this year to insure that a dip in enrollment did not become a trend.

Noel-Levitz Enrollment Services consulting firm helped us review every dimension of the enrollment process. Faculty and staff saw in a new way that enrolling students is a campus wide responsibility. And if the dip became a trend, jobs would be in jeopardy, including possibly yours and mine.

I prized the MVNU personnel infrastructure but was fearful that it may have to be dismantled

due to budget constraints. The MVNU Board is justly proud of closing the past thirty years in the black financially. And they were not about to make exceptions now. Nor should they.

Thus when we begin the year with a projected 1.2 million dollar shortfall, the budget planning committee and I, working with you in so many ways, made the necessary budgetary adjustments to close the fiscal year on June 20, 2005 in the black! Praise God!

Even as we planned for the 2005-06 fiscal year budget, we planned conservatively. Some positions were consolidated. The faculty and staff retreats were postponed for this year. Technology equipment purchases were delayed. A minimum increase in the base salary was the best we could do. Christmas gifts were not included in the budget presented to the Board in March for the 2005-06 school year. And many more needed projects and programs were put on hold.

Now, as we are on the verge of the 2005-06 school year, we are witnessing a phenomenal turnaround in enrollment. Many of you were involved in this spectacular reversal. Thank you! Thank you! Thank you! The freshman number will be above 385, compared to 304 last Fall. The consultants told us to budget on no more than 338. And we followed their advice.

The budget planning committee developed a list of priorities to be added back to the operating budget for the year if enrollment exceeded expectations. The contingency fund, for instance, will be restored. So will a Christmas financial gift, money for technology, and other projects.

Let's take this year as a time to express gratitude to God and to each other. We gain energy and confidence in God and each member of our academic faith community as we embrace and commit ourselves to the eight Board-approved goals for the remainder of the decade.

Let's reflect on last year, learn from it and look with expectation for God to continue to work in our lives and in our university just as He has in the past, even in the seemingly bleak years. Psalms 5:3 is my verse for this year: "In the morning, O Lord, you hear my voice; in the morning I lay my requests before you and wait in expectation."

There is one more area wherein this year we need to focus our "anticipation" and expectation" in prayer. Will you join me in praying expectantly that each student in every MVNU academic program will come to know the Lord Jesus in a dynamic saving-faith relationship? Lets not assume that all of our students are Christian. Lets believe, pray and expect that every MVNU student will testify to a dynamic faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and live his or her life accordingly.

God is teaching us, slowly, surely and sometimes painfully, to present our thanksgiving and petitions to Him.... and then to wait, wait, wait.... in GREAT expectation! Join me this year in celebrating the goodness of God, His mercy and grace extended to us. Lets wait before Him, expectantly, with a renewed sense of worship, praise and gratitude to Him.

Looking back, we can move ahead. I look forward to working with you during another exciting school year.