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## Founder's Day Convocation Remarks

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Founders' Day  
Remarks by President Richard F. Wilson

February 8, 2006

As you enter the campus at the North Main Street, you pass through the Founders Gates. On these gates is an inscription that is also printed on the back of your program. The message acknowledges the “incalculable responsibility” the founders of Illinois Wesleyan felt in the work they had undertaken. Try to imagine yourself joining with a small group of like-minded people in 1850 who believed fervently that the community needed an “institution of learning.” The challenges involved rallying other influential people and institutions to the cause, raising the money, finding faculty, recruiting students, locating places to hold classes, buying property and eventually constructing one building.

Now, fast forward to the campus 156 years later. In some ways, the same challenges remain. We still rally other people and institutions to our cause. We still have to raise money. We still work hard to attract the best students and faculty. Locating places to hold classes is less of a problem, but our vision for the future still includes new buildings and programs.

The Founders Gate inscription tells us that the people who created Illinois Wesleyan were passionate about the transformative power of education and the effect on future generations. “...Destiny seems to point out this valley as the depository of the great heart of the nation. From this center, mighty pulsations . . . must in the future flow, which shall not only affect the fortune of the Republic, but reach in their influence other and distant nations of the earth.”

We may think that the focus on globalization and life in the global society are new phenomena, but it is clear that the founders of Illinois Wesleyan envisioned a university with an international mission. We honor this aspiration with a study abroad program that is thriving and that increased in size by thirty percent over the past year. We honor the aspiration with an enrollment of international students that doubled this past fall. We honor the aspiration through extensive interest in travel courses in May Term. Finally, we honor the international aspirations of our Founders by bringing to campus artists and scholars like Zuzana Paulechova-Stiasna and Kenneth Pomeranz who broaden our perspective, enrich our experience, and stimulate our imagination.

At the opening of Illinois Wesleyan’s second academic year in 1851, there were 50 students and two faculty members. Classes in arithmetic, English grammar, algebra and geometry together with elocution and rhetoric were held in the basement room of a Methodist church. The 30 founders of our University were known collectively as “substantial citizens” of Central Illinois. And they believed fervently that “the education of nothing less than the whole American mind...” was essential.

So we gather this morning to celebrate our founding and to recognize that we and all who have come before us are stewards of an incredible legacy. We have accomplished much in 156 years and we acknowledge our responsibility to those who will be attending the Founders Day program in 2162 --156 years from now.

To that end, our Board of Trustees voted yesterday to approve the Strategic Plan that our campus community has been working on for the past three years. This has been a very inclusive process, and I want to thank everyone who participated on planning committees, submitted comments on drafts, and attended public forums for their interest and commitment to this process. This result is truly the work of people who care deeply about this University.

And now the real work begins: converting the plan into action, a process that will equally participatory and challenging. It won't all happen all at once, but I pledge to you that we will make progress and you will be able to see the results. I like the symbolism of being able to announce adoption of this plan at this Founder's Day ceremony. In essence, we can view the plan as a document that allows us to rededicate the institution to the principles that inspired our Founders and to those who will follow.

Imagine the excitement, responsibility and awe our founders must have felt in creating a new opportunity for excellent higher learning. I hope that you, like them, will sense the excitement of new opportunities on the horizon today and how critically important it is that we seize them. "We stand in a position of incalculable responsibility ..."—a phrase of great significance to the University in 1850 and in 2006.