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Founders' Day Remarks

February 19, 2008

Good evening and welcome!

Before beginning my remarks this evening, I would like to thank Doris Hill and the student musicians for rescuing us in splendid fashion when we discovered quite late that the organ in this hall was inoperable. We are grateful for your performance under pressure.

Founders' Day is a very significant event in the life of the University, both as a way to pay tribute to those in the past who were instrumental in the creation of this university and to reaffirm the enduring values that continue to characterize this institution.

In reviewing the history of this university, one cannot ignore the fact that the times leading up to our founding in 1850 were ones of great promise and yet significant challenge for the leaders of our community and the nation.

A new president of the United States, Zachary Taylor, was inaugurated in 1849 and would die 16 months later; the divide in the country over slavery was growing; a new railroad, the Illinois Central, was created and would link Bloomington with Chicago and St. Louis; and, of importance to us, a new college was being planned for Bloomington. While the country and national leaders looked ahead, at times with uncertainty, so did those in Bloomington.

Listed in your program today are the names of the 30 men who came together to found this institution in 1850. This was a diverse group in terms of religious beliefs and walks of life. The historical record gives Reverend John Barger much of the credit for the successful founding of this institution, because it was through his determination and strength of will that Illinois Wesleyan gained the support of the community and the Methodist church.

Barger was a real dynamo, who knew that establishing an institution of “collegiate grade” in the recently established city of Bloomington would bring new opportunities, just as surely as the coming of the railroad.

Barger spent a year meeting with and encouraging Bloomington leaders to join together in support of a college. During this time a coalition of the town’s churches and a number of its most prominent civic and business leaders came together, but progress toward their goal was slow and seemed to be going nowhere.

From May of 1849 until July of 1850, it was a roller coaster ride for Barger and a few others who would not give up on the dream of bringing a college to Bloomington. Finally, when no other sponsor would step forward Barger convinced the Illinois Methodist Conference to embrace the idea of a new college in Bloomington. With this endorsement, the University was founded and the name of the institution was changed from Illinois University to Illinois Wesleyan University.

And so, we certainly gather here today to celebrate the vision and fortitude of John Barger and his colleagues, but we also celebrate other early commitments that set the tone for this new University:

- In 1870, Hannah L. Shur enrolled, our first female student. She earned a Bachelor of Science degree in 1872.
- In 1873, the University welcomed its first female faculty member, when Jennie F. Willing, joined us as professor of English literature.
- Our first African-American graduate, Gus A. Hill, received his law degree from Illinois Wesleyan in 1880, just six years after the law school opened.
- Martha Buck, you may recognize the Buck name, served as the first woman trustee appointed to our board in 1892. She served Illinois Wesleyan as a board member until 1916.

This early commitment to diversity of people, ideas, and experiences is a hallmark of this institution, one that we revisit periodically to reaffirm and redefine in light of the issues and challenges being faced by local, national, and world communities. Over the past three years, we have devoted enormous time and energy to this kind of reexamination and have committed ourselves once again to such longstanding principles as:

- Centrality of the liberal arts for students in all curricula
- Enhancement of critical thinking and effective writing and communication skills
- Excellence in teaching and scholarship
- Importance of individual attention to students and success of our graduates

We also have articulated some special commitments that might be characterized as either new or perhaps more focused initiatives that respond to what we see as important issues for students to understand and experience:

- Social justice
- Civic leadership
- Environmental sustainability

Over the last four years, we have been privileged to have distinguished scholars and leaders on this campus to help understand each of these commitments and to consider ways that we might contribute to progress personally. I am extremely pleased to welcome James Hansen to campus to continue that educational experience. As backdrop for his remarks, I remind all of you of the admonition inscribed on our Founders Gate: "We stand in a position of incalculable responsibility…"

Thank you.