

“The Marriage of Faith and Knowledge”

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I am here, at least in part, tonight because I stand as a present-day representative of the church tradition that founded Carleton College in 1866. The Congregationalists, those Puritans who ventured out from England and made their homes in the New England colonies, were one stream of four that eventually became the United Church of Christ.

The Congregationalists had from the beginning a passion for learning and a stubborn drive to ensure steady intellectual growth for all. That commitment to education was evident as early as 1643, documented in a writing titled “New England’s First Fruits”, which said: “After God had carried us over to New England, and we had builded our houses and provided necessaries for our livelihood, reared convenient places for God’s worship, and settled the civil government, one of the next things we longed for and looked after was to advance learning and perpetuate it to posterity.”<sup>1</sup>

Over time the Congregationalists would steadily commit themselves to the advancement of learning, leaving an astounding legacy by founding countless colleges that remain among our most esteemed educational

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<sup>1</sup> Warren Upham, Editor, Congregational Work of Minnesota 1832-1920 (Congregational Conference of Minnesota, 1921), p. 18.

institutions today. Harvard, Yale, Dartmouth, Princeton, Amherst, Wellesley, Oberlin, Grinnell: all of these were colleges that the Congregationalists had their hand in founding. All of these and many more are part of that staunch Congregationalist commitment that married a vital faith with a hunger for knowledge. They established 13 “frontier colleges” in the early to mid-nineteenth century as they stretched beyond their New England roots into places like Ohio, Nebraska, Iowa, and (of course), Minnesota.

I read about the founding of Carleton this week in a book I found on our shelves at the Minnesota Conference offices titled “Congregational Work of Minnesota, 1832-1920”. It noted the larger climate in which decisions to found Carleton would be made, making the entrepreneurial, passionate commitment of its founders clear. Quote: “The territory of Minnesota had been organized only in 1849. Its population at that time was about 4000. When the decision was reached in 1860 to found a Congregational college, the population [of MN] had risen to 172,023. There were, in the MN of 1860, 47 Congregational churches, ten of them less than a year old, and the average membership of all of them 28. There were only 30 ministers and about 12

church buildings. Not more than three of the congregations were self-supporting.”<sup>2</sup>

And yet, despite this modest moment in this new State and in the life of Congregationalism here, the excitement about establishing a college was palpable. From the same book, the following was noted about a meeting here in Northfield in 1870 at which Rev. James Strong was elected President of the college, the evangelical enthusiasm of those present obvious, the sense of an abundant future unfolding before them abundantly clear: “Six resolutions were passed congratulating the college and pledging cooperation; and then in the afternoon, when the situation had been thoroughly discussed and its gravity was understood, there came the enthusiastic meeting where \$16,446 was pledged by the brethren present for the school. ...It reads to one now like that portion of the Acts where the early Christians, moved with a deep sense of their obligations to Christ and out of love to him, came with one accord and laid down their treasures at the apostles’ feet ..... The session closed with prayers imploring God’s blessing and returning thanks to him for his goodness in permitting them to see this day in the history of their beloved college....We who look back feel how certainly God’s hand was in shaping of these events

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<sup>2</sup> Warren Upham, editor, *Congregational Work of Minnesota 1832-1920*, (Congregational Conference of Minnesota, 1921), p. 151.

and in the developing of such consecration and love in behalf of the churches for the future college.”<sup>3</sup>

As you gather to celebrate the grand history of Carleton and Skinner Chapel since those first heady days of its founding, know that the United Church of Christ today continues to recognize God’s hand in your ongoing endeavors and know that our love and respect continue to follow you. Over the 150 years since this college’s founding and 100 years since the erection of the chapel, there have been multiple understandings of the place of religious life at Carleton....from staunch requirements of religious observance in the early days to the freedom given students now to explore all aspects of spirituality and meaning.... from a narrow, Congregationalist lens to a broader, more inclusive approach to spiritual life and a “passionate concern for ultimate value”.

But at each step on this path, Carleton has been faithful and attentive: to its origins, to its students, and to the wider, ever-changing world in which we live. You have honored those first impulses of your Congregational founders, to blend a zeal for learning with a steady respect for the sacred, however the sacred is revealed. May that same commitment to fostering the intersection of learning with deeper purpose and meaning remain central to who Carleton

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<sup>3</sup> Warren Upham, editor, *Congregational Work of Minnesota 1832-1920*, (Congregational Conference of Minnesota, 1921)

College will be in the hundred years and more that stretch before you. May  
God bless you and grant you wisdom.