

Characteristics of Hope College as a Community of Faith

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In the spirit of inviting colleagues to a conversation about what it means for Hope College to be at its best as a community of faith, we propose the following framework of characteristics—equal parts descriptive and aspirational. We intend this as a way to foster discussion about Hope’s identity that is both specific (if not unique) to the College and stated in the affirmative rather than in the negative: (e.g., “neither Calvin nor Kalamazoo”). We suggest five features:

- First, the Hope community is **rooted** in the Reformed tradition and the common calling of the historic, ecumenical Christian faith. Some under-developed specifics follow from this, the most important of which might be the concept of *semper reformanda*, the commitment to the academic pursuit of knowledge, and the understanding that all of our work together at Hope is, ultimately, God’s work.
- Second, through the person and work of Jesus Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit, Hope is a community of people **invited** into relationship with God and others. We understand ourselves to be formed by our participation in these relationships. Hope’s lack of a formal faith statement or affirmation of faith should not detract from God’s call to live **intentionally** from and into our faith commitments. Doing so in such an invitational community suggests the need for hospitality, openness, and, arguably, each member’s responsibility to participate actively in our community of faith.
- Third, as members of the Hope community, we come to understand our common call as we explore and discuss our faith commitments together in the context of **vocation**. All of our work together is God’s work, but we also know our specific callings intersect this general calling in different ways. Depending on the particularities of who we are and what we do, we might variously understand our work as vocationally, implicitly, or explicitly rooted in faith. As a community, we learn from each other by exploring together such questions as: What are my strengths and how has God made me? What has God called me to do? Where does my “deep gladness meet the world’s deep needs”? What is the good work to which God has called me? In this way, our faith informs how and why we as faculty and staff work, teach, research, and serve.
- Fourth, Hope College is an **ecumenical** community intentionally gathered from a wide range of Christian traditions and denominations. What’s more important, we are robustly ecumenical. Our rootedness in faith invites us to speak more, not less, from within our own traditions *and* intentionally cultivate a “multilingual” community where conversations about faith lead to greater understanding of the traditions of others.
- Finally, the Hope community is strongly **relational**—we intentionally cultivate friendships and understand that we are called to live out our faith primarily in relation with one another, our shared work, our shared mission, all Creation, and the triune God. Furthermore, we value these relationships as ways we can best engage differences about the historic, ecumenical Christian faith and God’s call to us as individuals and as a community of faith.

Conversation Starters

Given this framework of characteristics, in faculty development programs like the Faith & Scholarship Discussion Series, the Continuum Scholars Program or, arguably, in conversations with one another, we might ask colleagues:

- What are the roots of your faith? What people, texts, ideas, practices, etc. from the Christian tradition provide the foundation of your faith commitments?
- How does working at Hope give you room to be intentional about your faith? What aspects of our mission and community seem inviting to you? Which ones not? Why?
- How do you see your work as a calling? as a vocation?
- What is your experience with ecumenical communities, dialogue, or relationships beyond Hope? What aspect(s) of your particular faith tradition(s) do (or could) you contribute to our community of faith?
- What professional, academic, and/or scholarly relationships have shaped your faith? How has (or might) your work with colleagues at Hope contributed to growth in your faith? to deepening and expanding your sense of vocation?

Or, put another way, one might propose that working at Hope College is an opportunity to:

- learn more about the roots of the historic Christian faith in general and your faith tradition(s) in particular;
- accept (and, indeed, make) invitations to engage intentionally with your faith in a professional context, which might have been (and may still be) novel to you;
- explore your professional identity in the context of vocation and calling;
- become more familiar with and conversant in varied traditions within the ecumenical continuum of the historic Christian faith; and
- create meaningful relationships with colleagues, students, and programs contextualized in part by a shared faith.

At a minimum, these characteristics—**rooted**, **intentional** and **invitational**, **vocational**, robustly **ecumenical**, and **relational**—can provide points of departure for conversations that go beyond vague or abrupt questions about Christian identity and/or compatibility with the mission of the College. In addition, we suggest these characteristics as a way to demystify Hope's identity as a community of faith for those outside the community and ourselves. That is, we might find our faith journeys—both individual and corporate—enriched by conversations around these characteristics, which will create points of contact and commonality rather than departure and disagreement. Indeed, who among us doesn't recognize the need for rooting our collective identity in *something*, being open to invitation and intentional engagement, exploring our shared vocation(s) in service to our educational mission, familiarizing ourselves with the varied traditions that make up our ecumenical community, and sustaining meaningful relationships with one another, our work, all Creation, and our God.

A Metaphor

As we worked on the above list of characteristics of Hope College as a community of faith, the Holy Spirit guided us to what we hope is a useful acronymic metaphor: RIVER.

Rooted,
Intentional & Invitational,
Vocational,
Ecumenical, and
Relational.

We suggest that understanding Hope's faith community *as a river* opens up a number of metaphorical possibilities that differ from the center/periphery diagrams, big tent and fencing images, or the conservative/progressive polarities that so often constrain our ability to imagine Hope College as a community of faith in which all are welcome and active participants. Here are just a few undeveloped but promising metaphorically riparian possibilities:

- Headwaters (springs, melting glaciers and snow, tributaries, etc.)
- Wide vs. Narrow
- Deep vs. Shallow
- Fast vs. Slow
- Rapids, Obstructions, Eddies
- Changes in Direction, Erosion, Oxbow Lakes
- Banks and Beds
- Silt, Pollution

There are certainly biblical allusions to and uses of rivers, and many aspects of the historic Christian faith have used the river as a metaphor. Plus: baptism. We should explore these sources together. That said, our hope is that *in addition to the content* of the acronym (Rooted, Intentional & Invitational, Vocational, Ecumenical, and Relational), the *concept* of the word itself (RIVER) might help us to move past confusion, conflict, and withdrawal.

Far too often, members of the Hope community see themselves as outsiders, particularly in terms of faith. However, if we conceptualize Hope College as a community in which we as individuals flow together, inescapably connected to one another and ultimately shaped by our shared institutional, social, and cultural environments, then by using the model of a river we can construe the individual self as an integral part of the community. Both the self and other individuals within the community are elements of one, inseparable whole; and we can see parts of our community as connected, making it difficult to comprehend ourselves either in isolation as an object set within a model/metaphor or to which a model/metaphor has been imposed.

In conclusion, we propose that seeing Hope's community of faith as a RIVER both frees us from individual concerns and the temptation to withdraw and calls us to a life together: Rooted, Intentional and Invitational, Vocational, robustly Ecumenical, and Relational.