

Sacred Heart University

From the Selected Works of Michael W. Higgins

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Michael W. Higgins, *Sacred Heart University*



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On September 23, as part of Sacred Heart University's commemoration of its 50th anniversary, Michael W. Higgins provided insight into the University's beginnings and its promising future. Higgins is SHU's vice president for Mission and Catholic Identity.

The year 1963 was a time of international tensions, major social and political turbulence, and the early years of the Second Vatican Council. Great changes were taking place around the world, inspiring Bishop Walter W. Curtis of Bridgeport to create a university in which laity would assume leadership.

Curtis' attendance at the first session of the Second Vatican Council and the discussions there about empowering the laity reinforced a previous idea on his part to create a lay-led Catholic university, Higgins told an audience of about 80 faculty and staff members. In the summer of 1962, Curtis appointed a committee to formulate plans for just such an institution, and that committee moved forward even as Curtis traveled to Rome for the Council meetings. The end result was Sacred Heart University, established in 1963 as a co-educational, primarily liberal arts university led by laity.

SHU's early success can be attributed in part to the SHU Triumvirate—William H. Conley, the University's first president; Maurice O'Sullivan, its vice-president/dean and William E. Ready, its librarian. Each individual brought expertise and passion to aid in the growth of the institution.

"Curtis deliberately removed himself from a hands-on approach and left the Board and university leadership team to determine its objectives, pattern of academic offerings, size, tuition rate and anticipated clientele. But from the outset, a clear philosophical determination needed to be made, and the Board did not waffle or prevaricate in making it," Higgins said.

Higgins also touched on the last 50 years since SHU's founding and theorized about the next 50. He noted, despite the radical decline in the number of teaching priests, brothers and sisters and

the competition for students and faculty in an increasingly multi-faith society, that surprisingly, the demands for a Catholic presence in higher education has not diminished.

“And Sacred Heart precisely meets this need,” he said. “It is what Sacred Heart has done in its past, continues to do and must do. It must be fresh, adaptive, creative and engaged in this thinking. Within lay-founded universities in particular, none have been as energetic and none have been as visionary as Sacred Heart.”

The Sacred Heart community sees its mission as staying connected with the gospel values of hospitality, honesty and humility. The University has always had an openness to the contemporary world and a welcome attitude to the stranger, Higgins noted. “It has a pronounced nonjudgmental approach to diverse ways of thinking and of being. Sacred Heart University is a sanctuary, wherein ideas are pursued, research is undertaken, teaching is valued, mentoring is esteemed and relationships are fostered.”

Higgins concluded by saying Sacred Heart has a strong future and will continue to undergo immense transformation in every aspect. “Change is our daily reality, and universities must always resist being afraid of change. The university is an institution driven by ideas, and without these ideas, we cannot envision a new future nor ensure our daily relevance,” he said.

He concluded by wishing Sacred Heart a happy birthday and reiterating that at the heart of our Catholic institution, we must always continue to be about the person and the pastoral.