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THE VIRUS AND THE TORNADO

*An Interview with
President Whitaker*

Are pandemics something colleges and their presidents ordinarily prepare for?

Perhaps not pandemics on this scale, no. But we must prepare for crises of all sorts and have habits that are flexible enough to lead in such times. COVID is not the first epidemic to affect colleges. The 1918 flu pandemic affected King just as King moved to the current campus. The 1968 Hong Kong Flu likewise affected college-aged young people. And just a few years ago H1N1 hit college students, my daughter included. We certainly could not prepare for COVID specifically, as so little was known about it then. But the pandemic has reminded us all how important it is to prepare for crises generally.

When did it become clear that COVID-19 was going to disrupt or change things at King?

We began planning for it well before we knew how the virus would affect us. I went to a gathering of presidents in late February 2020 and was surprised that of those schools represented, only a few—including King—had really begun serious discussions about the virus. And we did begin early discussing how we would continue our educational mission if we had to send students home. That early and thorough planning was critical to what was a remarkably smooth transition to online. And no sooner had we sent students home in March we were planning for how to bring them back in the fall successfully. Now we are planning not only for spring semester, but also for what the fall of 2021 might look like.

Why did a shift that was deeply difficult for some universities go so well at King?

Not only did we have weeks to plan for it, we were uniquely well prepared because King also has a

longstanding online program and many of our traditional faculty were already comfortable teaching in an online environment. I was teaching Constitutional Law in the spring, and my class transitioned very smoothly. We also did not incur many of the expenses for technology that schools unfamiliar with doing online did.

How did the students respond to this very abrupt change in how they thought their college days would progress?

I think our students handled it superbly. Of course, there was some disappointment, as the hallmark of a King education is the close relationships students form with their faculty, and that is attenuated somewhat in a virtual environment. And there was also the disappointment for our seniors, as we were not able to have spring commencement at the usual time—although we kept our promise to have an Oval ceremony for them, which we did in August. Even though our surveys showed great satisfaction with how we shifted everyone to online, we still knew that the students very much wanted to return to campus this fall, and we committed to making that happen—and did just that.

What changed for the students who returned this fall?

There were many changes. We were keenly aware of the tension between keeping the authentic King experience while also ensuring everyone's health and safety. We studied every classroom and the classes held in each so we could ensure proper social distancing. We changed how the dining hall was arranged and how meals were served. We had to make changes to sports practices. We had to protect our most vulnerable community members and encouraged some to work remotely. We required masks on campus. We shifted in-person chapel to weekly prayer services virtually. And through it all, we had to respond to expectations and requirements of governmental authorities and the NCAA. There really has been no aspect of life at King that has not been profoundly affected.

What has been the biggest day-to-day challenge on the Bristol campus?

Oddly enough, it has not been the virus itself. More than 11 percent of our traditional students have tested positive for the virus since last spring, and none have had any serious complications. For many, it has been an asymptomatic illness or with only very mild symptoms. We isolate for 10 days those who contract the virus, and we set aside space to do that this past summer. But the real challenge has been the quarantine of close contacts—an average of five per COVID case. They have to be housed 14 days in individual quarantine rooms,

and at times we have come close to capacity. Fortunately, to date fewer than 3 percent of those quarantined have ended up contracting the virus.

Has King, then, escaped the sadness that has come to so many from this disease?

We have been fortunate so far on campus not yet to have had any serious cases—ones requiring hospitalization — among students, faculty, staff, or trustees. But some in the King community have had family members with serious cases and even deaths that can be attributed to COVID-19. Despite the general good health we see here, that sadness and anxiety are present, certainly. We are fortunate to have a very strong counseling center to assist students with the many sorts of stressors that the pandemic prompts.

Where and how have people contracted the virus?

We cannot know for certain, but as at other colleges, most of those infected appear to contract the virus from off-campus interactions or social gatherings. So far we have no evidence that suggests any cases have been contracted in classrooms—which may sound surprising given the density and long periods of time students and faculty are there. I think this strongly suggests that masks and social distancing are effective. Today the virus situation at King is much better than what is happening in the general population. People are safer on campus than off.

What have the financial implications been for King?

We benefited from CARES Act funding that provided aid for students and room and board refunds for residential students. We did have equipment costs, but some of those were funded. We had some savings in travel and other regular expenditures. But the real negative financial effect was always going to be in the fall enrollment, and that proved to be the case. We held steady in our traditional numbers, but economic uncertainty caused a decrease in adult and graduate learners and online learners in general. That was a significant hit to our budgeted revenue that we hope will be temporary and has made gifts all the more important this year. I hope those reading this will see fit to give generously to help King overcome these challenges.

How does being an intentionally Christian community affect how King addresses the pandemic?

Well, first, we have no hesitation in praying. I wrote an essay in March for an online publication about the English Litany's "deprecations"—specifically the prayer to be spared from plague. I noted that the simple, but

bold, prayer from the Litany, "Good Lord, Deliver Us," encompasses God's goodness, sovereignty, power, and love for us. Being able to pray that simple prayer can bring peace and confidence for the future—even if full understanding is elusive. I also think King's Christian ethos encourages all of us to make sacrifices and show regard for others as we take precautions. And because of King's Christian character, we have a closeness to each other that even social distancing cannot diminish.

What prepared you for this chapter in King's life?

It certainly did not hurt that I spent two-and-a-half decades in the Navy, where planning for things that might or might not ever happen is part of everyone's job. I also went through a couple of significant crises at my previous college—one involving the health of a key person and another involving a devastating storm. I think the more one has experience with crises, the calmer and more confident one can be, especially when there is in place a top-notch executive team, as is the case at King. But it was equally important that I had four years to get to know King and its people because how we responded had to reflect their values, desires, fears, and hopes.

When the pandemic is history, what lessons from this year will remain?

It's a bit early to know all of the lessons, but here are a few.

First, this forced us to remember what the core is of what we do, which is teaching students. Everything else last spring—sports, extracurricular activities, dining together, convocations—all fell to the wayside, but teaching continued. We always need to remember that teaching students is the single most important thing we are called to do.

Second, we learned that counter to many of the early stories about the death of traditional higher education because of the pandemic, those students who want a traditional education really want it, and do not see all-online as meeting their needs. That is reflected also in the steady numbers we have this fall for traditional students, and it is certainly what we heard from our students. And this is despite our doing online instruction far better than most schools.

Finally, as almost nothing else could have done, the pandemic has underscored why King and the experience here is very different from other schools. The affection our students have for King is deep, as is their sense that this is their home, for four years and always. We must always remember that, respond to it, and build on that foundation—a foundation our alumni certainly understand completely.