

HEAD LINES

A message from Chip Denton, Head of School



“Lord God, almighty and everlasting Father, you have brought us in safety to this new day...”

Book of Common Prayer

May 14, 2021

Dear Trinity Community,

I wonder if you remember where you were a year ago, in May 2020.



I was at a Trinity Board meeting: May 14, 2020. It was a VUCA time, as they say in the military: volatile, uncertain, chaotic, and ambiguous. Starting on March 13, 2020, and on through the spring, the Trinity Board met on Zoom almost weekly for updates on our pivot to remote learning and to discuss any number of important and challenging decisions facing the school in the fog of what was March, April, and May of last year.

In May 2020, we wondered whether our enrollment for the 2020–2021 school year might drop precipitously. What would the impact be on giving to the school? Would we be able to retain all of our faculty and staff? Would we return for in-person learning, stay remote, or invent some hybrid approach? And what should we do with this new building that was, as they say, shovel ready? We had been scheduled to break ground on the Arts and Engineering Building on April 1, 2020, but at the beginning of the pandemic we hit the pause button.

In its two meetings in May and June of 2020, Trinity’s Board made incremental decisions that led us to a full commitment to proceed with the construction of this new building. It was an act of faith—not presumptuous, but not like falling off a log, either. There were still enormous uncertainties in front of us. But I thank God that he led the Board to make this commitment. The summer of 2020 turned out to be an opportune time for construction. We secured most favorable financing, locked in on building costs before they skyrocketed, and put ourselves in a position to complete construction in time for the 2021–2022 school year. And the fundraising for this project has moved forward through the generosity of the Trinity community—we have less than \$200,000 to go on our Trinity Forward goal.

It would be a shame not to pause this May and recognize that we are coming to the end of a year that was at once the hardest we have ever faced as a school and also a year of God’s blessing and protection as we have never seen before. When we opened school in the fall, I asked the Nerve Center how long they thought we’d stay in school before we had to go remote again. Most of us (not all—Dr. Hall, aka Puddleglum, was the unlikely optimist among us) were hoping to get three weeks in before we went back to last spring’s regimen. That Trinity School has been opening car doors for nine months of the year and welcoming students to campus without outbreaks or transmissions is a cause to celebrate. That we have advanced the education of these students in powerful and life-changing ways during a pandemic is an unparalleled blessing. I realized this anew this week when Ellen VanTongeren led faculty devotions with the prayer I have quoted at the top of this letter.

I want to be careful here. I recount all this with joy but with a caution that comes from our school motto, “Not to us, Lord, not to us, but to your name give glory.” Our almighty and everlasting Father has brought us in safety to this new day. It was not our smarts or our faith that brought us here.

I think of Shakespeare’s Henry, sitting among his nobles in the carnage after the battle of Agincourt, hearing the reports of the French and English dead. It was an astounding victory for Henry’s army, and there were some among his leaders who were ready to gloat. Not Henry:

Come, go we in procession to the village.
And be it death proclaimed through our host
To boast of this or take the praise from God
Which is his only.

Fluellen asks, “Is it not lawful, an’ please your majesty, to tell how many is killed?” Henry’s retort rings in my ears and heart:

Yes, captain; but with this acknowledgement,
That God fought for us.

And then they sang the “Non Nobis.”

The year before Trinity started I had first seen, on PBS, Kenneth Branagh’s *Henry V*. It made an impact on me in ways I continue to discover across the years. When it came time to choose a song and a motto for the new school that was born in Durham and Chapel Hill in 1995, we chose Patrick Doyle’s “Non Nobis,” which plays over the scene that follows Henry’s “God fought for us.”

I have seen God fight for us many times in the 26 years of our school, but never quite like this year, when we have been able to stay afloat and even thrive through a challenge that none of us saw coming. It is not over yet, but we have lived to tell about it. This story shall a good man tell his son.

This year at graduation, when we hear a senior sing the “Non Nobis,” I’ll hear in a new and powerful way what it means to do battle, to lose some and win some, and to live to sing again,

Not to us, Lord,
Not to us,
But to your name give glory.

Non Nobis,



Chip Denton
Head of School