



ON MISSION

Revisiting Portsmouth Abbey School's Guiding Document

by Mary Beth Klee, Ph.D.

In September 2019 the Board of Regents embarked on a task that we take seriously and do infrequently: revision of the School's mission statement. We embarked with caution. Because the mission statement is, after all, the School's guiding document – a well formulated statement of its identity, aspirations, and goals. All Board policy decisions, all strategic planning, all program and hiring decisions, and ultimately all teaching decisions should be made against the benchmark of mission. Mission statements are, therefore, a bit like constitutions, and to co-opt the wisdom of Thomas Jefferson, “prudence, indeed, will dictate that mission statements long established should not be changed for light and transient causes.”

Ours had served us well for nearly a generation. A great deal of thought had gone into its 2003 formulation by the School's first-ever Board of Regents. Every year Regents had in some way at various decision-making junctures (fiscal, strategic plan, current crisis) revisited the mission statement and “found it good.” But a generation in the life of independent schools is a long time, and each year has brought new challenges. Both principles of best practice and the Board's desire to position the School fruitfully for the future prompted a re-assessment.

The Regents, who are custodians of mission, sought to preserve the historic pillars of “knowledge and grace.” That was non-negotiable, but we wanted three substantive enhancements in the new mission statement: a more direct avowal of our Catholic and Benedictine identity, grounded in the truth of Jesus Christ; a warmer tone; and a clearer articulation of the sort of community we seek to be. In format, we sought greater concision. The former mission statement was two-hundred-ninety-six words long. Could we sum it up in less than fifty words? Could we then elaborate in a “vision statement”?

The whole process was slow, deliberative, involved many iterations, and many people's insights. The reformulation benefited from numerous developments at Portsmouth Abbey School itself during the past twenty years: strong, mission-driven leadership by both Head and Board, the School's fortified alliance with St. Louis Abbey, an increased number of monks at the School, as well as the creation of our own think

tank, the Portsmouth Institute for Faith and Culture. Deeper reflection on the essence of Benedictine education were the fruit of all of these.

Our mission review subcommittee consisted of fellow Regents Abbot Gregory Mohrman of St. Louis Abbey, our Prior-Administrator Fr. Michael Brunner, former Headmaster Dan McDonough, Abbey Regents Dr. and Deacon Tim Flanigan '75, Cara Hume '99, Bill Keogh '78, and Mary Beth Klee P '04, as well as our Board Chair Chris Behnke '81. We were blessed to corral insights from key administrators Meghan Fonts, Nick Micheletti '04, Matt Walter and Paula Walter as well as Director of the Portsmouth Institute Chris Fisher.

In December 2020, after sixteen months of deliberation (fifteen versions and four presentations to the full Board for feedback), the Board of Regents approved our new formulation. The forty-six-word mission statement is this:

Portsmouth Abbey School helps young men and women grow in knowledge and grace. As a Benedictine boarding and day school, we embrace the Catholic faith while nurturing reverence for God and the human person, love of learning, and commitment to community life.

A three-paragraph “Vision Statement” follows, fleshing out those key tenets as illuminated by Benedictine monastic and educational tradition. What did we mean by reverence for God and the human person? Love of learning? Commitment to community life?

On the surface the new mission statement bears striking similarity to the old. But out of the gate, the novelty of the formulation is the word “embrace.” *As a Benedictine boarding and day school, we embrace the Catholic faith...* Portsmouth Abbey School does not simply educate in an historic and abstract Benedictine Catholic tradition. We embrace the Catholic faith, grounded in the truth of Jesus Christ, as the path to human flourishing. *This* is our guide moving into the twenty-first century. We stand ready because of that faith to be a sign of contradiction to the times.

How so? We spell it out in the “vision statement.” To a divided and contentious world, we answer that “Catholic means

universal, and we welcome students from all backgrounds, as Jesus was welcoming to all people.” To a nihilistic world that frequently treats human beings as objects or reduces personal identity to race, ethnicity, or sexual orientation, we affirm the “inherent human dignity and infinite worth” of each our students. To an acquisitive world that exalts material gain or personal pleasure, we respond that “God is at the center of the human search for meaning” and our task is to help students “in their search for God as the foundation of their lives.” Indeed, we exist in pursuit of grace, and wish for our students “the regenerative power of Christ that lifts hearts and transforms lives.”

Portsmouth Abbey School is first and foremost an academic institution, and for us “love of learning,” the School’s second objective, is not simply a hackneyed educational mantra, but the historic heart of Benedictine work. It was Benedictine monasteries that preserved civilization and classical learning from Viking raiders and “barbaric invasions.” It was medieval Benedictine monks in their *scriptoria*, who painstakingly transcribed, illuminated, and preserved manuscripts from antiquity. On craggy mountainsides and windswept islands, monks prayed, worked, and amassed libraries that would nurture the mind and heart of Europe for centuries to come. Monasteries became “schools of the Lord’s service.” That phrase, from the Rule of St. Benedict, described the monasteries themselves, but also a new reality. Benedictine monasteries formed schools to educate the young, and Portsmouth Abbey School stands in a long line of heirs to that tradition.

Portsmouth Abbey School grounds our educational endeavors in the historic Benedictine ethos, which in the words of Jean Leclercq inspires a “love of learning and the desire for God.” The vision statement explains: “Love of learning is grounded in wonder, undertaken in humility, and fueled by the hunger for truth.”

In today’s world, the search for truth (“*veritas*” is, after all, the School’s motto) has itself become counter-cultural. *Perhaps you have your truth and I have mine.* Portsmouth Abbey School affirms “*veritas*” over “*visum*” or “*quod spectat*” *truth over point-of-view, the truth over my truth.* To that end, we pursue a close reading of classic texts, promote keen observation of the physical world, celebrate beauty in the fine arts (visual, music, theater), and recognize that mind and body are best trained together, as a single body-soul project. We aspire to human excellence and commit to being guided in our academic program by “the things that matter: truth, goodness, and beauty.”

What characterizes the community in which we pursue these goals? The third section of the vision statement explains that it is the shared life of study, prayer, and play undertaken in a context of “friendship and joy.” Is that a shift for Portsmouth Abbey School? Maybe a small one. Fifty or sixty years ago, the ethos at Portsmouth Abbey School may have been described as one of “rigor and discipline” or “structure and order.” Friendships were born and joy was experienced to be sure, but perhaps at a time when authority and a firm hand trumped “see how they love one another other.”

Today’s Portsmouth Abbey School community is a “see how they love one another” community. “Called to live in mutual service to each other, we seek the growth of our members as individuals, while advancing the common good.” We encourage our entire Abbey family—students, faculty, staff, monks, parents, and alumni—to live out that commitment. We are proud that students of many colors and creeds from America and from around the world call Portsmouth Abbey home. And as a family does, we seek to create a sense of belonging for all. We hope our students will grow as individuals and learn that their greatest joy is in service to others. And we strive, as the vision statement concludes, to “nurture the talents of each of our students for energetic leadership” both in service to our own community and the world they will inherit. Inspired by the School’s mascot, we are eager to see each of our students take flight. Go Ravens!



Mary Beth Klee, Ph.D. has served several terms on the Portsmouth Abbey Board of Regents for a total of 14 years. She chaired the Board's first mission review in 2002-2003, and this revisit in 2019-2020.