Carolyn Akua L. McCrary*

SANKOFA AND *HARAMBEE* ITC: REMEMBERING, QUESTIONING, AND CELEBRATING OUR WALK TOGETHER

From the elders in the community, I humbly request permission to speak on this auspicious occasion of the Fall Convocation* of Interdenominational Theological Center.

My sisters and brothers, I greet you in the name of an almighty, infinitely loving, and gracious God, to whom praise and honor are due, especially in our service to the world and our stewardship of God's creation. To faculty, staff, and loving community in this awesome teaching and learning seedbed called ITC, I greet you; I salute your work in this vineyard. Especially, I greet our new president, Dr. Michael A. Battle, actually Lt. Colonel Rev. Dr. Battle. We are proud that you have chosen to be here with us; your name, as well as your reputation, tell us that in times like these, we have chosen the right person. At such a time as this. . .

I am humbled, anxious, and nervous in the preparation and delivery of the address for this special occasion. One thing gives me comfort: I, nor we, ever stand alone in these hallowed halls nor in these particularly sacred spots. Yes, we are surrounded by tremendous hosts of witnesses who whisper to us in latent and seemingly unknown tongues, during the midnight hours, "Remember to remember us. . ." Or, sometimes they drum with the pulsing of our blood, "Remember to remember us. . . ."

Perhaps our cue is taken from the *Adinkra* symbols of Ghana representing *Sankofa.* There are several symbols for this phenome-

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*Carolyn Akua L. McCrary is associate professor, Pastoral Care and Counseling, Interdenominational Theological Center, Atlanta, Georgia.

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non of positive reversion: the heart-shaped symbol with the "curly-cue" at the bottom, the plain surface with the many little star-like etchings. But the one that intrigues us the most is the bird flying forward, but looking backward, flying into the future but retrieving from the past the essentials, the lessons—yes—the potential for life from the past. For she, non-chauvinistically we may add, is literally plucking an egg—with her mouth—from her tail feathers—symbolizing the grasping of potential life from the past. *Sankofa* represents the retrieval from the past that which is pregnant with life for the present and future.

In the spirit of *Sankofa* we remember the ancestors this morning, as we did ten years ago in West Africa. Composed of a wonderful mélange of students, faculty, community leaders, and pastors from across the United States, with the leadership of Ndugu T'Ofori-Atta, Leander Swann, and Akua Rita Dixon, ITC poured libation on the deck of the "slave castle" at Cape Coast, Ghana. This followed a night of weeping and wailing as I had never known in that dirt dungeon room that preceded "the door of no return." We remembered as we poured libation:

For all those with the names *Adwona* and *Kwadwo*,
(women and men born on Monday)
For all those with the names *Abenaa* and *Kwabena*
(women and men born on Tuesday)
For all those with the names *Akua* and *Kwaku*
(women and men born on Wednesday)
For all those with the names *Yaa* and *Yaw*
(women and men born on Thursday)
For all those with the names *Afua* and *Kofi*
(women and men born on Friday)
For all those with the names *Amma* and *Kwame*
(women and men born on Saturday)

For all those with the names *Akosua* and *Kwasi*
(women and men born on Sunday)[1]

For all the families who searched for, grieved for, and suffered
the loss of family members, friends, and loved ones
For all those who were colonized on the African continent
For all those who died in the slave castles and the Middle
Passage [the *Maafa*]
For all those who are the descendants of our enslaved
Mothers and Fathers.

As we remembered—the *Maafa*—our spirits and our bodies also declared, as some say, "The devil and all the devil's agents are a lie" for WE HAD COME BACK, through that wretched door of no return.

Stony the road we trod,
Bitter the chastening rod,
Felt in the days when hope unborn had died
Yet with a steady beat
Have not our weary feet
Come to the place for which our Fathers [parents] sighed
We have come
Over a way that with tears have been watered
We have come
Treading our path
Through the blood of the slaughtered.[2]

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[1]Memorial Worship for our Ancestors, St. George Castle at Elmina, Cape Coast Castles, Ghana, West Africa, July 20, 1993. The writer and the editors are indebted to the Religious Heritage of the African World (located on the ITC campus) for this information.

[2]This is the second stanza of "Lift Every Voice and Sing." See *This Far by Faith: An African American Resource for Worship* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress Press, 1999), no. 296 for the complete text.

And closer to home, here at ITC, we remember the living dead; those who have died but whom we remember; the community remembers them still. We touch their spirit; we yet hear their voices, see them striding, remember their hugs, their stories, their laughter. . . .

Betty Butler
Cardez Chapman
Isaac Rufus Clark
Charles B. Copher
James H. Costen Sr.
Edward R. Davie
Willie Davis
Eugene Farlough
James Foggie
Bishop Cornelius Henderson
Barbara C. Holton
Jonathan Jackson
Hattie Johnson
Major Jones
Monroe Knowles
Clinton Marsh
Harold E. Moore Sr.
Moses Pittman
Thomas J. Pugh
Rosalyn Pruitt
Harry V. Richardson
Selma T. Richardson
Robert Robinson
Charles Sargent
Warren T. Smith
Farrel H. Thomas
Murphy Thomas
Carolyn Adrienne Warren

As we continue to remember Charles Buchanan Copher, who passed August 15, 2003, let us listen to the words of ITC's first president, Harry V. Richardson, writing in *Walk Together, Children*.

> I was elected to Gammon in June of 1948, but I had to stay at Tuskegee until September. I learned of Dr. Copher through my predecessor, Dr. John W. Haywood. Dr. Copher at that time had just graduated from Boston University with a

Ph.D. in Old Testament. Dr. Haywood had been in correspondence with him about coming to Gammon. I immediately pursued the conversations, because a Black person with that training in that field at that time was rare. Dr. Copher was interested, but he would not give me a final answer for he had other offers, and besides, the condition of Gammon at that time was not very inviting.

I remember how in July of 1948 he drove down from Atlanta to Tuskegee to look me over to see if I was the kind of person he wanted to work with. I must have seemed acceptable, for he agreed to come, and he worked beside me at Gammon and ITC for twenty years until my retirement in 1968, and he stayed on at ITC for ten more years, in all thirty years. Dr. Copher's scholarship, his boundless energy, his ebullient joyous personality, and his deep commitment to the Seminaries and their mission at once made him a leading person on each campus. He started as Professor of Old Testament, then became Dean of Instruction, and retired as Vice President for Academic Affairs. His insistence upon highest standards by both students and faculty did much to keep the academic life of the Center on the highest levels.[3]

We stand on the shoulders of those who came before us, and we thank God for the love, the sacrifice, and the work of these and other elders now among the living dead who shared in the birth, the pains, the growth, and the glory of this rare institution.

ITC was born in the religious, social, and historical whirlwind of the 1950s and the 1960s. Manning Marable, in *The Great Wells*

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[3]Harry V. Richardson, *Walk Together, Children: The Story of the Birth and Growth of the Interdenominational Theological Center* (Atlanta: The ITC Press, 1981), 83-84.

of Democracy, writes about "liberal integration" and the general belief by Black people that "the total desegregation of white institutions was identical with the pursuit of racial progress and individual upward mobility."[4] Interestingly enough, the conception and birthing of ITC coincided with this belief during that period and flew in the face of what Maralde calls another curiosity: the relative lack of black institutionalization and capacity-building, even during the period of Black Power. As examples he states:

> Relatively few black publishing houses, national magazines, journals and artistic and cultural nonprofit groups that were established in the 1960s made it to the 1990s. When they did in rare cases, they usually were successful because they departed from their original cultural and political vision to attract advertising dollars, corporate, and/or philanthropic support. The rising black bourgeoisie, for the most part, did not adequately support or raise money for the construction of new black cultural institutions.[5]

This was and is not the case with ITC.

On March 3, 1958, the official Charter for one of the most unique and outstanding theological ventures in the United States, was granted. After twelve years of visioning and clarification, four courageous and foresighted African-American religious institutions—Gammon, Turner, Phillips and Morehouse—did the seemingly impossible: put their differences aside, pooled their collective resources, honored their illustrious histories, and decided to synergistically become greater than the whole. ITC was born and according to Harry Richardson,

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[4]Manning Marable, *The Great Wells of Democracy: The Meaning of Race in American Life* (New York: Basic Books, 2002), 170.

[5]Ibid., 171.

Classes began in the new school on September 15, 1959 on the campus of Gammon Seminary in South Atlanta. . .with ninety-seven students, twenty-two board members, and twenty-one faculty persons—intentionally interracial, international and interdenominational. Rev. M. J. Wynn was Director of Gammon Theological Seminary; Rev. Levi M. Terrell was Director of Morehouse School of Religion; Rev. Milner L. Darnell, Director of the Phillips School of Theology and Dr. George A. Sewell, was Director of Turner Theological Seminary.

The first and most encouraging development came on May 10, 1958. The General Education Board on that date appropriated $500,000 for endowment for the new Center. This gave us all new hope, for if one Foundation were responding so generously, we felt that surely the other would, too.

We were not mistaken. On June 6, 1958, The Sealantic Fund granted ITC $1,750,000. Of this amount $1,500,000 was to be used in construction of the plant, and $250,000 was for endowment. The grants from both Foundations totaled 2,250,000 which up to then was one of the largest grants ever made to Black education, and by far the largest ever made to Black theological education. The only condition attached to the grants was that we should raise $250,000 to go with the GEB grant for endowment. When this amount should be raised the Center would have $1,500,000 for construction and $1,000,000 in endowment. They gave us five years in which to raise the $250,000. We raised it in less than one.[6]

The first ITC Convocation, held May 2-3, 1961,[7] included the inauguration of the president and the installation of the directors

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[6]Richardson, *Walk Together, Children*, 54-71.

[7]William V. Rossa, ed., "A Convocation on Theological Education: A Service of Dedication: The Inauguration of Harry V. Richardson," *The Center* 3, nos. 1 and 2 (Fall-Winter, 1961-1962): [i].

(as the deans were then called), was composed of representatives from many of the leading seminaries and colleges in the nation. A three-day event, it was "in every sense. . . a magnificent occasion"[8] with great local and national attention. ITC even received a telegram from President John F. Kennedy "expressing his appreciation of the school, and his prayers and good wishes for the school's future."[9] Dean Liston Pope of the Yale Divinity School gave the inaugural address, "The Nature and Purpose of a Theological School," in which he stated:

> The Interdenominational Theological Center is heir, in these times of tension and crisis, of brave and humble men and women who knew not what they were building but had a profound sense that they were building under Him without whom nothing stands. No more valuable legacy could seal your own efforts as you move into an unknown future, devoted, as were they, to the reconciliation and furtherance of sound learning and true piety. . . . And so one could wish for your school a future in which the name and example and power of Christ are regnant—a future in which denominational jealousies, regional prejudices, and civic provincialisms have no important place. This school has the promise of being one of the foremost theological seminaries. As the head of a great theological school steeped in the traditions and fortified by the wealth of centuries, I could envy the promise displayed by this new venture. The promise must be fulfilled. As a school that stands at the juncture of history and destiny, that promise is yours to claim or cast away.[10]

Harry Richardson responded to the charge given by the chair

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[8]Richardson, *Walk Together, Children*, 77.
[9]Ibid., 79-80.
[10]Liston Pope, "The Nature and Purpose of a Theological School," *The Center*, 21-22.

of ITC's Board, Ernest Cadman Colwell. In his inaugural address, "The Times, the Task, the Pledge," the president replied in his own inimitable way:

> It is in this spirit that we accept this school and our participation in it, as teachers, as students, as workers of every kind. We are mindful that everything here is a gift: these buildings, these grounds, the books, the funds, everything, given in the holy hope that the troubles of the day shall not overwhelm us, that the leadership we need shall be found and trained, that here we shall produce men and women in whom the word of life can become flesh and move among us and lead us into the life eternal, eternity comprehended now.[11]

In 1970, under the leadership of Oswald P. Bronson, two more denominations joined the Center: Charles H. Mason (Church of God in Christ) and Johnson C. Smith (Presbyterian).

ITC has been in full stride—with dips and peeks—through Presidents Dr. Harry V. Richardson, Dr. Oswald P. Bronson, Dr. Grant Shockley, Dr. J. Deotis Roberts, Dr. James H. Costen, Dr. Robert A. Franklin, Dr. "Dean" Oliver J. Haney, and now you, Dr. Michael A. Battle. Sir, you have an awesome task before you, but we are ready to help. We have kept the promise. We have not let the troubles, trials, tribulations, the tasks of reaccreditation, curriculum reviews, self studies, nor the worries of the world overwhelm us.

In consideration of everything, one could say that we have been in the midst of crisis. But as Ndugu T'Offori-Atta and Thomas J. Pugh taught us: we need not be overwhelmed nor over anxious. The good news and the positive challenge is that *crisis is actually a dangerous opportunity.*

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[11]Ibid., 120.

Speaking of opportunities, you see, thirty years ago, I sat where you sit. Well, I didn't really sit here because this was not the chapel then; this was the library. The real chapel was in the room we now call the auditorium. So in that chapel—figuratively—I sat where you sit, (especially you first-year students) feeling expectant and scared about the opportunity to study here at ITC. I thought that I didn't know anything about theology—especially when I opened my first book and saw that big word "eschatology" for the first time, I said "I'm going to flunk out in this place. What am I doing here"?

Also, thirty years ago, three months and three days ago you all, I was already in a time of life crisis. Let me try to say it quickly. In my personal life, I was running, running, running, partially because I was suffering from some bad theology, and partially because (unbeknowning to me) my spirit was suffering from idolatrous relationships: my marriage that didn't work out—crashed and burned—and my educational motivations and pursuits had also gone up in flames. Those were two of my main gods—you see—marriage and education. So I tried to run from myself and my pain all the way down to the beaches in Mexico—Cipolite in particular. Now, I can't tell it all, but let's just say a group of us hippies from around the world were sitting on the shore one day when, one by one, they decided they would go jump into the high crashing waves. I said, "I ain't gonna do that." Then, after further communications, commiserating, and a type of communion, I went toward the ocean: I waded into the foam, and I sprang over a large wave. I continued to jump and leap and to splice the waves with my body. I was just jumping and leaping over the waves, like a fish surging against the tide. At that time, I didn't even know why I was jumping. I'm just all in and over the waves until, all of a sudden, an undertow pulled me down and turned me over and over. Finally, my head popped up from the churning waters. I tried to propel my body above the agitated waters, but I could no longer jump. I couldn't jump

because I couldn't find bottom! My feet no longer touched the ocean floor! There was no bottom! Apparently, I was much further out than I thought. I was terrified! Then I thought, "Oh well, I've been thinking about dying anyway, so this may be a good way to go out. This might be the best way and the best day to die. They'll say she was in an accident on the beach in Mexico, and everybody will feel sorry for me. They'll miss me then. I think I'll just stop trying to live and go on out."

Then, feeling as if I were going down for the last time and still debating about living, I beheld a curious sight. From that particular point in the ocean, peering through a hole in a rocky mountainous ridge that seemed to tumble into the water, I could see, on the top of a far mountain peak, a large cross. I stopped drowning to say, "Who in the world put that 'big ole' cross up there? How did they get it up there? Maybe I ought to go over there and see this cross and find out how it got up there." But lo and behold, I couldn't go anywhere. I couldn't even stop drowning. What could I do? Then, in the midst of this drowning situation, something came to me and said, "Carolyn, 'chill out,' get on your back and float." Instead, I hollered to my friends on shore, "Help me, help me, help me! Ayudame!" They could not hear me. I could barely see them. None of that worked. So I turned on my back and somehow by the grace of God, I floated, little bit by little bit, using my weary arms and hands as oars, back to the shore.

Now, if I were preaching, you know I would say,

I was sinking deep in sin,
far from the peaceful shore,
very deeply stained within,
sinking to rise no more;
but the [creator] of the sea,
heard my despairing cry,

from the waters lifted me,
now safe am I.
Love lifted me.
Love [surely] lifted me.
Love lifted me.
When nothing else could help,
Love lifted me.[12]

But you know what else lifted me, ITC? The questions, SIGNIFICANT QUESTIONS IN THE MIDST OF CRISIS, lifted me.

I really want to emphasize this before I take my seat this morning. The questions. Don't fear questions. Questions are a good thing. One day I'm going to preach that sermon, "It's All Right to Question God." In fact, who told you that you cannot question God? That you cannot fuss with God or even challenge God? God and I talk all the time, and more. Sometimes in my private spaces, I find myself fussing and "cussing" with God; God just listens with bated breath. Well, I think so anyway.

And, just as important, ITC, are the questions that we ask ourselves: is the spirit of the Lord still upon us? What is the Good News? Who are the poor? What does it mean, if anything, for a graduate school of theology to help in proclaiming release to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind, and freedom for the oppressed? I know this place helped to liberate—theologically—one oppressed little colored girl from Macon, Georgia, who had "considered suicide when her rainbow was enough."[13] In particular, I had a theology that I didn't even know I had. I came to ITC and learned that

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[12]The text is stanza 1, "Love Lifted Me." See *Lift Every Voice and Sing II: An African American Hymnal* (New York: The Church Hymnal Corporation, 1993), no. 198 for the remaining stanzas.

[13]Reference is to Ntozake Shange, *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide When the Rainbow Is Enuf: A Corepoem* (New York: Bantam Books, 1977).

I had this Deuteronomistic theology (or as some call some it, a theology of retribution)—"righteous living brings rewards; unrighteous living brings damnation and punishment." I thought God had blessed my young life because of all the good and righteous things that I had done. Likewise, I believed that I deserved only damnation and punishment when I made unwise choices. Wrong! I just didn't know into what a tiny box I had placed God. So, I have spent the last thirty years here, gleefully exploring the sweetness of God's grace. Hallelujah! But alas, you all, it's not all about me. Sometimes I wish it were, but it's not all about me.

More questions for us: what impact are our trained leaders having on the 47,000 captives in the state of Georgia alone, the 100,000 on probation and parole? How much care are we providing the 3,078 women incarcerated in the state of Georgia?[14] Consider, for instance, Metro State Prison, where many of our students have been in incarnational ministry for years (some who go back to volunteer even after formal classes have ended). Out of the 900 women incarcerated there, are we aware that 57 percent are on the mental health case load? That 80 percent are victims of physical, sexual, and/or emotional abuse at some point in their lives? That 80 percent have substance abuse issues—alcohol and other drugs?[15]

And how does our teaching and our learning impact the estimated 42,000,000 adults and children worldwide who are living with AIDS? The 980,000 in North America? And what care are we showing to the 29,420,000 women, men, and children living with AIDS in Sub-Saharan Africa—not to mention the millions of orphans, many struggling to rear themselves.[16] We are our broth-

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[14]Georgia Department of Corrections, *Georgia Department of Corrections Annual Report 2002* (Atlanta: The Department, 2002), 11, 13, 34.

[15]Rev. Susan Bishop, chaplain, Metro State Prison for Women, interview by Carolyn McCrary, 1 September 2003, Atlanta, Georgia.

[16]See the Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS) and World Health Organization (WHO), *Aids Epidemic Update: December 2002* (Geneva: UNAIDS and WHO, 2002).

ers' and our sisters' keepers. African-American women accounted for nearly 64 percent of HIV cases reported among women in 2002 in the United States.[17] Have we finally gotten the message that HIV/AIDS infects and affects all of us, and that AIDS is not "a gay disease"? Have we really gotten beyond the false notion that people living with HIV/AIDS are being cursed by God, especially if they have a gay or lesbian lifestyle? How about let's look at our Deuteronomistic theology here. Let's see if our theology is helping us to treat or to mistreat God's children on a day-to-day basis. And, if there ever were a time, we need to talk about sexual behavior, health disparity, and poverty. Is now not the time? You know, I could go on and on with this list of this society's ills, especially as the current United States administration fiddles with billions of dollars of its own weapons of mass destruction.

But, who are we, my sisters and brothers of ITC? How are we treating each other? *How are we treating each other?* Are we continuing to make a difference and to help each other in our day-to-day-living? Considering our diverse histories and our past and current crises, can we walk together for the common good? Yes, the unity in our diversity is important. But what makes us unique and strong is the diversity in our unity—diversity in denominations, in gender, in histories (personal and corporate), in cultures, in nationalities, in styles, in sexual preferences, in denominational histories, in ethnicities, in polities, and in theologies. Can we walk together, children?

Let's consider two other questions. The first is a lingering one that resurfaces to plague us on various occasions. For what God-given reason do we need ITC? Especially as it concerns the presence of two of our treasured fellowships, when there are two well-endowed seminaries across town. Why do we need ITC? And sec-

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[17]See the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, *HIV/AIDS Surveillance Report 2002* (Atlanta: The Center, 2002).

ondly, why do so many of our students, at great economic sacrifice, still choose to matriculate at ITC? Can we walk proudly together, children—fully aware of who and whose we are? Or, are we yet afraid of our African-centered essence which preserves us? I'll share this experience, and then I'm going to take my seat.

ITC afforded me the opportunity to take a sabbatical where I taught at St. Paul's United Theological College in Limuru, Kenya, East Africa, during the fall of 1995. For the Christmas holidays my children and I were invited by Peter Bisem, vice president and academic dean of St. Paul's, and his family to go to their home in Eldoret, located in northwestern Kenya. To make a long story short, after a wonderful worship service at their home church, we went nearby to the home of sister Evelyn. She said, "In honor of our guests, this African sister, this Black American woman, her three children, and her niece, we are going to give them a special Kenyan treat." So sister Evelyn went to the corner of the room, and proudly brought forth this large gourd. She said, "It's an honor to have you all in my home and in our country; so we're going to share with you this eight-day-old milk." She proceeded to pour a cupful for each one of us. My children looked at it and one by one, they spoke. Alexandra stated, "Mama, you know I'm not going to drink any milk." Micah whispered, "It's lumpy too. . . .I don't want that." William just said, "I can't drink that, mama." And my niece, a little older and a bit more refined said, "You know I'm a vegetarian. I don't do dairy." I pride myself on being adventurous and open to new experiences. Yet, here I was in this different, East African culture, feeling uncomfortable about drinking eight-day-old milk (whose only refrigeration was being placed in a gourd and perched on a stand in the corner on the clay floor). Yet, I asked myself, "How could I refuse a gift from my people, especially such a special treat as this?" Dean Bisem and the pastor of the church were saying, "Oh, don't worry, professor Carolyn; it tastes good. It's the

African version of vanilla yogurt." And so, with a bit of trembling and trepidation inside, I said, "Okay." Then, as I picked it up to take a sip, I looked down in the crystal cup. Lo and behold you all, there was something in the milk—little black specs—not with feet or legs mind you, but little black particles. I really said my prayers this time. As I looked around, I noted, "None of my friends are falling out from it, so I'll go on and try it." I tasted a little bit. It was good! It tasted just like vanilla yogurt—cool even. I drank all of mine and one of my children's as well. The other African children gladly shared those that my children still refused to drink. Afterwards, when we went outside to take a group picture, I turned to my colleague, "Brother Peter, tell me, what were those black particles floating around inside the milk?" He smiled and said, "Oh, Carolyn, that was the resin from the *wateed* tree. We smear that resin inside the entire gourd to preserve the milk. These particles of black resin keep us from getting sick." So, much to my amazement, that of which I was most afraid, was that which was preserving the milk and keeping us healthy.

Of what are we afraid, ITC? We are the black resin in the eight-day-old milk. We are the black resin in the eight-day-old milk of western patriarchal theology and patriarchal structures that oppress everybody. Originally and theoretically, yes, the milk may have sustained some of us, but it is potentially poisonous and definitely toxic after a while without the black resin to preserve, to critique, to enhance, to augment, to change, to reveal, and oft times to reinterpret "thus says the Lord." If God can make dust walk, cannot God make resin walk as well? Can we walk together, children? To do all that needs to be done and be all that we are called to be, we must walk together. We must float together. We must live and work as those nine coal miners who were trapped in that watery tunnel 100 feet down below the surface. Bound together we are far stronger than we could ever be floating around alone. Yes, we embody a

healing wholeness, and we have attempted to capture it in words. So now, on the occasion of this Fall Convocation; today, on the eve of our prepared existential "leap of faith";[18] on our victorious march through yet another accreditation visit, let ITC continue to do what Jesus would do. Let us live out the true meaning of our mission statement. Let us BE the ITC that, ". . .educates and nurtures women and men who commit to and practice a liberating and transforming spirituality; academic discipline; religious, gender, and cultural diversity; justice and peace."[19]

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[18]For an interesting discussion of this concept see Alastair McKinnon, "Kierkegaard and 'the Leap of Faith,' " *Kierkegaardiana* 16 (1993): 107-125; also Ronald Green, "The Leap of Faith: Kierkegaard's Debt to Kant," *Philosophy and Theology* 3 (Summer 1989): 385-411.

[19]Interdenominational Theological Center, *Academic Catalog, 2002-2005* (Atlanta: The Center, 2002), 10.