

In our senior capstone course, Basic Issues of Faith and Life, students are studying the book *The God Who Sees* by Karen González. In the book, González uses the words “immigrants,” “strangers,” and “others” almost interchangeably as she explores issues of acceptance and inclusion through her own migration story, stories others have shared with her, and biblical migration stories. Caring for the “others” is the highest of callings, she states: “I had never realized how much the scriptures tell the stories of people who began as strangers and then became part of the family of God. Welcome and belonging are overarching narratives of the Bible.” Whether the individuals we welcome to campus are literal immigrants or not, all students will feel “other” at some point, and we at Bethel continue to strive to make our campus a place where everyone can feel that they are a part of the family of God.

As Bethel continues to move in the direction of becoming a federally designated work college, areas of focus continue to be student success, retention, and career preparation. We are currently in the pilot year of the Career Pathways Program, a work-learning-service program intended to help full-time, residential students reduce their student loan debt and graduate with high employability skills. Open forums will take place this spring for anyone interested to learn more about the program and ask questions of the Strategic Planning Committee members. The committee is set to conclude its process in October 2022 at which time there will be staff in place to continue the work. Several positions have already been redefined to fit into the new model, such as a director of career and leadership development and a director of student success and retention. The retention rate for all students for fall 2021 to spring 2022 was 93.2%, the highest rate in over ten years, after welcoming our second-largest freshman class in recent history. We were also able to celebrate being removed from “on notice” by our accrediting body.

Faith formation has been another topic of discussion, discernment, and study on campus. A task force was formed in the fall of 2020 to ensure that our faith formation efforts are relevant, effective, and peerless. Results of discussions and a survey were presented in the fall of 2021, but it was clear that more work and dialogue was needed. As faith becomes more personalized and individualistic, it is important for the college to reexamine how it can bring all into the family of God. In the survey, students ranked religion courses and personal conversations as highly formative activities. Bethel continues to provide many opportunities for worship and prayer, both formal and informal, including an interfaith room. The annual Staley Lectures in March will be presented by Karen González. In the fall, the postponed Worship and the Arts Symposium will take place with a focus on the new Mennonite hymnal, *Voices Together*. The Student Life office was able to reopen the campus food pantry after closing it due to pandemic concerns. Food is donated by local individuals and available to any student who is experiencing need. Bethel was also one of 78 colleges nationwide invited to participate in the 2021 Institute on Truth, Racial Healing & Transformation (TRHT) Campus Centers.

We are not able to accomplish these things and provide students with a space to find their place in the family of God alone. Thank you for your contributions.

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