Good afternoon. Mr. Chairman, members of the Board of Trustees, students, faculty, staff, alumni and distinguished guests: Thank you for honoring Kansas Wesleyan University with your presence here today. Your support and care for this institution enables us to celebrate its rich history, appreciate today’s excellence, and dream of an exciting tomorrow.

Wow. I stand here humbled by this moment and the grandeur of this occasion. Let me begin by saying thank you. What a truly amazing moment this is.

This day would not have been possible without the efforts of the entire campus community and the Inauguration planning committee. Thank you to everyone for your tireless effort to make this day so special. And before I go further, I want to thank my wife, Jennifer, and my daughter, Darcel, for supporting me in this grand new adventure.

They say God has bigger plans for you than you can ever imagine for yourself. I stand here as an example. Growing up in Jacksonville, Florida, I did not while away the hours dreaming of being a university president. Even after graduating from college when I started my career in higher education, I could not have envisioned this. I know that I am here thanks to the plan that God has for me in my life. I truly feel a calling to serve the students and community of Kansas Wesleyan.

As with all new undertakings, it is important to begin in prayer. Some of you were with us this spring at a prayer breakfast to mark the beginning of my presidency. That was a powerful morning as we listened to beautiful worship music performed by our students, heard an inspirational message from Bishop Jones, and were surrounded with grace and prayer. During that service I felt confident that the Lord had placed me at this institution, at this moment, to do His work. I continue to feel that calling.

Since arriving in April, everyone on campus and in the community has been so welcoming. My family and I are truly appreciative of all of the kindness and warmth that we have received as we’ve made a new home here. Y’all have generously made us feel welcome. Now rarely does anyone tease this Southern boy for his use of the word, “Y’all”. Which is nice, because I don’t even know I say it. We have been working on ways to blend in with our new Midwestern friends. My daughter now asks for a Pop instead of a Coke and now has her first pair of boots. My wife, who has great culinary talent, has attempted to make Bierocks. And we all own more purple and gold clothing than I would have thought possible.

My family and I are awed by the confidence that you have placed in me. You need to know that I embrace the responsibility of the presidency, live with it, and cherish it each day. This job is a lifestyle – not a role I put on and take off as I leave the edge of campus. I am so deeply proud to now be a part of the Kansas Wesleyan family.
One of the best parts of being brand new to a place is that you get to see it with fresh eyes. The things that may seem commonplace to you are new and exciting to me. I have enjoyed learning about our new home state, and particularly the history and legacy of Kansas Wesleyan, tied deeply to that of Salina – an important relationship that is inextricably linked. From Salina’s founding in 1858, this community was a crossroads – a trading post for those continuing further west, a place of safety from wilds of the area, a respite for those looking for a new start. Salina was a place that valued education and created the developing city grid system to put education at the four corners of town with St. John’s Military School to the North, Kansas Wesleyan to the South, the now closed Salina Normal School to the West and Marymount College to the East. Faith and education were literally and figuratively the intersection of this crossroads town.

Our Methodist founders believed in the need for an educated citizenry – one that could develop not just faith, but intellect, and marry those two in a life of service and prosperity.

Over the last five months, I have spent a lot of time really listening to the stories and words shared by colleagues, alumni, community members, faculty and staff. I have learned so much about Kansas Wesleyan’s 127-year history, and these stories have been true gifts to me. They have helped me to understand exactly what makes this place special, why we are who we are, and I think, most importantly, who has helped shaped the Kansas Wesleyan we know today. I’ve come to value the people and the ideals that make Kansas Wesleyan what it is.

I am so grateful that you have shared with me your memories. I enjoy those who have spoken in reverent tones about the legendary Coach Bissell. I relish John Burchill’s retelling of the faculty forming a human chain around Wesley Hall to protect the students during the Iranian hostage situation. I look forward to alumni gatherings and hearing about the extent to which students went “back in the day” to prepare for the Lilac Fête, including scavenging trips to the fields of Oklahoma. Who couldn’t love a place whose alma mater talks about school pranks, color scraps, and picnics on the banks of the Smoky River? And I have to admit, that I do enjoy hearing a good rivalry story about Bethany. All of these pieces combine to make Kansas Wesleyan such a special place, not just to the students, faculty, staff, and alumni, but to the community and to me. As your new president, I have gladly claimed your stories as my stories. You should expect me to safeguard the character and the values of this institution, as if they were my own.

The stories of Kansas Wesleyan that most resonate with me are the ones about the pioneering spirit of the people and the university. That spirit comes from the men and women who came to this wonderful part of the country in the mid to late 1800s. Strong-willed, devout, humble, and determined people settled here. That image is wonderfully captured in the mural that adorns the proscenium arch over Sam’s Chapel and inspires the name for this building. Therefore, it seems only appropriate that we stand here, at this moment, on the steps of the Hall of the Pioneers. For today we honor that pioneering spirit that is the heart of the Kansas Wesleyan experience.

As the nineteenth president, I am blessed to have this opportunity to build upon the contributions of eighteen previous leaders. I honor their work, their story and their legacy. That lineage now hangs around my neck on this Chain of Office. It is a chain that links the institution’s leadership across the decades.
However, the legacy of Kansas Wesleyan is more than the sum of these 18 men. The past and present have been forged by generations of faculty, staff, alumni and students who have come before. One simply needs to look to our alumni to witness how the Wesleyan experience and the pioneering spirit have led to innovation in so many fields. As you heard earlier, Kansas Wesleyan faculty and graduates have been pioneers in banking, art, education, aviation, space science, nursing, government, biology and theatre to name just a few. The pursuit of their individual passion, along with their God-given gifts, fueled by the knowledge obtained from KWU, enabled them to contribute to society in ways that impact our lives today. That pioneer spirit was driven by teacher-scholars who asked probing questions in the classroom; who provided an academic environment that stimulated creativity and encouraged discovery. The pioneer spirit was instilled by coaches and staff members who advised and mentored, who encouraged the development of not only intellect, but also the growth of character. This pioneer spirit that has embodied the university for more than a century continues to inspire our current generation of students.

It has been the faithful labors of our predecessors that have created our rich legacy. As I reflect back on their achievements and the accomplishments of this institution, I am reminded of our school motto found on the University seal, “Palma non sine pulvere”, which translated means, “victory not without toil.” It has been the hard work, the commitment, and the dedication of many people that have led us to the journey we are on today. And as with most journeys, there is often a crossroad.

We are physically standing near the very center point of our country, at the intersection of roadways that so many have passed through on their way to destinations east and west, north and south. Kansas Wesleyan is also place where students arrive at a crossroad – a place where choices can be made. Which direction will be chosen? Interestingly this is a decision our students of the past, present and future have had to, and will continue to, face every day. Which direction? Which major will I choose? Which club should I join? What professor should I take? Which friends should I make? Which life choices are mine?

Our Methodist heritage has provided a nurturing atmosphere for those questions to be pondered, for students to reflect and discern the choices that will bring meaning to their lives, allow them to pursue their passions and open doors for them to serve others. Our faith-based education, galvanized by our pioneering spirit leads us into a promising future.

Who will be the next generation of pioneers? Where are they? What are their dreams? What are their names? I tell you, they are sitting today at the tables and desks of Sams Hall and Peters Hall. They are on our playing fields and the courts of Mabee Arena. They are in the Fitzpatrick Theatre and Memorial Library. They are the Kansas Wesleyan students sitting next to you in this audience today. So the question becomes, how do we prepare them to achieve their dreams? How do we ensure that they receive the best classroom experience; the best residential experience; the best athletic experience; the best development of their artistic talent? How do we ensure that Kansas Wesleyan can continue to be a place where they can safely experience the challenges and disappointments that come with collegiate learning as they prepare for successes and challenges in life? A place where they can feel in every way that they are indeed at the
center of it all – at the center of their education. Let me say that again – we must put students at the center of their education, where faculty and staff surround each student and nurture his or her development.

We are indeed at a location, at a time, at a place, where we need to determine our direction. The world around is changing. The employment marketplace is demanding new skills from our graduates and we are responsible for preparing our students to meet these demands. Our role is to educate students to achieve success and to be great citizens. We want to produce global citizens, who care about issues and understand the world; who are technologically savvy, but understand the importance of interpersonal skills; we want to graduate critical thinkers, innovators, change agents, and champions of character.

The higher education marketplace is changing. Students have more than 4000 higher education institutions from which to choose. At Kansas Wesleyan, we offer students a unique experience. Our charge is to continue to provide more interesting, challenging, and relevant experiences in state-of-the-art facilities with the best faculty. The greatest complement a parent can give us is to send their children here to learn. We have the awesome responsibility of shaping tomorrow’s leaders.

We have talented, experienced leadership in all areas of the campus; people who are not afraid to think creatively, to challenge the processes, to introduce new ideas and possibilities, to break new ground, and to expect the best for Kansas Wesleyan.

Today, our students expect more – enrichment opportunities, experiential learning, global education, technologically sophisticated classrooms and labs. Our students are changing and evolving. We are not serving the same student of 5, 10, or 20 years ago, and therefore we cannot offer what we offered 5, 10, or 20 years ago. We must expose our students to a broader world; challenge them to move outside of their comfort zone; and to see a world beyond Salina, Kansas, and the United States.

In this world of 24-7 media and screen time, our students today need to learn and grow in a faith-based environment. A place where they are free to wrestle with what they believe, explore new perspectives and become stronger in their faith journey. We owe this to our students. And what you hear is indeed a collective “we” – for it will take each of us to move this great institution forward beyond this crossroad.

Yes, there’s a sense of calm, of security, that comes with standing still at the crossroad, but there’s the anticipation of a greater excitement, a greater reward, a greater destination when the decision is made to go forward – to have a direction and become a pioneer. This isn’t the start of KW’s journey. Our journey has been under way since our founding more than a century ago. Now is simply the time to increase the speed, to push, to excel. Now is the time to dream.

Ralph Waldo Emerson once famously wrote, “Dare to live the life you have dreamed for yourself. Go forward and make your dreams come true.” Today I challenge each of you who
loves this institution, who treasures its rich history, who enjoys today’s strength and commitment – to dare.

In order to live the life we have dreamed for our university, we must dare. Dare to recruit the best students to experience the exceptional education foundation of Kansas Wesleyan; to prepare the next generation of pioneers to serve and change the world; to provide better technology and resources, not only for today’s students but also for the students of tomorrow. Dare to continue to hire the best faculty who are caring and grounded in real success, who are able to deliver a classroom experience that engages and enlightens; to build the best facilities that go beyond just meeting the needs but that excel in excellence for both in and out of the classroom use. Dare to realize the dreams that we have only whispered.

What I propose is not the impossible. What I propose is the realization of what can and must be for Kansas Wesleyan. Agatha Christie, in her famous classic mystery, Murder on the Orient Express, has Hercule Poirot say, “The impossible could not have happened, therefore the impossible must be possible in spite of appearances.” Our grand future is possible. We must put aside the “could we” or “should we” of indecision. Instead we are obligated not only to those who have come before, but to those whom we will serve in the future to move forward boldly and confidently.

This is an evolving dream – we will shape it together. Here are four of the many exciting initiatives on the horizon for KWU.

First, develop a new curriculum – The curriculum drives the inspiration for who we are; a new curriculum should be exciting, challenging and stimulating for everyone here – it allows faculty to grow and to develop the pedagogy to serve our students; it forms what and how we teach students to shape their lives; it helps coaches push their students to be better, to think more critically, to work more collaboratively; it enables talented young minds to stretch and create beyond their comfort zone.

Second, build new facilities – Well-designed facilities inspire the mind, drive imagination, and create an environment that awakens a spark in us for what we must do. We are in the planning and development stages of several new facilities, including the new sports complex and new academic facilities that I believe will enliven the campus and excite the imagination of those who use them.

Third, create a great place to work – Our faculty and staff spend most of their waking hours in the service of this campus. Coming to work should be a joy and should be life giving. We are looking each day at ways to make this one of the most sought after places to work – not just in Salina, but in the region.

Fourth, reclaim our faith heritage – In the last year, we have begun new campus ministry offerings, including weekly student-led worship and an alternative Spring Break service trip to Costa Rica. The faculty have begun to consider new degree offerings that will support the future work of the church. All of this is done within a renewed commitment to be a place that embraces
our role of educating within a Christian setting by challenging all students to explore their faith, to deepen their walk, and to serve others.

As I’ve spoken at different events and visited with people in their homes, I have been asked by them, “How can I help?” I tell them there are four things everyone can do to help Kansas Wesleyan achieve its dream: hire an intern, employ a graduate, refer a student, and provide financial support.

One of my favorite literary characters, John Irving’s Owen Meany warns, “There’s nothing as scary as the future.” And as I like to share with anyone who will listen, “If your dreams don’t scare you, they’re not big enough.”

Students arrive here with a dream for who they want to be. Through the Kansas Wesleyan experience we want to broaden their world so that they can find their place at the intersection of who they are and the world’s greatest needs. Our students have big dreams for their lives. They deserve us, as a community, to have bold plans for how we will help them achieve those dreams. Salina and Kansas deserve our absolute best. Our graduates deserve our commitment to continue to make this place better, for each improvement we make enhances their degree. We want to graduate critical thinkers, change agents, and champions of character. Collectively, the impossible is possible.

Today is not about a person, but about a fine institution, 127 years in the making. Kansas Wesleyan is the men and women who have called this place home. It is a seat of education nestled into the fabric of Salina. It is tradition, community, and family.

I invite you to join me as
together we dream,
together we pioneer,
and together we dare to shape our future.

I am honored and grateful for the opportunity to be your president. Now IS the time to seize the day!

Matthew R. Thompson, Ph.D.
President and CEO