

# Agnes Scott

## *Inaugural Address*

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**Elizabeth Kiss**  
**President**  
**April 20, 2007**

### "Stand Up, Speak Up: A Woman's Agenda for the 21st Century"

What an honor and joy it is to be with you here today, in the presence of the Agnes Scott family and of so many distinguished guests from Decatur and Atlanta, from institutions of higher learning around the country and beyond, and from the wider world. And what a privilege it is to be granted the opportunity to lead this inspiring institution at a time of such promise in its history! Few college presidents have as tough an act to follow as I do, given Mary Brown Bullock's extraordinary leadership, and fewer still have been blessed with such a gracious and helpful mentor and predecessor. But to have all three of Agnes Scott's living presidents – Ruth Schmidt, Sally Mahoney, and Mary Brown Bullock – on the stage with me today is a gift indeed. Their presence is a testament to the continuities of commitment that have made this college strong. These continuities were vividly on display last Sunday when the Rev. Dr. Wallace Alston, Jr., son of Agnes Scott's beloved third president, preached at Decatur Presbyterian Church at a special service celebrating the relationship between Agnes Scott College and our founding congregation.

I am also joined on stage today by two distinguished leaders who have played important roles in my life, former Davidson President Sam Spencer and former Duke President Nan Keohane. Indeed, between Sam, Nan, and Mayor Shirley Franklin, I am blessed by the presence of incredible mentors and role models!

Jeff and I are so delighted to have close family here to share this day – my mother and sister from Washington, DC, and his stepsister and brother-in-law coming all the way from Melbourne, Australia. And as we mourn those killed at Virginia Tech this week, I have been reminded so often of how those we lose remain in our hearts and infiltrate our beings. My remarkable, brilliant, and passionate sister Agnes, who died in 1980 just shy of her 30<sup>th</sup> birthday, remains a constant inspiration for me and coming to Agnes Scott has made me even more aware of the power of her memory in my life.

Inaugurations are an opportunity to reflect on the past, present, and future of this institution and of its place and purpose in the world. As I have come to know this

college and its history over the past year, I have been struck by three aspects of our legacy that will continue to propel us further and higher in the coming years:

First, the audacity and relevance, today as in 1889, of the college's founding vision of educating women for the betterment of their world;

Second, the enduring link between a woman's college education and the development of a strong and confident woman's voice – the smart, warm, and feisty voice that characterizes Agnes Scott women across the generations

And third, the power of Agnes Scott's commitment to a liberal education grounded in moral values, so beautifully captured by our mission statement to educate women "to think deeply, live honorably, and engage the intellectual and social challenges of their time."

## 1.

As Reverend Alston reminded us last Sunday, Decatur Female Seminary was established in the context of a south still reeling from the economic and social crisis of the Civil War. Colonel George Washington Scott, the Reverend Frank Gaines and the other founders were determined to elevate their community and convinced that the education of young women was key to this task.

That was 1889. In 2007, we hear this claim stated, ever more loudly, by development economists and grassroots community activists around the world. Women's education is key to economic development, to stemming the spread of HIV/AIDS, to population control, and to the eradication of global poverty. The United Nations identified women's education as one of eight Millennium Development goals and emphasized its importance as key to the achievement of all of the others.<sup>1</sup> There is overwhelming evidence that educating women leads to a better world.

For the founders of Decatur Female Seminary, as for many of today's champions of women's education in developing societies, the primary interest in educating women stemmed from the influence an educated woman has within her family, particularly on the education of her children. But rather than embracing a primary school or finishing school model our founders affirmed, from the very beginning, a tenacious commitment to rigorous academic standards "fully abreast of the best institutions of the country," in Reverend Gaines' words.

There is something audacious in envisioning such a school in Decatur, Georgia in the early years of Reconstruction. But as Reverend Alston put it so beautifully in his sermon last Sunday, this audacious vision was firmly rooted in a conviction rooted in

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<sup>1</sup> [www.un.org/millenniumgoals](http://www.un.org/millenniumgoals). See also *Gender Equality and the Millennium Development Goals*, World Bank Gender and Development Group, 4 April 2003, pp. 11-14.

the Reformed tradition that it was our duty to nurture a commitment to three communities: to Jerusalem, with its love and tutelage of a redemptive faith, to Athens, with its love of reason and the pursuit of truth, and to a vision of America as a covenantal commonwealth, a free society in which women as well as men would be equipped to serve the common good." And so, from its very beginnings, Agnes Scott College was animated by a vision that to develop and elevate a society, we must liberate women's minds. This vision was shared throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century through the efforts of so many legendary leaders, faculty, and benefactors, Nanette Hopkins, Carrie Scandrett, Frances Winship Walters, Jane Pepperdene, Ben Kline... each of them, and so many others, deepened and enriched, even as they reformed and transformed, Agnes Scott's commitment to a rigorous education.

Interestingly, a recent World Bank report<sup>2</sup> argues that primary education for women, which had received the most attention in discussions surrounding the United Nations Millennium Goals, is insufficient to enable women to have the societal and economic impact that is needed in the developing world, arguing that more funding and emphasis needs to be placed on secondary and higher education. The return on investment is higher when resources are put into opening the doors of advanced education to women. I suspect that this is true in Atlanta as it is in Nigeria or Bangladesh – that higher education for women is a key to addressing chronic poverty, economic stagnation, and ill health.

So as we consider Agnes Scott's place and purpose in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, we can proudly recommit to the audacious idea affirmed by our founders, that the education of women is key to improving the world – and seek new and exciting ways to link our campus with this mission.

## 2.

The second aspect of our legacy I want to consider and affirm is the enduring link between a woman's college education and the development of a strong and confident woman's voice.

This is a less obvious claim today. After all, the doors of so many institutions once closed to women opened in the 60s and 70s. Women are in the majority in our coeducation institutions of higher learning. Do we still need women's colleges?

The answer lies in the magic that happens when women, at the formative stage of joining the scholarly community as independent, critical thinkers, get to study, lead, advocate, and play in an institution focused on and devoted to them. This is borne out by recent research on women's colleges such as a report issued last year by Indiana University's Center for the Study of Postsecondary Education,<sup>3</sup> which shows that they

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<sup>2</sup> I have been unable to put my hands on this even though I had a printout of it at the time I was working on the speech – so sorry! I have asked Astrid Pregel ([apregel@aol.com](mailto:apregel@aol.com)) whose reference to this report in a speech first directed me to it, if she can help us.

<sup>3</sup> <http://newsinfo.iu.edu/news/page/normal/3705.html>

outperform coeducational institutions on a number of key indices of quality learning environments and on their ability to nurture women's leadership and achievement. But actually, all you need to do to understand this is to look around an Agnes Scott classroom.

In fact, the first thing I noticed about Agnes Scott as I began to know this community in the course of the presidential search process was that VOICE – that smart, warm, and feisty voice. I felt invigorated and inspired by the presence of these confident and interesting women. Those of us fortunate enough to attend last night's Tower Circle dinner heard it in the extraordinary student presentations. As Kristin Hall of the Class of 2007 put it so eloquently in her comments on "Finding an Academic Voice,"<sup>4</sup> an Agnes Scott education helps students develop a clear, precise, confident, and authoritative voice – to know that they have something to say, and to know how to say it.

Perhaps it is in our DNA. I was amused to find this description of Agnes Scott in Betty Scott Noble's wonderful little book about our namesake. Dr. Gemmill, her neighbor and friend, reported that she was

"A lady of genuine kindness, a person of gentleness and true benevolence who was firm in her convictions and held her views with great tenacity but without aggressiveness."

That's a pretty good description of the students and alumnae I have gotten to know – strong, confident women with tenacious views. As Jane Pepperdene put it in a lovely Investiture speech entitled "A Woman's Place" which she presented here some years ago, Agnes Scott women are, and have always been, made to feel that, in the words of the poet John Donne, they are "something worth." The presence of powerful women faculty throughout the college's history, the wise balance of intellectual challenge and nurture, and the climate of being taken seriously as a person of substance has combined to make an Agnes Scott education an empowering experience for women across the generations.

Now I do not mean to suggest that women cannot have this experience in coeducational environments. But we know from studies of such environments, including the pioneering Duke Women's Initiative led by Nan Keohane, that the peer culture on a coeducational campus can be disempowering to women, leading to drops in intellectual and social self-confidence over the course of their undergraduate years.<sup>5</sup> This is obviously something that coeducational institutions can and should seek to address – it is not inevitable. But it points to the continued relevance of all-women

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<sup>4</sup> [http://www.agnesscott.edu/about/p\\_newsarticle.asp?id=423](http://www.agnesscott.edu/about/p_newsarticle.asp?id=423)

<sup>5</sup> [http://www.duke.edu/womens\\_initiative/index.html](http://www.duke.edu/womens_initiative/index.html)

institutions as an inspiring alternative, and to why, as one Agnes Scott alumna put it, "a women's college environment is preparation for leadership in a coeducational world."

We live in a world where many forces continue to conspire to discourage and disempower women. In all too many places, these are direct and violent forces of exclusion from economic and political rights, sexual exploitation, systematic rape and abuse, and harmful cultural and religious practices. But even in more fortunate circumstances we are surrounded by insidious voices that tell us that what's important to women's status has little or nothing to do with what's between their ears.

So it is that in 2007 – as it was in 1889 – it is important to have institutions that affirm as their central mission the education and empowerment of women. As we consider Agnes Scott's place and purpose in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, we can proudly recommit to this mission and seek new ways to communicate its importance.

### 3.

The third essential piece of our legacy is the particular way Agnes Scott has pursued its mission, through a dynamic liberal arts and sciences curriculum and a practical commitment to moral education most clearly exemplified in our 100-year old Honor Code. People here have come to know my love and admiration of our mission statement, which so eloquently and succinctly sums up what we are about, that we educate women "to think deeply, live honorably, and engage the intellectual and social challenges of their times."

At a time when a growing number of institutions of higher education have adopted a specialized and vocational approach, a liberal arts education is more valuable than ever today. There are many reasons for this; let me simply mention three:

First, a liberal arts education provides us with the tools – not only the knowledge and skills, but also the habits -- to adjust to a rapidly changing global economy. This was abundantly clear in a recent study commissioned by the American Association of Colleges and Universities of corporate leaders and what they are looking for in the young people they hire.<sup>6</sup>

Second, a liberal arts education provides us with an appreciation of human diversity and complexity, and a sense of moral nuance, all qualities that are badly needed in today's world and which, if we are lucky, might even protect us in the future from the extremisms and military misadventures that we confront today.

And third, a liberal arts education provides us with the knowledge and skills to identify new problems and the conceptual and practical tools to seek creative solutions to

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<sup>6</sup> <http://www.aacu.org/advocacy/leap/documents/Re8097abcombined.pdf>

them. I love the story of Kay Krill, ASC alumna and CEO of Ann Taylor, who based her turnaround of that company on her psychology background and the nuanced understanding it gave her of how women from many different backgrounds can think in similar ways about who they are and how they want to present themselves to the world. This insight prompted her to propose a shift in company strategy from a standard demographic model of product development to an innovative psychographic one.

But there are many such stories. Tomorrow we will honor several alumnae who have put their liberal arts educations to extraordinary use, from aerospace technology that saves lives and money to an understanding of West Nile virus transmission that protects the blood supply here and abroad.

At Agnes Scott, this commitment to the liberal arts has been given a sense of purpose and direction by being grounded in some core moral values. These include our 100-year old Honor Code and how it shapes our campus as a community of honor, integrity and responsibility, our commitment to integrating intellectual and spiritual inquiry, and our wonderful achievements and ongoing efforts in becoming a diverse and inclusive learning community. Each of these reflects a recognition that much of the most important learning in college occurs in campus life and community. Finally, the closing phrase of our mission statement reminds us that we seek to educate women who will “engage the intellectual and social challenges of their times” – who will draw on their liberal education to engage a wider world.

So as we consider Agnes Scott’s place and purpose in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, we can proudly recommit to our vision of a liberal arts education grounded in core values of integrity, respect, and spiritual and civic engagement. Together, they inspire us to nurture a rigorous liberal arts core while seeking new ways to define and engage intellectual and social challenges, through programs as wide-ranging as public health, human rights, film studies, and neuroscience.

## Conclusion

With these three pieces of our legacy firmly in our grasp, what is Agnes Scott’s place and purpose in the 21<sup>st</sup> century world? What are the next audacious steps we should be taking to live up to the ambitions and ideals of our founders and of the leaders who have come before us? Let me close with a few thoughts inspired by the exciting discussions we have been having about Agnes Scott’s new strategic plan, *Engaging a Wider World*.

While much of what our founders envisioned remains relevant today, it is also important to see that the world they saw in Decatur in 1889 has changed dramatically. Atlanta has risen like a phoenix, becoming the fastest growing metropolitan area in the country and a true global center and leader in business, education, research, human rights and other fields. Decatur has become something rare and unique, a

cosmopolitan small town. And if you look at our student body and faculty you will see that Agnes Scott, too, has become a more diverse and global community. These changes provide us with several exciting opportunities to take the pursuit of our historical mission to a wider stage.

And so, as I look to the future of Agnes Scott, I see a college that has become a key player in Atlanta's global conversation through a new Center for Women's Global Leadership that engages students, faculty, staff, alumnae and individuals and organizations from across Atlanta and around the world. I see a college that has become a national model for institutional efforts to live honorably, from a commitment to a living wage to environmental sustainability to inclusion, courtesy, and respect. And I see a community of teacher-scholars who are constantly seeking ways, old and new, to help our students integrate what they learn, connect it to the world, and become engaged global citizens who can put their strong, smart, warm, and feisty voices to the service of bettering their communities.