

Paul Farmer Offers Opening Address

Austin College officially began its 159th academic year Sept. 3 with an Opening Convocation address by Paul Farmer, physician, Harvard Medical School professor, and global humanitarian who received the 2007 Austin College Leadership Award in March.

While still in college, Farmer traveled to rural Haiti to assist those providing health care to the poor and sick. In 1987, Farmer co-founded the charity organization Partners In Health; 20 years later, the organization serves some of the world's sickest and poorest on four continents, providing schools, clinics, and training programs for health outreach workers. Farmer has received numerous awards and honors for his continued service and advocacy on behalf of the poor, sick, and disenfranchised.

"The path I embarked on has brought me great satisfaction — and was opened up to me by a liberal arts education," said Farmer, a Duke University graduate, as he spoke to a large crowd in Wynne Chapel, including the entering Class of 2011, members of the Class of 2008 beginning their final year of college, faculty, staff, and guests.



Paul Farmer

PHOTO BY VICKIE S. KIRBY

Farmer spoke to students about recognizing the opportunities offered them through a liberal arts education, pursuing leadership characterized by service, and understanding the need to read and think critically in order to make informed and responsible decisions as citizens.

Farmer reminded students that to attend a school such as Austin College and experience a liberal arts education is to live "on an island of privilege." Farmer, who had traveled from rural Haiti the day before, expressed his hope that, in realizing their privilege, students would savor the opportunities before them. "In the eyes of six billion people who live on this planet, this is unheard-of good fortune," he said, speaking of the poor individuals he serves in his work around the U.S. and the world.

Urging students not to rush into a particular career or area of study, Farmer encouraged students to take advantage of the liberal arts to broaden themselves, to explore new areas of study or service, and to "find something you can be passionate about for a long, long time."

Farmer recommended that all students embrace the spirit of service leadership espoused at Austin College and seek ways in which they can serve others. "I've never heard someone come to the end of life and say 'I wish I'd done less for others,'" he said. "In every profession in the world, you can find ways to use the skills in which you are trained to be of service to others."

Referencing our electronic age, Farmer said much information is available in the world, but not all of it is true. "We're lucky we still have democracy here," Farmer. "I am quite concerned about democracy and we have to preserve that," he added, explaining that it takes critical analysis to sift through the barrage of information to find facts and know how to use them.

"People who have liberal arts educations, who learn about their world, and who think about service to others are the ones who are going to make democracy better," said Farmer. "That would be my deepest aspiration for the students of the classes of 2008 and 2011."

Farmer was selected for the Austin College Leadership Award for his work promoting healthcare and human rights for the world's poorest citizens in places like Haiti, Peru, Guatemala, Mexico, Russia, Rwanda, Malawi, and Lesotho. *Mountains Beyond Mountains: The Quest of Dr. Paul Farmer, a Man Who Would Cure the World*, by *New York Times* best-selling author Tracy Kidder, was assigned as a common read for the freshman class.

"Dr. Farmer's efforts to transform healthcare on a global scale by championing the cause of some of the world's poorest and least-heard individuals truly show his commitment to serve as a responsible and active member of the global community," said **Oscar C. Page**, president of Austin College. ∞