

# Using the Imagination in Telling Our Story:

How Does the Church Minister in Higher Education?

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One does not have to be in a position as campus minister for very long before the need arises to explain and perhaps defend one's purpose. The audience for these explanations is at times the university and at times the church. All too often one must explain to one's own self! The academic world needs to hear this rationale for Christian ministry in terminology which relates to its own goals as an institution. The denomination, likewise, can identify best with constructs that are familiar to ecclesiastical ears. It is my contention that the professional campus minister needs to make a consistent effort at learning to describe and define an identity and a primary purpose, with imagination.

In speaking engagements as well as private conversations, I have found the use of metaphors and analogies to enhance tremendously my audience's ability to comprehend and therefore support my work. Jesus' use of parables has provided a model (e.g., "the Kingdom of God is like unto . . ."); I have provided some terminology. Since my most recurrent arena for explanation is within the church, and since mutual accountability is so increasingly vital among God's people, I present the following three ideas for consideration as an approach to campus ministry "administration" within the broad theological scope of the doctrine of the church: ministry in the world. The fact that these same metaphors and analogies speak to me, encouraging me personally and giving direction to my professional efforts, lends a stability that has sustained me through nearly twenty years of ministry in higher education.

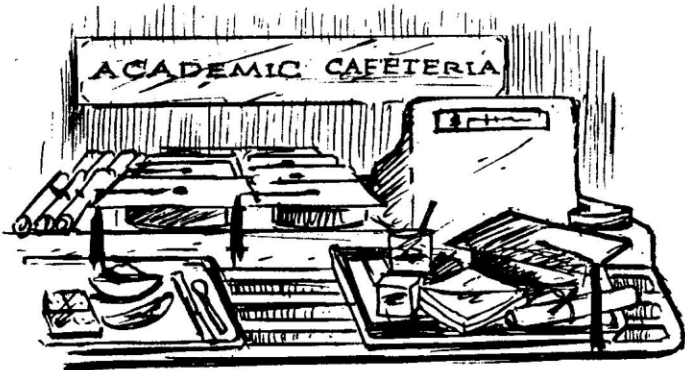
## **The Campus as a "Foreign Mission" Assignment**

Any understanding of campus ministry must include a specification as to who the "ministers" are, as well as a speci-

fication as to the object of the ministry. At times, the two are identical. The campus can be regarded, and frequently is, as a "mission field." It is a self-contained microcosm with its own government and populace. In denominational schools, we may be seen as "friendlies"; in secular institutions we may be regarded as "aliens." The professional campus minister is the "missionary-in-residence," one who has the necessary credentials and has been allowed to function in that setting, a minister *in academia*. One might add that the "credentials" must be not merely acceptable to the senders, but especially to the campus.

The object of the ministry/mission is to represent God and Biblical values to both the permanent and transient academic community. The campus minister is accountable to those who sent him or her for transmitting their concerns, and also to the campus community for doing so in terms that meet their standards and needs. There is an "ambassadorial quality" about the campus minister's status and function. The theological rationale is incarnational.

Since the average college campus today is not totally devoid of Christian believers any more than the average foreign country, the presence of "indigenous believers" becomes the initial focus of the missionary's efforts; the campus minister must find Christians who are already present on the campus and meet their nurturant needs in an on-going way in the pastoral role. The "missionary" must seek them even before seeking the unsaved because eventually he or she will be able to lead them to become the *means* for carrying out the mis-



sion/ministry to saved as well as unsaved on a peer level.

In traditional missionary parlance, this is known as “nationalizing” the word; in the campus adaptation, it is a “laicizing” of the ministry, whereby the permanent as well as the transient communion of saints becomes the real “campus minister,” and the professional becomes a player/coach, an “equipper of the saints for the work of the ministry” (Eph. 4). Baptists need to keep in mind that their campus ministers and B.S.U. Directors function in a “state of grace” in the university and do not have the power to produce on alien turf what might be an easy idea for a church to do on its own property. Missions on campus or in other countries requires that we earn the right to be heard.

Following this model in explaining our work to others and to ourselves is of tremendous value in New Work areas and can prevent the tension which arises from unrealistic expectations about ministry in the campus situation.

### **Ministering in the “Academic Cafeteria”**

Since the middle 60’s, there has been an increasing need to meet the needs of commuter students who see the campus as a kind of “academic shopping mall” which they visit for education on demand. They have little sense of “belonging” and simply pay their fees and expect to receive their degree. Ministry in the midst of this mentality is analogous to the campus minister being one of the servers in a cafeteria line: students pass before the minister and he or she attempts to serve them according to their needs in the time they remain stopped in front of the server, which probably won’t be very long!

I have often speculated about how a server in our local cafeteria might try to develop an “organization” out of all the patrons who ordered the chicken and rice today, asking them to sit kindly together, unquestioningly enjoy each other’s company, and participate in moments of prayer or religious instruction before dessert! Obviously, few of the patrons would cooperate, partly because the suggestion does not fit their agenda, and also because the chicken and rice server has insufficient influence. Trying to get these same patrons to agree to a retreat or state convention of other chicken-and-rice-eaters would be simply out of the question.

Servanthood is not impossible in this scenario, but trying to *organize* those who are served so that they will come again and again and will serve others is extremely difficult. Personal and denominational expectations that hinge upon developing some sort of student group from these dynamics are bound to result in frustration and possible failure.

Campus ministers who regularly try to coagulate students based on their common bond in Christ find that the majority of them may be uninterested in expressing that bond in any other than the ecclesiastical setting. Just as likely a reason for their failure to join in is the fact that they may be working part-time and are unable to add further religious demands to their already over-stressed lifestyle. However, sharing the “cafeteria analogy” helps people, including the campus minister, do creative thinking about what realistically can be done with and for the majority of today’s commuter students. It really speaks to ministering to non-traditional students. We need to be consistently faithful to prepare and serve, whether or not large crowds show up wanting what we have to offer.

### **Feeding and Breeding on the “Artificial Reef”**

Campus ministry built entirely on students is not only challenging to create, but it is also subject to rapid and total collapse at the end of any given academic year. I like to take my listeners’ imaginations to the ocean bottom where sports fishermen have dumped old tires, collapsed bleachers, and junked mobile homes in order to create artificial reefs. Fish arrive with every tide to feed and breed in the relative safety of this fabricated world. The campus world is very similar with its annual arrival of new freshmen and transfers. It is even more similar with the daily and hourly arrival of commuters. The campus minister needs to have enough framework in place to provide for spiritual feeding and breeding, i.e. the growth and outreach elements students will develop for themselves when provided with a safe environment.

I have sought to develop this basic structure among Christian faculty and staff when beginning work on a new campus. Most of them do not have the time to develop a student organization alone, no matter how much they “love the Lord.” And although they see needs daily, they do not always have the

training necessary to meet those needs. On the other hand, volunteer campus workers such as pastors and youth directors, may have the training but are not present daily to observe daily needs. Developing a network of on-campus resource people relieves any one person from being totally responsible for nurture and program. Publishing a list of this "reef" allows incoming students to realize that theirs is not indeed a "God-less campus" and that they can join in the ministry that God is *already* doing through His people who work there.

Those who support our work, the associations of churches and the conventions, need to consider how to go about facilitating such a framework among the permanent academic community. This model has excellent possibilities for application in the junior college setting where it is so difficult to have anything to show for one's efforts. Build a reef, wait for the tide, see what God sends your way.

### Conclusion

All analogies break down eventually, and metaphors have a way of becoming too extended; however, communicating our mission must be open to constant adaptation. W. F. Howard recommended becoming a "student of student work," part of which requires that we learn continuously how to help others understand the academic adaptation of the ecclesiastical mandate. Our continuing education becomes the prerequisite for their continuing education.

Representing God and doing theology on the university campus requires a support system of informed, caring church people who are not motivated exclusively by results they see coming back in the pew. Their primary concern must be for a faithful and effective voicing of their values within the higher education system. In fact, Christian values which are celebrated in the church should show up on the campus in the lives of student parishioners who matriculate there, rather than having the church primarily wait for students to "find Christ" on campus and transmit this back into the baptistry. If campus ministry is indeed the church's mission to the campus, its effects on the academic milieu should take precedence over its effects on the sending body. I have learned that this is extremely difficult to communicate.