

WHERE ARE WE GOING IN STUDENT MINISTRIES?

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Science Fiction has always been my favorite form of literature. I grew up reading Welles, Verne, Heinlein, Asimov, and Clarke. These writers were both visionary and pragmatic. They were able to take present realities and extrapolate future possibilities, always taking into account the human factor. This allowed them to mix the new and unique with the old and mundane to produce a synthesis which was both familiar and strange and, therefore, believable. This is what separates good science fiction from fantasy.

In this article, I would hope to do the same thing—to suggest how currents in present-day student ministry might develop or be adapted (mutate?) in the coming years.

I will not attempt to deal with the issues or currents themselves. They include, but are not limited to: mobility, technology and technocracy, urbanization, family disintegration, depersonalization, specialization, international independence, ethnicity, the “graying society” (of which I am one), terrorism, ad infinitum. For more information on these issues read Megatrends, Thriving on Chaos, your weekly news magazine or a multitude of other sources.

My projections are based on several priority concerns for student ministry in our state. First, we will continue to emphasize the “basics” of Baptist student ministries: evangelism, Bible study, discipleship, missions and ministry. Second, we will continue to seek qualified, called local directors of student ministries and give them the resources and support to do their work. Third, we will continue to call out and develop student leadership. Fourth, we will coordinate our ministry with local churches in an effort to reach students who might otherwise “fall between the cracks.” Fifth, we will

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encourage students to see themselves as global Christian citizens with a worldwide vision.

What will our ministry look like in the year 2010? I have chosen that date because I fully intend to be retired by then and have “passed the mantle” to someone else. In making these observations, I am saying, “The good news is that we will still be in the student ministries business; the bad news is that some things never change.”

1. The professional director of Baptist student ministries will be more of an educator and less of a pastor, more of a generalist and less of a specialist.

The local director will perform fewer of the functions of a pastor—preaching, leading in worship, shepherding the flock—and more of the functions of the theological educator conversant in adult developmental theory, educational theory and practice, and teaching skills. Yes, we will still be proclaiming and counseling and sharing biblical revelation, but we will be doing more equipping and coaching of others to perform these ministry functions.

Although we will still be “ministers of the Gospel,” agents of reconciliation and theologically articulate, we will have a broad knowledge of society, culture, people and education so that we can bring the Christian faith to focus on our field of service.

State offices will continue to provide supervision, researching and selection of local personnel, but there will be a great deal of local autonomy in the design and implementation of programs.

Most of us doing student ministries today (myself included) probably are not qualified to do what we expect the local director to undertake in 2010... but that is twenty years from now. We can learn a lot in two decades.

2. We will have embraced a “ministry in a learning society” approach.

There will still be residential college and universities, baccalaureate degrees and football teams (although they will finally be recognized as semi-professional athletes and compensated for their work), but this model will represent only one segment of “higher education.” There will be a

great deal more diversity in educational delivery systems, class locations, degree programs, the age of students, and learning goals. Higher education will be even more segmented than it is in 1988. Lifelong learning will not be an option; it will be mandatory in order to adapt to new vocational and employment opportunities.

As a result, "Campus Ministry" will be an outmoded term. "Student ministry" may no longer be adequate. What will take its place? I don't know, but the terminology will have to encompass the breadth of a ministry which knows no geographic or physical boundaries. Several years ago, the Lutherans suggested the idea of a "ministry in a learning society." If we are to survive in the year 2010, we will have to adopt this approach or come up with something equivalent. At least one state calls their department "Ministries in Higher Education" to express that comprehensiveness. This is a step in the right direction.

3. There will be greater use of volunteers in student ministries—volunteer directors, lay leaders in the churches (Sunday school teachers, etc.) and those who work with students within the context of higher education (faculty, administrators and staff members).

As we strive to recover a healthy theology of the laity and lay ministry, we will feel more comfortable in calling forth the gifts of lay people and empowering them for ministry with students and in the education community.

Increased leisure time will free up people to give more of their time to this ministry, but they will not get involved unless the opportunities are challenging and meaningful. We will need to provide first-class training for these ministers, respect the strengths they bring to the work, and accept them as full members of a ministry team.

4. We will be more inclusive in our ministry and less concerned about labels—black, Hispanic or ethnic. By 2010 we will employ people as student ministers because they have gifts for the ministry and not because they represent a particular social, racial or national group. I do not mean that we will deny or sublimate race, sex or ethnicity, but these characteristics will be accepted as the

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inherent strengths an individual brings to his or her ministry in higher education.

5. We will still be a ministry of the churches, but “church” will have a new meaning. Southern Baptist are embracing new models of “church”—home churches, cell groups, satellite churches, churches without buildings, covenant or intentional communities. Many of these will have great success in the coming years. Some will be extremely well suited to reach college students, especially the non-traditional student. At the same time, the traditional form of the church will continue in all sizes and shapes.

Our challenge will be to learn how to relate to all of these forms, represent them to the higher education community, equip their members for ministry and coordinate their efforts to minister in a learning society.

6. We will use “high tech” equipment and resources, but it will not take the place of “high touch” activities. Computers, electronic networks, video and technology as yet unnamed will be valuable tools for us. Each of us will do more of our own clerical and secretarial work with a minimum of pain. Software will allow us to produce commercial quality printing and program materials at low cost. The greatest benefit, however, will be the freedom this will give the individual director to concentrate on people skills—team building, consensus building, facilitating the cognitive and spiritual development of individuals, and serving as catalysts for ministry. Human relations skills will be a valuable commodity in a “high tech” society.

7. We will use the arts and media more effectively in communicating the gospel. John Newport, Bill Hendricks and other Southern Baptist theologians have been trying to convince us of the power of the visual and performing arts in communicating Christian truth. By 2010, we will have gotten the message. We will use drama, interpretative movement, sculpture, painting, photography and music more extensively in our worship, teaching and evangelistic effort. This will also open avenues to dialogue and

ministry within education as we interact with those who practice these arts.

Where Baptist student centers continue to exist, they will feature quality art objects which stimulate thinking about what it means to be human and Christian. Drama teams sponsored by student ministries will be more professional, sophisticated and committed. Musical groups will consider the theological basis and implication of the music they perform.

8. We will continue to be accountable. Let's be realistic. There's sure not going to be a quantum leap in the financial and personnel resources available to do our ministry. We will find ourselves in an intense competition for part of a shrinking pie. In other words, we will be justifying our existence to our various publics and trying to find new and more effective ways to "tell our story." We will have to tell Baptists why we need these resources, how we plan to use them, how we did use them and what the results are. We may use holographic video to "tell our story", but we will still have to do it!

9. We will still have the challenge to serve as innovative mediators—interpreting the Christian faith in an intellectual atmosphere and sharing the excitement of intellectual activity with the church.

We have often fallen short of this goal. Jerusalem does have something to say to Athens. If we are to be spokespersons of the Christian faith in higher education, we must be well read, articulate interpreters of faith, but we will not be heard unless we exercise our ministry with love, compassion and integrity.

Student work is a "cutting edge" ministry and we will continue to make for the churches new approaches to ministry, discipleship training, evangelism and Bible study. The student minister has traditionally been an innovator in Baptist life leading the way in such concerns as volunteer involvement in short-term missions, experimental approaches to Bible study, community ministry and social action, and world hunger education and fund raising.

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Because we are and will continue to be in touch with the rapidly changing world of academe, we will be the conduit for ideas which can be used or adapted for use in Christian ministry.

10. We will practice what we preach about continuing education and lifelong learning. Only the most creative, self-motivated people will be willing to serve in this ministry or be invited to do so. A commitment to lifelong learning will be mandatory for such a person.

Each director will be expected to develop a support network in order to call upon resource people in the denomination, secular fields, other denominations and educational institutions for personal and professional growth.

Each director will regularly develop personal learning goals in consultation with his/her supervisor and a mentor-facilitator. These goals will be met through formal academic study (such as the doctor of ministry program), brief focused courses (perhaps on interactive video), individual study (accessing seminary and university libraries though personal computer links), or individual tutoring.

Conclusion: My "crystal ball" provides a few surprises but a number of challenges. Student ministries (no matter what it will be called in 2010) will continue to be one of the most exciting, stretching and satisfying ministries of the churches. It will constantly call forth the best that we as individuals, organizations and churches can provide.

Because this work will require so much in terms of personnel, time and financial resources, some will suggest that we get out of it. That is not a viable option. We may attempt to ignore the world of higher education, but God will still be at work there, and He will find other representatives to articulate the Gospel. Who will lose? Southern Baptists will lose and I, for one, don't want to miss the opportunity.