

The Effects of Current Higher Education Trends on Campus Ministry,

Or How Do You Build a Rose Garden Under the Trampling Hooves of Apocalyptic Horsemen?

By George W. Jones

Like the horsemen of the Apocalypse, four factors—economic, demographic, societal and ideological—have combined in the 1980's to force a crisis in some form and to some degree on every college and university in the United States. During the next decade, overall enrollments are predicted to decline while economic bases erode and public confidence and esteem for higher education plummet to new lows. Meanwhile, a loss of faith in academia and its role in society will further the depression.

Since the shape and direction of ministry is affected by its setting and context, campus ministries are also involved in these changes. Will the changes be purposive and intentional or reflexive and short-sighted? The apostle Paul wrote that he became "all things to all people" so that more might be won. When both the things and people of higher education are being changed by today's apocalyptic forces, campus ministers, too, will need to recast their programs in order to deliver the ministry of unchanging purpose.

Economic factors like the horseman of famine threaten the very existence of some institutions. The federal cuts in student aid and research monies have been well publicized. Less known are the recisions being made by some states, especially those in the Frost Belt. Because of short-falls in state revenues some state colleges have been forced to take 15 to 20 percent cuts in mid-year. Also, the unavailability of part-time and summer jobs and the layoffs which affect parents' incomes contribute to the economic crisis of many colleges, especially private ones, as would-be students are unable to pay tuition charges.

Individual institutions respond differently, but almost all colleges to a certain degree at some level are engaged in some of the following activities to make ends meet:

(1) Making sure the college has a carefully delineated, clear statement of its mission.

(2) Examining the current program's content and forms in light of the mission statement.

(3) Analyzing the needs of clientele currently being served or which potentially could be served within the mission of the institution.

(4) Examining delivery systems (schedules and locations) that will be most convenient for both old and new clienteles.

(5) Introducing, often uncritically, from corporate industry planning, management and evaluation systems in hopes of greater productivity and efficiency.

(6) Identifying and cultivating supporting publics through more effective public relations and fund development programs.

(7) Instituting faculty and staff development programs to retrain personnel no longer needed in declining programs and to staff new programs.

The successful institutions will be those which can effect change and at the same time sustain a climate which will challenge staff, students, and patrons to their fullest creativity and productivity. The task is not easy nor is a successful outcome guaranteed, since other factors compound and sometimes conflict with solutions to economic problems.

Like a second apocalyptic horseman, **demographic factors** have decimated the number of available prospects for colleges and universities. Low birthrates during the 60's and 70's mean a declining population in the traditional college age range during the 80's and 90's. My high-school-senior son's mailbox bears testimony to the increased competition by colleges for the shrinking pool of candidates.

Other colleges have sought new clienteles—adult and other non-traditional learners—only to find that many of these can attend only part-time and require expensive non-traditional services such as child care. A few colleges have stooped to tactics to recruit foreign students that are so questionable that they border on the scandalous.

Some institutions have redoubled their efforts to hold the students they already enroll. Grade inflation, reduction of graduation requirements and unwelcome remedial services have sometimes resulted. In the process, some institutions have been altered beyond recognition. Liberal arts colleges have become vocational. Specialized institutions have become general in purpose. Single-sex institutions have become coed. Some private schools have gone public. Students are now recognized as "consumers" with the clout to make or break institutions.

The third horseman has been **societal changes** which affect what colleges teach, how they teach and how much they are valued. Next year's conference of the American Association for Higher Education, in some ways the best window for viewing what is happening in higher education nationally, will have as its theme, "Education for the Information Age." The premise is that American life has changed from an economic base of labor-intensive, heavy industry which provides products to one centered on information processing and communications with the result that a majority of the work force is employed in high technology, white-collar, and service vocations.

Pressures increase on colleges to prepare people for a greater variety of increasingly specialized careers. This in turn has intensified the debate on what is the common knowledge which should be expected of all educated persons. Curriculum revisions proliferate across the country as faculty try to decide what should be taught.

One trend seems clear: Colleges expected too much of students in the 70's in deciding what was best for them to learn. For example, in one cooperative curriculum project involving thirteen colleges, "Requirements stressing various skills have been adopted at every institution." Also involved in each was a new definition of minimal standards of educational quality.¹ Many would agree with Chester Finn, professor of education and public policy at Vanderbilt, that "quality is almost certainly going to turn out to be the foremost national educational concern of the 1980's much as equity was the premier issue of the 60's and 70's."²

With such uncertainty within colleges about what they should be teaching, it is hardly surprising that many in the general public increasingly question the value of a college education. Public confidence has waned as college graduates have been unable to find jobs, have flouted traditional values and lifestyles, have required additional on-the-job training to fit them for their work, or have proven themselves incapable of the conceptual thinking and social concerns which were assumed of college graduates. Some have maintained even that basic research can better be done in other settings such as corporate or independent labs. Other institutions—the family, the churches and synagogues, museums, libraries, the media—are held to be more responsible and reliable in transmitting the general education expected of all citizens. Some even see that this climate of opinion is fostering a new wave of anti-intellectualism in American life. As a result, colleges have had to justify their existence in ways they have not had to do for nearly a half century. The realization by many faculty that they are not highly esteemed or well-remunerated has been shocking and demoralizing.

The final horseman which I see impacting colleges and universities is **ideological**. The faith in science which has provided much of the vision quickening college teaching and research has in our day come on bad times. The scientific method, so successful in the physical sciences, gradually came to be adopted in the nineteenth century as the preferred method in other fields as well for determining not only what can be known but also for deciding what is good for man. It is confidence in this ideology sometimes called Scientism, sometimes called Rationalism—even Modernity—which has cracked on our college campuses. Many faculty, to be sure, are still true believers. But, the students—that is a different story. Science's ability to secure knowledge to guide decision making is most limited in those areas of greatest urgency to students—the vision needed for personal and cosmic meaning, a source for values and morality and a basis for human community.

To make matters worse, Scientism has not been replaced by a new faith, and the resulting vacuum has led to a crisis in authority. Anarchy threatens the intellectual establishment.

Bill Pinson spoke eloquently of the effect on our campuses at the 1980 ASBCM meeting. "The problem is having no concept of who is in charge in the world, no ultimate commitments . . . no commitment to a source of authority beyond oneself. . . . It comes down to a life style where God is removed and a kind of basic secular humanism takes His place. . . . You are left with nothing except the individual as the source of authority, with me-ism."³ A case can be made that the appeal of authoritarian cults, the increase in violent crimes on campus, and the escapism of drugs and alcohol are all responses of students to the vacuum of ideology and authority on campus and in society.

These four trends not only impact the institutions themselves but also all the persons related to them. More stress and lower morale among faculty are being reported on many campuses as teaching opportunities are restricted, demands for productivity intensify, and as satisfying rewards both immaterial and financial are eroded. Demands for more scholarly productivity often become interpreted as "no matter what I do it will not be good enough." By turning increasingly to part-time and temporary faculty, colleges are creating a permanent academic underclass who like migrant workers will teach more hours, be paid less, and move frequently to follow available jobs.

Students, too, respond to the crises invading the campuses. Economic conditions for many have forced a deadly seriousness about grades if not their studies, more concern that education leads directly to a job, and less of a tendency to become involved in risky enterprises. Concern for security and material well-being are often held to be linked to a new conservatism and narcissism among students.

What are the implications for campus ministry? Changes on campus can lead to a response of trying harder to make old programs and old approaches work; but they can be also viewed as opportunities calling for new forms of ministry. First, consider opportunities for ministry to the institution itself. This is what Kenneth Underwood called kingly or governance ministries.⁴

Robert Greenleaf, a retired AT&T executive and author of **Servant Leadership**, has challenged all Christians to a ministry to institutions:

I believe that caring for persons, the more able and the less able serving each other, is what makes a good society. Most caring was once person to person. Now much of it is mediated through institutions—often large, powerful, impersonal, not always competent, sometimes corrupt. If a better society is to be built, one more just and more loving and providing opportunity for people to grow; the most open way (and the most effective and economical course, while supportive for the social order) is to raise the performance as servant of as many institutions as possible by voluntary regenerative actions initiated within them by committed individuals: **servants**.⁵

Campus ministry may be in a better position to help address issues of mission and direction than persons more responsible for the day-to-day management of institutions. One of the factors needed to effect change in any institution, according to some researchers of organizational development, is advocates—active, articulate spokesmen for change. “Advocates are often ‘marginal’ men, persons drawn from outside rather than from within institutions and who have become committed to new or different ways of doing things.” They must also have access to resources including people committed to the benefits of a new program of service.⁶ Since campus ministers are clearly on the margins of their institution and yet have access to many human resources, they are well situated to call together groups across disciplinary and structural lines to look at a problem, particularly from ethical and theological perspectives which are often avoided in academia. Because campus ministers generally have strong ties outside the college, they are in a position to draw in outsiders who can contribute to a solution.

The role the campus minister can best play here is probably that of catalyst. Most campus ministers are not experts in the philosophy, policies, curriculum, or administration of higher education, but most are experts in people. They generally are skilled in getting people together and to talking, talking at depth—examining assumptions, seeking connections between differing perspectives and pressing for practical suggestions for action. Campus ministries can also provide neu-

tral settings and places that would facilitate open and honest conversations.

Some of these overarching topics which campus ministries might help to be addressed on their campuses would be those suggested by the National Commission on Higher Education Issues—What is quality in education? What are spiritual dimensions of morale? What is the role of knowledge in decision-making?⁷ Another tack would be to address the ideological crisis. Specific topics are suggested in articles in **The Campus Minister** and the **NICM Journal** as well as denominational professional resources. Robert McAfee Brown provides a pertinent one in the **NICM Journal**, “Is there a Biblical perspective that can inform the educative process?”⁸

A second area of implications for campus ministry of current higher education trends are more personal opportunities with students and faculty. One good effect of the ideological vacuum on campus is that students and faculty are willing to consider options previously taboo. The February **AAHE** (American Association for Higher Education) **Bulletin** headlines read “The Growing Influence of Religion” and “The Impact of Belief.” Because of this greater attentiveness on campus, now is a time for forceful, thoughtful presentation of the Gospel both as it relates to persons and to all aspects of life. Many other “gospels” are being propounded in the plethora of religious groups and gurus found on our larger campuses. Instead of decrying the ideological vacuum on campus and blaming it on Secular Humanists or other scapegoats, campus ministers should, like the apostle Paul, see the opportunity, even the necessity, for faithful proclamation both in word and in the actions of a loving community of students and faculty.

The diversification of students should also signal a diversification of programming. What is planned for the older student, the minority student, the student who lives at home, the part-time student, the night or weekend-class student? How well are we encouraging and resourcing local churches in ministering to their own members who are at home at college? Frequently, these students have special needs; they are treated like independent adults on the campus and at work but like

dependent children when they go home. The Alban Institute is a research and development group which has given particular attention to local churches' ministry with students. Not all of what they suggest may apply to Baptists but much does.⁹

The financial needs of students may provide an opportunity for ministry. At least one state Baptist Foundation provides scholarship funds for students, which campus ministers may utilize in their ministries.

Finally, the need for pastoral ministries to faculty and staff has probably never been greater. As university operations become "lean and mean", to use the words of a university dean of students and former president of the American College Personnel Association, stress on individual administrators and faculty mounts.

How should a campus minister proceed in reshaping ministries in light of current trends in higher education? What I will suggest are the things effective campus ministers are doing anyway:

1. Develop at least a recognition vocabulary for the literature in higher education issues. The two best sources of information on higher education issues written in laymen's terms are **Change** and **AGB** (Association of Governing Boards) **Reports**. **Change** goes into greater depth while **AGB Reports** covers more topics in a summary fashion.¹⁰ Your goal would not be to become an expert on these issues. Most campuses have several of these anyway. Rather, some familiarity with the field would enable you to listen sympathetically, to understand something of the import of what is being addressed on your campus, and to help relate Biblical perspectives to the current discussions.

2. Determine what is happening on your campus. Where are discussions about institutional mission, the teaching of ethics/values, the questions of faith and learning, and personal meaning taking place? Who is involved? What aspects are being ignored? What conclusions are being arrived at? The answers to these questions should provide data to determine if programs to address institutional needs would be appropriate.

3. Assess the human costs. Who is getting hurt? Who is gaining? Are the interests of students and the public being adequately considered? What feelings are being evoked? What divisions or alliances are forming? Higher educators are notorious for not considering affective aspects and denying the political realities of a situation. This data should suggest directions for pastoral ministries.

4. Get together those persons who can address the issues from a biblical perspective but who might not otherwise talk to each other. Determine the aspects of the situation in which campus ministry can be truly facilitative. Even in the planning, a campus ministry can be a shared ministry of the body of Christ on campus.

5. Develop a strategy. Set goals for specific campus ministry actions. Secure resources and personnel. Execute and evaluate plans. And don't wait for someone to say thank you. The motivation of the servant to risk becoming involved in others' problems is merely to meet a need as Christ did.

Apocalyptic horsemen come and go. The surviving remnant holds the promise for the future and the opportunity for ministry.

Footnotes

1. Jerry Gaff, "Reconstructing General Education," *Change*, 13:6 (September, 1981), p. 53.
2. Chester E. Finn, Jr., "Toward a New Consensus," *Change*, 13:6 (September, 1981), p. 20.
3. Bill Pinson, "Crisis and the Campus Ministry," *The Campus Minister*, 4:1 (Winter, 1981), pp. 9-10.
4. Kenneth Underwood, *The Church, the University and Social Policy* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press), 1969.
5. Robert K. Greenleaf, *Seminary as Servant* (Peterborough, NH: Windy Row Press, 1981), p. 9.
Excerpts from Mr. Greenleaf's writings would provide a helpful starter for a discussion on the role of campus Christians in helping their college or university to serve better. Essays on servanthood by Mr. Greenleaf are available from Windy Row Press in bulk quantity.
6. Ernest G. Palola and William Padgett, *Planning for Self-Renewal* (Berkeley: Center for Research and Development in Higher Education, 1971), p. 79.
7. Thomas M. Stauffer, "The National Commission on Higher Education Issues," *Change*, 13:7 (October, 1981), pp. 1-52.
8. Robert McAfee Brown, "The Boundary Area between Biblical Perspective and Religious Studies," *NICM Journal*, 6:3 (Summer, 1981), p. 76.
9. Further information on this Commuter Student/Young Adult Ministry and the Thirty-plus Ministry projects may be obtained from the Alban Institute, Mt. St. Alban, Washington, DC 20016.
10. A subscription to *Change* costs \$18.00 (Helen Dwight Reid Education Foundation, 4000 Albemarle St., NW, Washington, DC 20016). *AGB Reports and News Notes* may be ordered from the Association of Governing Boards, 1 DuPont Circle, Suite 400, Washington, DC 20036 for \$35.00 per year.