

# The Campus Minister as Discoverer/Enabler of Gifts

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The college years seem to be, for many students, a time of learning, searching, and asking important questions such as "Who am I?" and "What do I want to do with my life?" Although these all-encompassing questions will not be fully answered during a student's pursuit of a college degree, the process and the search seem to intensify at this time.

Who we are to become and what we are to do are part of a "passage" in life, as Gail Sheehy would say. "The passage in which we are earnestly in transit between the intimate circle of family and the adult world extends roughly from the ages of 18 to 22. The tasks during this time are to locate ourselves in a peer group role, a sex role, an anticipated occupation, an ideology or world view."<sup>1</sup> College students in this passage age-group are often on their own and living away from home for the first time in their lives. The heavy demands of making important decisions about majors, careers, relationships, extracurricular activities, and use of time and money are suddenly upon them.

The intensity of the search for becoming and knowing, and the responsibilities of decision-making, make the college years a critical and a ripe time for the emerging, discovering, and sharpening of the spiritual gifts and natural talents of Christian students. I believe that finding who we are, what we are to do, and what is God's will for our lives is directly related to discovering our gifts and abilities. So, by virtue of the needs of our students, we campus ministers are thrust into the role of "discoverer of gifts."

A "discoverer" according to **Webster's New World Dictionary** is one who "finds out; learns of the existence of." A more appropriate title for the campus minister may be an "enabler" or "evoker" of gifts. An enabler is one who "calls forth or summons." We provide opportunities and encouragement so that students may discover.

The Church of the Saviour in Washington, D. C., utilizes

small groups for the evoking and exercising of gifts within their community. Elizabeth O'Connor, in her book **Eighth Day of Creation**, says of the group moderator, "His special responsibility is to see that every person is either exercising his gift or grappling with the naming of it."<sup>2</sup> We, as campus ministers, take on the role of moderator as we help students grapple with discovering and then utilizing their spiritual gifts.

The main listings of the spiritual gifts in the New Testament are found in Romans 12:6-8, I Corinthians 12:8-10, and Ephesians 4:11. The Old Testament mentions a number of gifts not listed in the New Testament. Some of these gifts seem similar to talents or natural abilities used for supernatural or spiritual purposes. Billy Graham has written, "I am not sure we can always draw a sharp line between spiritual gifts and natural abilities—both of which, remember, come ultimately from God. Nor do I believe it is always necessary to make a sharp distinction."<sup>3</sup>

Ralph Neighbour, Jr., on the other hand, feels that "the spirituals" (the translation of the Greek word used in I Corinthians 12:1) are much more than natural or physical talents.<sup>4</sup> As Ephesians 4:12 tells us, the gifts from the Holy Spirit are "to prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up. . . ." (NIV). Neighbour stresses, and I would agree, that "the spirituals" are given to us in order that we might be productive, functioning members of the body of Christ. A spiritual gift "becomes evident by the spiritual power seen in the ministry of the believer who uses the gift. Spiritual gifts point people to Christ."<sup>5</sup>

But in addition to our spiritual gifts, I believe that sincere Christians desire for all of their abilities, talents, and skills to be given in service to Christ and to be used for His honor and glory. In the rest of this article, I will suggest ways in which campus ministers help students discover their spiritual gifts and other natural talents and skills they may have. I will use the term "gifts" when I am referring to spiritual gifts specifically and the term "talents" when speaking of other natural abilities. The campus minister's goal in helping students become discoverers is to build up faithful, dynamic church members and self-fulfilled individuals who will use their talents for Christ's glory and in service to the world.

"Enabling" and "encouraging" are very nebulous-

sounding terms, yet I believe there are some concrete ways in which campus ministers help evoke the gifts and talents of their students.

One way is through **special Bible studies, seminars, and discussions**. This is an important way to lead students to understanding and discovering spiritual gifts. I have taught seminars at state BSU conventions on spiritual gifts and almost always the seminar room is packed. I do not believe that happens because I am a wonderful teacher, but rather because students have a great deal of interest in, as well as confusion about, spiritual gifts. They have heard the terms and they desire to see these gifts put into effect within their own lives. They are willing to learn about gifts.

As Baptists, we also teach the priesthood of the believer. We teach students that each individual has direct access to God through Christ and that each is accountable to Him for his/her salvation. Do we also teach that each believer is accountable to God for what He has given us and how we use His gifts? Do we teach that the discovery and utilization of our spiritual gifts is not optional but that they are entrusted to us that we may use them faithfully (as the parable of the talents illustrates in Matthew 25:14-30)? Our teachings on the subject of spiritual gifts is important in our effort to help students become discoverers.

A second way in which we help evoke gifts is through our **counseling with students**. I have found that Christian students tend to want to discuss majors, careers, and job options with a Christian counselor, even when they may already have been assigned an academic counselor or placement officer. Campus ministers often find themselves in this role of counselor because the students know the minister will understand when they talk about "praying about" their major or "seeking God's will" in choosing a career. This area of counseling may deal more with helping students recognize their own skills, talents, and abilities than their spiritual gifts, but it is an important aspect of helping students understand how God desires to use us in our uniqueness for His plans and purposes.

The September 2, 1983 **Monitor Memo** from the Research Department of the Baptist Sunday School Board analyzed value trends of college students (ages 16-24) in comparison with the total population. In the trend toward "meaningful work," 49

percent of the students surveyed strongly value and 46 percent moderately value the definition of meaningful work—“any work situation that provides a personal challenge, growth, and satisfaction—over and above income.”<sup>6</sup> That is, a total of 95 percent of the students surveyed moderately or strongly value meaningful work as compared to 86 percent of the total population valuing meaning above income.

If this value level holds true for our Christian students, then providing counsel on utilizing abilities and being creative in the search for careers and jobs are areas in which campus ministers may find themselves called upon to help.

I hasten to add that as a campus minister I do not feel competent to do all of a student’s academic or career counseling. Some campus ministers have specialized in these areas and can help students a great deal. I cannot give as much curriculum advice as an academic counselor, nor do I have as much knowledge about the business world’s hiring practices as a placement counselor. But I do feel that campus ministers can aid students in dealing with the ethical issues, philosophies, and creative use of their talents in making career and job decisions.

Campus ministers often counsel students who are considering church-related vocations. It is important for students to understand “calling” and gifts” when they are making decisions about the specific ways in which they will put their calling into action. They need encouragement, guidance, and teachings from a community of believers knowledgeable about spiritual gifts.

I believe it is also important for campus ministers to counsel Christian students who are choosing secular careers. They, too, will be utilizing God-given abilities in their work. God’s leading and His desire to use them for His plans and purposes are just as real and important for these students as they are for students in church-related vocations. In making career choices and understanding **what** they are to do, it is important for all students to understand for **whom** and **why** they do what they choose to do.

A third way in which campus ministers evoke gifts in students—and one of the most important ways in my thinking—is through **student leadership and participation in the campus ministry program**. I believe Christ has given us

an example of leadership-participation as we see how He taught and worked with His disciples. The disciples were constantly with Jesus, hearing His teachings, even when they did not fully understand, and watching His example. All along the way, Jesus included them and at times even gave them specific assignments. He asked their opinion about how to feed the five thousand and then He sent them to distribute the loaves and fish to the multitude. He sent them out in pairs to preach and heal. And they returned, rejoicing that His power was available to them.

So we help students, by our teaching, by setting an example, and by allowing them to take responsibility for and participate in the work of ministry.

Neighbour writes, "Christians who stand around waiting for the gifts to appear before they begin to minister, never do anything at all."<sup>7</sup> In order to evoke gifts from our students we must provide an abundance of non-threatening situations to discover possibilities.<sup>8</sup> Discovering involves having the opportunity to try—making mistakes, failing, succeeding, creating. And I believe that the way Baptist Student Unions provide the opportunities and possibilities for gift discovery and use through the BSU Council is one of the best things we do.

As we utilize the BSU Council to offer students the means for leadership and service, I feel that we can evoke both their spiritual gifts and their natural abilities and talents.

The whole process of applying and being interviewed for a council position causes a student to consider what he does well, in what ways she can serve and what he enjoys doing, considerations that open the door for discovery. Some council positions, by virtue of their definition, provide ways for students to practice their gifts: president—the gifts of wisdom and leadership; Bible study leader—the gifts of teaching and knowledge; ministry leader—the gifts of helps and mercy; outreach leader—the gift of evangelism. Other positions such as publicity leader, choir director, intramurals leader, and newsletter editor give students opportunities to develop skills and abilities such as artistic talent, musical abilities, athletic ability, and writing skills. In a responsible but non-threatening way, we are giving students the opportunity to try something they think they can do, to think and plan creatively, and to

carry out responsibilities. In so doing, they are beginning to give shape and form to their gifts and are sharpening their talents for God's use.

The BSU Council, with the help of the campus minister, provides a small group atmosphere for the nurturing and developing of spiritual gifts. Students are good encouragers for their peers.

As all campus ministers know, working with council members is time-consuming, requires patience, and can be frustrating. Yet in the midst of trying to keep the program organized and the projects moving toward completion, we need to remember that more importantly we are helping individual students learn responsibility, practice leadership and, yes, even discover their God-given gifts and talents!

Leading a council asks a lot of us. We must be sensitive to student needs and abilities. We must be willing to delegate responsibilities, be a guide, and push and prod when it would be easier to do it ourselves. We must be willing to say "yes" expectantly or "no" firmly to student ideas without crushing student eagerness and enthusiasm. We must allow individual creativity while considering the life and ministry of the whole group.

So we find ourselves working with students who are in that in-between youth/adult stage in relation to their mental, emotional and social development. They desire to know and be and do, and we are called upon to help enable them to make some discoveries in these areas. I see many Christian college students who are in this youth/adult stage in their spiritual growth. They have faith and some knowledge, but they need deeper understanding, guidance, and practical experience in order to become a vital part of the body of Christ.

Let us refer back to the fourth chapter of Ephesians where Paul, after listing the spiritual gifts and stating their purposes, speaks in verses 13 and 14 of becoming "mature," attaining the "fullness of Christ" and being no longer "infants." The analogy is one of growing up into adulthood. As we help students discover and exercise their spiritual gifts, and strengthen and dedicate their talents for God's purposes and His honor, then we are helping them to grow up into spiritual adulthood and maturity. And **growth** is a worthy goal as we seek to fulfill our role as enablers and evokers of gifts.

**FOOTNOTES**

1. Gail Sheehy, **Passages: Predictable Crises of Adult Life** (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1976), p. 39.
2. Elizabeth O'Connor, **Eighth Day of Creation: Gifts and Creativity** (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1971), p. 34.
3. Billy Graham, **The Holy Spirit** (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1978), pp. 197-198.
4. Ralph W. Neighbour Jr., **This Gift Is Mine** (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1974), pp. 20-21.
5. Ebbie Smith, Equipping Center module: **Discovering Your Spiritual Gifts** (Nashville: The Sunday School Board of the Southern Baptist Convention, 1981), p. 14.
6. Baptist Sunday School Board Research Department, **Monitor Memo** (Nashville: The Sunday School Board, Sept. 2, 1983) p. 2.
7. Neighbour, p. 84.
8. O'Connor, p. 47.