

The Campus Minister as Spiritual Pacesetter

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When I think of a pacesetter, I think of a superbly conditioned athlete competing in the marathon. He leads the other runners over the course, setting a pace that keeps him in front of the other runners, while saving enough energy for a final kick. As a campus minister I often feel like a runner, rushing from one place to another to cover the numerous tasks I am expected to complete. At times I wonder if I have the extra energy that is necessary to stay ahead for the remainder of the week or semester. Becoming a spiritual pacesetter and maintaining that role is as difficult to achieve as to define.

Defining the role of the campus minister as a spiritual pacesetter seems to be a redundant task. The thing that sets the campus minister apart from student personnel workers with the university is the fact that the campus minister works from a spiritual basis. The campus minister does provide a number of services that can be found in other places on campus: social interaction, intramural sports, counseling, leadership training, and service projects, for example. The one thing that sets the campus minister apart is his spiritual leadership.

Most campus ministers could be more financially successful in another profession, but they feel called to work on a college campus to help students grow spiritually. This sense of calling sets the campus minister apart since the motivation for being in his present setting involves more than worldly benefits. In acknowledging and responding to this call, the campus minister is taking on a monumental task that will provide little recognition. Helping students grow spiritually involves more than passing on seminary notes or facts that have been accumulated through reading. It means actually demonstrating the difference Christ has made in his life—becoming a flesh and blood illustration of what a Christian is.

One of the biggest disappointments of my life occurred upon my first application for a job with a Certified Public Accounting (CPA) firm. I had graduated from college with nearly a 4.0 grade point average in accounting and had two years of

work experience, so I felt pretty qualified for the job. Following a battery of standard tests produced by the American Institute of Certified Public Accountants, I was told that my accounting education was nearly worthless. I was hired because of other skills and told that I would be taught all of the accounting skills I needed through experience. I did learn those skills under the close supervision of a more experienced accountant and after less than two years received my certificate to practice as a Certified Public Accountant. It was amazing to realize how many of the memorized facts I had acquired in college were meaningless until I learned how to put them to use.

Just as I learned in my accounting career, the campus minister's role as a spiritual pacesetter is largely one of modeling—allowing students to see a person who is living a Christ-like life in the real world. The campus minister is not to be a perfect person, but one whose life is dynamic because of the presence of Christ. Just as I had to be shown certain accounting skills before I could become a good accountant, students need to be shown certain Christian principles. Teaching a person such basic principles is not very challenging, but it is necessary if we expect to see growth. I am assuming that we as campus ministers have already incorporated these things in our own lives. It is a fact that I had to learn my basic accounting skills from a good, accomplished accountant; even so, a young Christian must learn how to grow up in his faith from a mature, Christ-like campus minister.

Becoming a spiritual pacesetter is a matter of taking all the theory one has accumulated over the years and putting it into practice. I can study all of the theory on running and not be a great runner. The thing that makes one a runner is the application and practice of that theory. As campus ministers we cannot ask students to grow in their daily walk with the Lord if we are not willing to do the same in our own lives. If we are going to set the pace in the race, we must pay the price in practice. Too often we want the reward of victory without the discipline of preparation.

Personal discipleship is an ongoing, growing experience. If we ever feel like we have arrived at the top of the heap, this is a sure sign that there is still work to be done. It is easy to sit back on the knowledge we have already accumulated and impress students with our ability to quote scripture or cite

historical facts, but we still need to continue our own growth. It is amazing to see how quickly my resources dry up when I become stagnant in my walk with the Lord. Most of the people around me will not be able to see a difference, but I know and can see my effectiveness begin to drop off. The things that are most likely to replace our own spiritual growth are good things that appear to be good for the ministry. Once again we must examine our call to be a spiritual pacesetter and keep our own spiritual growth as a top priority item which is not to be shoved aside.

“So,” you say, “there is a need for me to be a spiritual pacesetter. I’m called to be a spiritual pacesetter and I need to practice more than theorize. Just how can I become the spiritual pacesetter on my campus?” You and I know that there are no magic formulas, but here are some of the things that have helped me.

Maintain a teachable attitude. As W. F. Howard constantly reminded us in our student work classes at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, “The way to succeed as a BSU director is to always be a student of student work.” In order to be an innovator there is a need to hear what others are saying and know what others are doing. Being in an academic atmosphere may cause us to close our minds to new ideas as a defense mechanism. If we want to be pacesetters, we need to know the pace of those around us.

Make yourself touchable. At times I find myself so wrapped up in doing the “right” things that I allow people who are hurting to pass right by me. We need to be open enough to allow students to reach out and touch us. Unlike the runner, when we lose touch with students we have lost our race to be effective campus ministers. Simply allowing a student to see a small part of what makes us “tick” can make a deep impression in that life. We all have a fear of losing our privacy if we are too open, but if we are not willing to be open with students, how can we expect them to be open with us?

Be patient with yourself and your students. As much as we would like to set the world aflame this year, we cannot be too hard on ourselves if we do not accomplish all of our life goals by June. We need to do our part and leave the results to the Lord. This is not a pat excuse to do poor work. We are working for God, and He knows the quality of our work

beyond the numbers recorded on a monthly report. Too often we see student work in the corporate mold. The harder we work the better the results. "Work hard and I'll get to the top." Not so! We are already at the top, working with the brightest minds with the most potential of anyone in the world. If we are truly called by God to work with college students, there is nothing in the world that could possibly constitute a higher calling. Even so, we need to be patient with students and encourage the potential they possess. Often they will not bloom until after they have left our ministry, but our job is to prepare them for that future time. We are to equip students to be the leaders for tomorrow, realizing that the only credit we may receive is a smile from the Lord. (That should be enough, shouldn't it?)

Be a prodder. Confront and challenge students to become Christ-like. We sometimes think that they will catch on if they hang around long enough. Unfortunately, most people are too lazy to be self-motivated. As a spiritual pacesetter, this means that at times we will need to tell a student what we honestly think about his present position and his future potential. This is one of the toughest parts of campus ministry, but if we are not willing to risk telling a student the way things are, who will? (Remember that's a **prodder**, not a **plodder**.)

Be a servant. It is hard to keep this attitude when dealing with students who are so young and immature. It is at times demeaning. But to be a pacesetter we must be servants. The problem is that this pace is so different from that set by the world. No one strives to be a butler or a maid, but we are called to be servants of God **and** His people. If we are going to set a Christ-like pace in spiritual matters, we must be willing to become servants. We will become servants only when we are able to follow Christ's example in John 13:1-17 and perform the most humbling tasks for our students.

Dr. Frank Leavell, the first secretary of the Department of Student Work of the Baptist Sunday School Board, made some comments in an address to the Baptist World Youth Congress in 1937 which remain relevant today:

All too few are the Christians who rise to their maximum capacity. Years ago, Dwight L. Moody invested his life in answer to the simple challenge of these words: "It yet remains to be seen what God can do with one man fully consecrated to Him." Today that demonstration is awaited. While

through the ages unknown Davids have arisen to slay terrifying Goliaths, the vast multitude of Christians have remained content to be average.¹

Are we as campus ministers willing to go one step beyond the others into new, uncharted directions? Are we willing to be the spiritual pacesetters, willing to be misunderstood? Who among us will accept Moody's challenge to be fully consecrated to God in order to give students a pathway to follow?

FOOTNOTE

1. Claude U. Broach, **Dr. Frank: An Informal Biography of Frank H. Leavell** (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1950), p. 2.