

Student Ministry Base Design: A Personal Response

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In the years since the 1981 Directors' National Workshop in Arkadelphia, few topics have been the subject of more rumors and debate in ASBCM circles than "base design." It was an ominous business. Some bigwigs in Nashville were meeting secretly to redesign *our* ministry. Worse still, the word was out that they were selling the farm to the superchurches, making BSU obsolete. The coincidence in time of the base design process and Charles Johnson's calls for increased emphasis on student ministry in the churches led to the assumption—an exaggeration, if not just plain wrong—that the balance of power in student ministry was shifting from campus to church.

On October 30-November 1, 1985, the officers of ASBCM met with the leadership of National Student Ministries (Charles Johnson, Bill Henry, Ed Rollins, and David Hazelwood) at Vanderbilt University to discuss a wide range of issues. One of the first things NSM did was to give us copies of the September 23, 1985, draft of the Student Ministry Base Design. It was a 100-page document produced by an interprogram team and submitted to the Coordinating Committee of the Inter-Agency Council of the Southern Baptist Convention. What we saw was a *draft* not yet approved by the IAC and therefore still confidential. It might be revised, but the hope of all concerned was that this draft would be approved in January 1986. I cannot quote from the base design and can only describe it in general terms, but I don't think I am violating NSM's intentions if I "leak" enough information to help you sleep at night.

Yes, friends, we have looked the monster in the teeth—and survived! The first response of all the ASBCM officers was: "Why all the secrecy?" Why not just distribute this document to all campus ministers and put all the rumors to rest? Just as we had been assured by NSM earlier, base design is a rather innocuous bureaucratic working-paper, grounded in current practice rather than in any radical re-visioning. We officers agreed that letting you read the document would be one of the most constructive things NSM could do.

But you will never see the base design unless someone “pirates” it and reproduces it. I have been tempted, mind you, but these comments are as far as I can go without violating the trust our Nashville colleagues have placed in us. Why is the thing classified? It is not simply that the paper is unfinished. The base design is not a public document and is intended for internal use only. It is the skeleton upon which the new *Student Ministry Guidebook* will hang, but you will only see it in its fleshed-out form. You’ll be able to guess what the bones look like from the appearance of the body, but it seems you’re as likely to see this skeleton as you are your own.

It will help to understand the function of a program base design. It is not a prescription of what you should do. It is primarily a description of what student ministry is on a local level for the guidance of SBC agencies as they work together to support that ministry. It is a conversation among agencies and programs of work led by NSM for the purpose of reaching a common understanding of the Southern Baptist program of student work, in order that all these agencies and programs might work together in ministry to students. I understand that many of us wish we had been included in the conversation, but it turns out that the participants had not gathered to talk *to* us but to talk *about* us, and only in the most favorable terms.

Every other program of work in the SBC has a base design. Student ministry is unusual in having functioned without such a document. This is not a statement of what NSM’s design should be; it is a design for a unified program of ministry to students which is led by NSM but involves many agencies and programs. It is to our advantage that someone—it happens to be Charles Johnson—is taking the leadership of *the* SBC program of student ministry and pushing such a design forward. The alternative is to have the relatively autonomous agencies and programs (for example, HMB, FMB, Sunday School, Church Training, WMU) charging ahead with their own programs of ministry to students without relating to NSM or BSU. The most striking example of this is the Sunday School Department’s “College Concern,” which caught many of us blindside. The stronger the leadership of NSM, the more effectively the interests of campus ministers will be served.

The student ministry base design is broken into three “volumes.” The first is “the *why* of a student ministry,” and deals with Biblical/theological foundations, history, philosophy, and

needs. The second section, "the *what* of a student ministry," describes the basic tasks and is largely concerned with how the various denominational programs contribute to the accomplishment of these tasks. The final volume looks a lot more like the old BSU guidebooks and is called "the *how* of a student ministry." Its focus is on organization and administration.

The "why" volume is least likely to irritate anybody. The foundation statements are extremely general but are statements we could all agree on. The historical summary is a bit more sanguine than necessary, I thought, without enough attention to real problems and failures. But what do you really expect in this type of document?

The 1970 recommendation to the convention which established NSM and the Student Ministry Advisory Group was noted and even appended in its entirety, but without comment. It struck more than one of the ASBCM officers that the recommendation had not been faithfully carried out. The chief action recommended was that the Sunday School Board

secure within its structure an organizational arrangement such as division, commission on campus ministries, or other entity, with a unique relationship, so as to: (1) encourage responsible creativity by personnel, (2) simplify administrative procedures, (3) provide a clearer national identity, and to (4) accelerate the publishing, printing, and distribution schedules so that materials can be relevant, and can speak to current needs.

It *still* sounds like a good idea! Instead we have NSM functioning as a department within a division, the very structure the study wanted to avoid. The organizational structure is such that it *discourages* creativity, *complicates* administrative procedures, *blurs* national identity, and *bogs down* publishing schedules. It also seems that the Home Mission Board has been too slow in "increasing support" of "its contribution of workers with students in newer convention areas." I don't know what happened to the formal review of the provisions by the Executive Committee mandated in 1972, but the Committee was also ordered to "keep under study the national program of student work," presumably to this day. A weakness of the base design is that the organizational structure at the *board* level is not dealt with at all since it focuses on ministry at the local level. Who *can* deal with the big picture? All the staff people say their hands are tied by their program assignments. It seems strange

that NSM was *not* created by the convention and its place in the structure was determined *contrary* to the convention, but now all that has become as untouchable as the Constitution and it will take an act of the convention to change things. In any case, none of this is Charles Johnson's fault or the assignment of the base design team.

The second volume of the base design may provoke some criticism, since it is the most substantial part of the paper, dealing with the intentions, structure, and relationships of a student ministry. A significant change is that the ten "emphases" of NSM are being replaced by nine "tasks," which are already serving as the basis for NSM planning. In this still unapproved draft, the nine tasks are: witness, church membership, ministries, life decisions, study, missions, worship, fellowship, and world issues/social action. This strikes me as an excellent list. It was reported that some state directors held out for the inclusion of world issues and social action as one of the basic tasks. Bravo! Guiding students in making life decisions about vocation, marriage, etc. is now a basic task rather than something that is tacked on. Bible study and theological reflection are seen as one task. International student ministry appears to have disappeared, but in fact it receives major emphasis under "ministries to persons," along with other special groups such as ethnics. Discipleship is not a separate task—and discipleship language is never even used in the document—because all nine tasks are seen as part of making disciples. Bravo again!

What may threaten some of us is that these tasks are not seen as BSU tasks only but as student ministry tasks. Under each task is listed an array of approaches and activities, some involving BSU, some involving pastoral ministries or church program organizations, some involving both. It must be said that BSU approaches are prominent under every task. We are simply discovering areas in which BSU and church programs are working toward the same objectives. It is also significant that the base design consistently calls for churches to minister through the standard program organizations rather than setting up a separate program for student ministry. There is absolutely no attempt to set up a church-based BSU or a student organization other than Sunday School classes and other college groups we've had for decades.

Part of this volume deals with the relationship of each task

to the others and the relationship of each program to student ministry. This is useful for inter-program coordination, but it's unbelievably bureaucratic. It's a little like writing job descriptions for your BSU council and then writing how each council member might interface with each other one. Your students wouldn't stay up all night reading such stuff.

The third volume gives information on BSU organization very similar to our old guidebooks. Organization for church ministry recommends using program organizations; it advises forming a student ministry council only in a very large church and only with leaders of program organizations, not an independently elected student group. The remaining material on administration, finances, and buildings is practical but common-sense stuff. From my newer-convention perspective, I am disappointed that the design in no way addresses the problems of finances or buildings for campus ministries in state conventions which cannot afford staff or centers. Perhaps that is the subject for another document. This document will no doubt serve its purpose, helping some gears to mesh and providing grease for the bureaucratic machinery.