

Where do We Go From Here?

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Although I am sure that this is poor journalistic technique, I am beginning this article with what is probably the ultimate disclaimer: I have not enjoyed writing this. If that confession does not keep you from reading the article, then maybe you can identify with some of what I am feeling.

It bothered me that every time I attempted to write on the topic assigned to me, "The SBC in the nineties: Where do we go from here?", I would become very fatigued. It dawned on me that this was not just my normal pangs of laziness or procrastination, but was an overflow of what I am carrying inside of me. I am sick and tired of the whole SBC controversy. The process of dredging up all of my concerns and thoughts about the convention and writing them down has not been a labor of love or even a catharsis of some sort; frankly, it has been quite a drag.

I guess it has been healthy for me to "actualize my angst" because evidently I am internalizing a lot of it, as I suppose many of you are. It is constructive that I have consciously acknowledged, for perhaps the first time, that the current climate of distrust and pettiness is truly all I have ever known as a Southern Baptist minister, beginning with my very first seminary days in 1978 until this present moment. I am definitely frustrated and angry at that and feel that something, like a birthright, has been stolen.

For all of my adult years this conflict has been at the forefront of everything I know to be Baptist: our conventions, our associational relations, the work of our seminaries, and the spirit of our local churches. It has

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even, sadly enough, affected relationships--for me some important ones--but I suppose civil wars always do.

Most importantly to us, this mess is affecting our students to the extent that many are shying away from investing their lives as Baptist ministers because they are confused. Some have even had their confidence shaken with the church as a whole. It is hard to blame them; it is hard to know what to tell them.

The confusion created by this "conflict" has certainly torn down some bridges that previously enhanced the work of the Baptist Campus Minister. As I seek to minister in Christ's name and through the support of the Baptist people. I find it increasingly difficult to translate exactly what that means to my students and staff. For many of them Baptists have become a confusing lot, or even worse, a cartoon of everything a religious people should not be.

The main thing I am adjusting to as I head into the nineties is dealing with the anger and fatigue I feel toward the whole denominational picture. I resent the chaos it has caused as I try to serve on a mission field I love so much. This "conflict" has caused much confusion and confusion is the last thing Campus Ministers need as we try to share the Good News on the college campus. It is probably the last thing all Christians need.

There is something else that the process of writing this article has uncovered that makes me even more uncomfortable. It is the realization that I am very skittish about communicating how I feel about all of this. My fears are fairly rational: a) I like my work; b) everyone certainly does not agree with my thoughts; and c) there is a risk in expressing these thoughts. I certainly do not know who will read this or how they will interpret it. So the better part of valor at times is some caution about what I say about Baptists since I work for them.

And yet that does not feel right. It is not my nature to be afraid of honest expression; personal expression of faith is a hallmark of our Baptist heritage. So I know other issues for me as a Baptist Campus Minister in the nineties will be how I express my personal faith in honest and prophetic ways and yet continue to do my work in partnership with Baptists as they are now?

With that gigantic preamble out of the way, here are my thoughts on what I plan to do from here:

1) I plan to remember that what I am doing is my personal response to what I best understand to be my place in God's world. I am in a particular place intentionally and I will try to be a good steward of each day.

How we find our place of service is a very individual and complex thing. That understanding of calling comes in a myriad of ways, but every Campus Minister I know feels it deeply. (Which one of us has not bristled at the implication that what we are doing is fine until we "get a little older" or as one well meaning saint put it one Sunday, "until we can find a church.")

I think it will be helpful in the days ahead to remember the simplicity of why I believe I am here. I am not here waiting for the denominational smoke to clear so that I can find my real job. I am not waiting to grow up and become a preacher. I serve in this place at this time because I feel that this is where I need to be. I am going to try remind myself of that calling regularly as stress and frustrations mount. There may be a lot I cannot control about days ahead, including the length of my tenure. That scares me very much; and yet I have committed myself to be a person willing to go where I need to be. Right now I think that is here. So I hope to do my best to keep my top effort in it until the day comes I understand my place of service to be elsewhere.

I recognize that this is not a goal that contains a lot of answers to the "What If?" questions that all of us have been spinning. I also understand that many of you are beyond this simple way of dealing with all of this, but for me that is an important step in handling the darkness ahead. I need to curb some of my anxiety about tomorrow by doing what I know I ought to be doing today.

2) I plan to live carefully my personal commitment to integrity. That looks like pretty pious language on the word processor, but I cannot think of a better way to express myself.

One of the ongoing questions in this time of conflict and change is, "When does it all change so much that I cannot be a part of it anymore?" Some of you have

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not asked this question, I know, but it is a very real issue for many.

I hope and pray that as I enter each new day of the nineties that I will keep in touch with those ultimate values and beliefs that make my faith mine. There is great temptation to fall prey to what is expedient when one is afraid. When think of family, career, and security I am sure the temptation to go along for safety's sake will be quite a temptation.

One the other hand, sometimes it is just as tempting to let temper and frustration guide us into some bad choices. To become a martyr is not always a noble thing.

Again, I feel all of this will come down to the personal nature of where we are and what we are doing. Every Campus Minister serves in a unique setting. In fact, everyone is a unique creature with personal beliefs, standards and way of handling conflict. It is quite possible in some settings and for some individuals that keeping integrity and remaining a Baptist Campus Minister will become impossible in the nineties. For some the personal nature of their beliefs and their place of service will not conflict with their job.

I hope to go into the nineties seeking a good balance in the matter integrity: not selling out precious personal faith for security, but also remembering the interesting advice of Earnest Campbell that "every battle isn't Armageddon."

3) I will also try to remember something that may not be good advice for anybody but me. The conflict within the denomination and my feelings about it should not become a cop-out for me and my attitude towards those for whom I work. Even though I might not feel good about issues that heat up a National Convention, and even though I might become completely heartbroken about changes in institutions I love, I am not excused from honest accountability to the people who put me out here. In my situation, that is the State Board of Missions and the Director of Campus Ministries. As long as I work for the Baptists, I am going to continue to be an open book for them to see and evaluate.

I do know one thing that the days ahead hold for us as Campus Ministers: the peculiar treasures called students that we seek to serve and love each day are worth what we are trying to do. They have great value for the future of everything that will ever happen in God's world and they have precious value to the God who indeed holds the future. May we be satisfied that for this day we have enough to do in Christ's Name for and with these students; may we be faithful stewards as tomorrow presents itself.