

## TRANSITIONS IN CALIFORNIA YOUNG ADULT MINISTRIES: A DANGEROUS OPPORTUNITY, 1993

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### I. Prologue to Crisis

The first indications that the California Southern Baptist Convention's financial difficulties would impact student ministry came in December, 1992. I was informed of the possibility of losing a very large sum from my 1993 budget. That was such a horrific possibility, that I immediately went into a classic denial state. It was unthinkable to even consider such an option. The ramifications were unacceptable.

After the turn of the year, the reality hit home. In an emotional meeting with convention administrators, I learned that my department was indeed going to lose \$150,000, and the only way to adjust for that was to eliminate ministry positions. Seven full time, and two part time Area BSU directors would lose their jobs. This action was to be recommended to the Convention's Executive Board for implementation in 1993, in preparation for revisions in the 1994 budget. I was assigned the task of providing transition processes, and suggesting ways to continue the ministry under different financial arrangements.

### II. Crisis

The facts of the crisis were hard to ignore. For years our convention had been struggling with plateaued Cooperative Program income, and increasing overhead. Ministry departments regularly had to reduce program spending eight to ten percent below budget just to stay in the black. The total convention staff had been reduced by 12 persons over the past six years. The 1993 closing of the print shop brought that number to 15. 1992 Cooperative Program income was \$802,000 less than the yearly goal. College and Singles Ministries alone had a year end deficit of \$62,000.(1). The crisis made radical financial rearrangement a matter of honesty and right stewardship.

That these decisions were fiscally necessary did nothing to soften the emotional blow. For convention administrators, it meant one more hard, unpopular, and difficult decision impacting persons' lives. It meant compounded grief about people and ministry. For me, it meant the end of a ten-year dream for campus ministry expansion. It also meant facing nine of my friends with the distasteful news of the loss of livelihood, income, insurance, and the opportu-

nity to exercise their campus ministry calling. For them, it meant emotional and physical upheaval, insecurity, fear, anger, and a deep sense of betrayal. The three days in February, 1993 when I had to tell these people this news face to face were the most horrific of my life, topped only by the illness and death of my wife two years before.

### III. Opportunity

In evaluating this new situation, I found my commitment to ministry as strong as ever, but I needed to adjust some of my ministry presuppositions. I realized my ministry target was larger than I thought. A simple comparison of census data showed that of the 3,412,257 married and single 18-24 year olds in California, 73% are in the world of work and society, living either at home, or in apartments, within the shadows of our churches. Of the total college enrollment, only 4% (72,957 students of all ages) lived in institution-owned on-campus housing.<sup>(2)</sup> UCL information told us that over 14,000 18-24 year olds are enrolled in California SBC Sunday Schools. I realized that while we knew how to approach the campus, we were unprepared to reach the age-group at large.

While some preliminary thought had been given to a long term young adult strategy, nothing was finalized in January, 1993. The Executive Board eliminated personnel positions, and gave approval for the development of a new concept. Everything was fluid from the beginning. At this writing, eight months after the events, those directions and strategies are just now taking shape. No grand scheme had been set in concrete, regardless of how it was reported by the press.

### IV. National Reaction

The Southern Baptist student ministry family reacted strongly to our situation. Rumors ran rampant and emotions high. For weeks, the only exercise some people got was jumping to conclusions. People talked to each other across country. Opinions often became fact without regard to reality. Folks were saying we were making decisions on matters we had not yet even had time to consider. Many failed to realize that we were and are in the throes of an ongoing transition.

Reacting in anger, one state decided to withhold California East-West Challenge gifts. They failed to realize that such an action did not punish the state convention, but did indeed hinder the work of continuing and deserving campus ministry. Others wrote strong letters of protest. Still others demanded why National Student Ministries did nothing to stop us. In the midst of this, I have been deeply disappointed that apart from continuing conversations with NSM, and others at the Baptist Sunday School Board, only two student ministry

leaders cared enough to ask me for and get a full briefing on the situation before coming to their own conclusions.

#### IV. The Issues at Hand

Before we could move from crisis to the opportunity of new approaches, I had to struggle with basic issues. I had to make them an integral part of my thinking, praying and strategizing. These same major issues must be addressed if campus ministry anywhere is to survive. The reaction of The Association of Southern Baptist Campus Ministries, as reported in the *Colleague* and the subsequent press release, reflected some of the issues.

##### A. Ownership

In spite of our traditional approach of asking local associations to provide program funds, we have seen limited local support for campus work. In the past, some associations accepted BSU as a state convention project, and then promised, but did not deliver, or delivered and then reneged on their promised program dollars. It is the rare California association with BSU that did not at one time or another cut or eliminate those funds.

At the same time, and regularly, there was conflict with Directors of Missions and other local "powers that be" over the supervision of area BSU directors (and other convention field staff). Who was the boss: the people that paid the salary, or the one to whom the BSU staffer related on a near-daily basis? More than one BSU area director had to be transferred over this issue.

In the ensuing months several of the associations with strong BSU traditions have continued their support. They have begun to pay stipends to staff, and recruited Mission Service Corps volunteers. They have blessed and encouraged campus ministry and ministers. This combination of situations led us to understand the importance of "ownership". Unless there is strong local sponsorship there can be no campus work that truly links campus and church. The "California model" does not call on churches to do campus ministry, but on local entities, i.e. the association, coalitions of churches, or individual churches to sponsor the work. The principle is basic: "If there is no local sponsorship or 'ownership' of a ministry, it will falter or even die, even if it is supported in other ways."

##### B. Vision

It seems our loyalty to a specific target group has blinded us to broader perspectives. Campus ministers are generally cutting edge people - a fact they often and loudly trumpet. Yet, when it comes to creating cutting edge solutions to pending problems, they are reactive. Is the task of BSU to preserve a form and method of work or funding, or is it to reach students for Christ, by

whatever legitimate means possible? Why cannot student ministry claim the high ground and be in the leadership in a bold campaign to reach an entire population segment?

Campus ministers have yet to deal with what will happen when the money runs out. What will they do when the customers, (local churches) who support them through denominational agencies find it no longer economical to do so? What will happen to those ministers? The issue is not whether the calling of campus ministry is viable and valuable. The issue is, given limited resources, can the church and denomination continue to do campus ministry in the same way it has for 70 years?

### C. Strategy

There has been a great void in our strategy. We have had no comprehensive plan for reaching non-college young adults. As stated previously, in California fully 73% of 18-24 year olds are not at any given time enrolled in college or university. According to ASBCM's ministry statement 50% of high school graduates attend college. That means that 50% do not. Is there any reason why state and local campus ministries cannot be on the forefront of empowering churches to reach all young adults?

### D. Finances

Campus ministers are often naive, or unresponsive to financial realities. Our attempt at endowment fund raising is a clear example. For several years the California BSU endowment fund had \$12,000 as principle, later increased to \$60,000. Every year the fund earned about \$4,500 in interest, which was used for director training and an Annual Director's Workshop.

To celebrate the BSU's 40th anniversary in 1985 we planned an ongoing endowment campaign. All directors, both professional and volunteer, agreed as a group to raise or donate \$3,000 a year for five years to this fund. The year of the endowment campaign came and went with little results.

The sad part was that directors were never willing to make increased endowment a reality. Few to none were willing to donate their money to reach the \$3,000 a year goal. The very mention of contributing brought spasms of agony and anguish, and "don't touch my money". MSC volunteers and their area director supervisors adamantly refused to solicit their supporters for donations or allow us to do so. There was no viable internal commitment to the endowment effort .

We can imagine, that, had there been a large endowment fund, the outcome of our budget crisis would have been different. I feel the demise of convention-sponsored campus ministry positions was at least partially the result of lack of director vision, support, and commitment to endowment devel-

opment.

I am concerned for the financial future of campus ministry. I am concerned that campus ministers will neglect the truth in the statement: "While students are our market, the churches are our customers." If we do not deal with our customers we will not be able to reach our market. I'm concerned that we will continue to pay lip service to the need for national and local student ministry endowment, and yet do nothing about it. I would hope that ASBCM will cooperate closely with those working to have a national endowment campaign for student ministries. BSU is expensive. It is personnel and salary intensive.

People are already asking questions such as: "what are we really getting for our investment?". Someday soon someone is going to wake up and realize that \$50,000 a year for overhead on a deteriorating student center might be best used elsewhere. Those past and present luxuries may well be threatened.

Campus ministers will have to find creative and less expensive ways to do the ministry to which God has called them. We must find different means of providing people the full-time opportunity to minister where they want. Southern Baptist campus ministers have no other choices. It would be a shame for campus ministry to discover it is in one place and the denomination which enables it to minister, is in another, leaving it on sinking sand without foundation or support.

#### E. Attitude

The downside to the strong sense of call to ministry through BSU is an almost overbearing spiritual pride and arrogance. The demand has been subtly, and blatantly, communicated: "God called us; We deserve to be paid; You must pay us." This attitude ultimately contributed to our situation. Actually, the issue was not that attitudes were so bad in public, but attitudes prohibited directors from reading and reacting properly to the danger signals. Attitudes adversely affected relationships with churches, associations, the convention, pastors, and DOMs. Attitudes prohibited campus ministers from seeing legitimate supervisors as allies rather than adversaries.

As both local and state BSU director, I sometimes felt like a denominational step-child. We all did. That paranoia made it very easy for us to believe that "they were out to get us". That attitude led us to isolate ourselves from the very persons who enabled us to minister in the first place. In the end, our attitudes contributed to our downfall.

#### F. Accountability

Campus ministry often acts like a law unto itself, accountable to itself alone. While our mouths say that BSU is "the link between the campus and the church" our hearts have forgotten this. We say we are church-related, but act

like para-church groups. Campus ministries must remember that Christ died for the church, not BSU. We need to have our fingers on the pulse of denominational life enough to know of the resurgence of the importance of the local church. Campus ministry must build alliances with and gain support from local churches. It must prove indispensable to the ministry of local churches or it will not survive.

## V. Toward a New Model

Unexpectedly, I am experiencing a renewed clarity of vision. I realize that there are more than two times more young adults out there than we have been focusing on. I realize that no one in Southern Baptist life is doing anything strategic for those young adults not enrolled in college. I realize that in order for campus ministry to survive it must be coupled with strong church ministry to all kinds of young adults. Since we can no longer do ministry "business as usual" we must now do it differently, from different bases, with a broader perspective. We are re-strategizing and rethinking our presuppositions. In so doing most of our BSU heritage is retained, and some good new stuff is being added.

### A. Restating the Purpose

Working within the framework of the state convention's missions statement, objectives, values, presuppositions, and priorities in California, we restated our understanding of the purpose of any ministry regardless of who does it. Simply put, that purpose is to win young adults to faith in Christ, nurture them into Christian maturity, and send them to share their faith in word and deed. This is the reason a Sunday school class or a church fellowship or a BSU exists.

### B. Restating the Values

Secondly, we restated the values for such a ministry, to which it would conform its organization, content, and activities:

1. It would be sponsored and initiated locally by a church, an association, or a consortium of churches, with or without the direct involvement of the state convention.
2. Local sponsors would be empowered to do the ministry with a minimum of outside direction.
3. It would be driven and staffed by those passionate about the ministry.
4. Its prime directive would be to bring young adults to a saving knowledge of Christ.
5. It would disciple and grow Christians as persons, believers, and leaders.
6. It would be participant led and "owned".

7. It would develop and train participant leaders.
8. It would develop and train sponsor-selected leaders.
9. It would be available to assist in starting churches and missions.
10. It would draw its financial support from a multitude of resources.

### C. Doing the Research

To get a correct understanding meant holding our philosophical bias and statistical preconceptions in abeyance. We researched the census data. We needed to know who and where these people were.

Next, we searched the literature. We looked at Fowler, and Gribbon, and all kinds of Single Adult material. The growing literature on Baby Busters proved helpful; everything from Barna, to Raines and Bradford, to Littwin, to Strauss and Howe. These books and articles gave us the generational and developmental framework for valid and developing understanding of the current generation of 18-24 year olds.

Then we had to find out what our constituency was thinking about this ministry. We used face to face meetings and written surveys. Eighteen think tank/listening sessions were held all over California, with 122 persons participating. We sent a written survey in English, Spanish, Chinese, and Korean to every California pastor, and many church leaders. We received 59 replies. In a second survey 100 leaders of young adult groups described their church's ministry to this group. Finally, we asked 126 young adults themselves to describe their "dream church". This information will be invaluable for future consultation and leadership training.

### D. Getting Organized

We knew from the outset that passion-driven people would continue to do campus ministry, with or without the financial aid of the convention. We knew that our Great Commission mandate made campus ministry an absolute necessity given our student population and the numerous strategic campuses here. Our concern was to organize to do it without Cooperative Program dollars.

We knew that churches were already ministering to young adults as a regular part of their Sunday School program with no real way to adequately train their teachers in the fine nuances of young adult ministry. Convention directives had increasingly focused on strengthening and supporting the ministry of each local church.

We developed a two track approach. The first was campus ministry. It will still be given the logistic support it had been receiving. Two part time coordinators were placed on contract. One is responsible for coordinating all the now-independent campus ministry entities, and the other is to help sponsor-

ing groups strategize to start student churches on, or near college campuses. This track is administered by the division director.

The second track is church ministry to young adults, for which I am responsible. It will work aggressively and directly with churches to strengthen their ministries by training teachers and participant leaders. It will provide leadership networking and participant enrichment opportunities. It will help churches in the area of Sunday School and Discipleship Training. Eventually, it will employ up to three part time consultants to work directly with pilot projects and other churches.

### Conclusion

The Chinese characters signifying the word "crisis" mean "dangerous opportunity." The danger exists that we will be unable to carry out the Great Commission on our college campuses, or to reach the rest of this age group. The opportunity exists to do that vital ministry in radical, and not so radical new ways. It is the chance to awaken and enlist a whole new army of ministers to young adults. It is the opportunity to expand and empower a broader base of operations for reaching this group.

Is there a "California model"? Yes, financial issues have brought it into existence. Is it viable or successful? While it looks promising and productive, at this time it is too early to tell. But, like everything else, what happens here eventually moves east. When your campus ministry financial crisis comes, you will encounter the same issues, and you will have to deal with them.

### Footnotes

- (1) *The California Southern Baptist*, February 4, 1993
- (2) 1990 Census Data provided by the state of California; *College Facts Chart: 1991-92*. Spartan, S.C.: The National Beta Club; Personal phone calls to the University of California, the California State University System, and the California State Community System, public relations offices.