

BOOK REVIEW

The Abandoned Generation: Rethinking Higher Education, by William H. Willimon and Thomas H. Naylor (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995). 171pp.

If Baptist campus ministers desire to function professionally as something more than “transplanted” church youth leaders, then theological reflection upon the purposes and direction of higher education is a vocational necessity. Campus ministers need to develop the habit of critical analysis and insightful evaluation of the higher education contexts in which God and the churches have called them to serve. Faced with this daunting task, Willimon and Naylor’s *The Abandoned Generation* provides campus ministers with some easily accessible insights and perspectives for approaching the challenge.

Based upon their long years of service in higher education, Willimon (currently dean of the Chapel at Duke) and Naylor (an emeritus professor of economics at Duke, who is currently a lecturer at Middlebury College in Vermont) offer both a thoughtful lament and an impassioned plea for a change in the direction and values of American institutions of higher learning.

In brief, the book focuses upon the crisis of meaning faced by American students. Willimon and Naylor succinctly summarize their analysis as follows:

The three most visible symptoms of the crisis in higher education are (1) substance abuse, (2) indolence, and (3) excessive careerism. Underlying these symptoms are three fundamental problems: (1) meaninglessness; (2) fragmentation of a student’s life into unrelated, incoherent

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components; and (3) the absence of community [p. 15].

Most campus ministers will recognize the students whom Willimon and Naylor describe and will resonate with the numerous colorful anecdotes and pithy illustrations which punctuate the pages of each chapter. As the writers trenchantly observe, given the current consumer-oriented situation of higher education, "About the best we can hope for is satisfied customers rather than open and honest friends" (p. 35).

What makes this book most valuable, however, is not its on-target analysis or its true-to-life examples, but the authors' strategies for change. This work is not just a lament, but a proposal for reform. Four "strategies" are advocated: "(1) restructuring the academy, (2) teachers who teach [i.e., redefining faculty roles and rewards], (3) curriculum reform, and (4) the rediscovery of colleges and universities as learning communities" (p. 18).

Among the ideas for restructuring, the most radical is the authors' vision of shifting undergraduate higher education towards "decentralized liberal arts colleges." This would involve two major steps: (1) "during the next decade, we are proposing that large universities basically withdraw from the undergraduate teaching business" (p. 106) and (2) "to finance the shift . . . we would close many redundant state-supported professional schools and graduate programs" (p. 107). Beyond the issues of access to higher education that such downsizing raises, the task of finding leadership for such massive changes seems formidable.

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As part of their proposals for curriculum reform, Willimon and Naylor advocate the institution of a required first-year “search for meaning” course, similar to those in which they have been involved at Duke, Middlebury College, and the University of Vermont. Their model course, summarized in the Appendix, ironically reveals the fragmentation which afflicts even the most skillful and best-intended efforts in this area. The course resembles a smorgasbord of modern Western culture, rather than revealing a clearly integrated vision. One wonders whether this really represents any significant improvement over the infamous required courses on “Western civilization” or “classics in translation” which have been imposed upon generations of unwilling entering American undergraduates.

In short, while the authors effectively point to some major issues confronting American higher education, the “solutions” simply offer beginning points for lively debates regarding reform.

Baptist campus ministers, by virtue of the context of their calling, have both a professional interest and a moral obligation to become involved in discussion of the issues which Willimon and Naylor raise. This book offers an invitation to dialogue. Will we join the conversation?

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