

Changing Paradigms in Collegiate Ministries

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Introduction

During 1997, Southern Baptists celebrated the seventy-fifth anniversary of Baptist student ministry. The denomination used 1922 as the beginning date of Southern Baptist student work because Frank Leavell established the first "southwide" office of the Inter-Board Commission on Student Religious Activity ministry in Memphis in 1922. In reality, Baptist ministry with college students goes back to the founding of Baptist colleges in the early days of the republic. Before there was a "southwide" program of Baptist student work, there were Baptist lay people on campuses and in local churches doing ministry with college students. Baptist student ministry was a true grassroots movement.¹

In the grand scheme of history, we are dealing with a relatively young ministry. I entered college in 1961. If we use 1922 as the "official" beginning point of the Baptist student ministry, the work was only 39 years old when I started college! The Southern Baptist Convention itself is only 152 years old, and it continues to change (please note the massive reorganization occasioned by the Covenant for a New Century). Southern Baptists' ministry with college and university students also continues to evolve. One could take a snapshot at any point in the last 75 years and say, "This is what Baptist student ministry looks like." Such a statement would be erroneous. Our ministry with students is dynamic and changing.

The purpose of this article is to review briefly several trends which are impacting Southern Baptists' ministry with college students and then to consider some constructive responses to these trends. My list of trends and responses is not meant to be definitive. I am certain that the reader will identify other significant environmental factors and come up with other creative responses.

Assessing the Environment

Let us consider a few trends which impact our collegiate ministry at the end of the twentieth century.² I will try to find something good to say about each of these, although it may be hard!

- *The "Controversy."* Since 1979, the national entity known as the Southern Baptist Convention has been transformed. The transformation reached its climax in the implementation of the Covenant for a New Century. The "controversy" is now making its mark on the state Baptist conventions.

Several months ago, a meeting of moderate Baptists was held in a southeastern state. The question was asked, "What in our state convention is worth saving?" After a few minutes, someone said, "Our Baptist college." "Anything else?" After a few more minutes, someone said, "BSU." Then the question was asked, "What are we going to do?" There was silence.

Consequences of the transformation are many, but one which specifically impacts collegiate ministry is apathy. Even those who are "friends" of collegiate ministries are tired of the battle. The younger pastors are investing themselves in their own churches and are not particularly concerned about denominational politics on either the national or state levels. Since the greatest financial investment in collegiate ministry is made by state conventions, our work is particularly vulnerable.

- *Collapse of Denominational Cooperation and Agreements.* In the new Southern Baptist Convention, every agency is out for itself. In the Virginia Baptist state paper, editor Mike Clingenpeel wrote, "Autonomy is the basic ingredient of Baptist polity. Autonomy, however, is as likely to produce competition as cooperation. Baptists now practice autonomy with an emphasis on competition."³

The national structures of cooperation (such as the Student Ministries Advisory Group) with which we have worked for almost thirty years are gone. The International Mission Board (IMB) has a renewed emphasis on work with college students and international students. The NAMB is focusing on church starts, urban ministry, and reaching high school and college students. National Student Ministry is emphasizing major national events that will involve partnering with parachurch groups such as the Fellowship of Christian Athletes.⁴ There is no longer a single "national voice" for collegiate ministries and certainly no national voice promoting a distinctive Baptist identity.

There is a positive side to this situation. It does provide some opportunities for Baptist collegiate ministries on the state and local levels to develop direct partnerships with the IMB, NAMB, and other Baptist entities without these efforts being "brokered" through National Student Ministry.

• *A "Post-denominational" Age.* Baptist historian Bill Leonard has said, "This is a bad time to take over an old denomination or try to start a new one."⁵ Although many declare this a "post-denominational" age, the death knell may be premature. Denominations will survive, but the way they operate will change. Consultant George Bullard notes that "grassroots ecumenism or transdenominationalism is on the rise. We will likely see increased cooperation between denominations and various para-church Christian groups. . . . Denominations are not dead or dying, but changing to new forms in the 21st century."⁶

With the de-emphasis on denominations, what will be the source of future Baptist church leaders? One campus minister said, "I still believe there is a place for making little Baptists. I have never apologized for it. Just because there is a trend away from denominationalism does not mean we should stop trying to train up new leaders for Baptist churches. The Campus Crusade model will never do this."⁷

• *The "Domestication" of Collegiate Ministry.* Baptists' ministry with college students has always been innovative. Collegiate ministry introduced Southern Baptists to volunteer missions and short-term mission projects. We have always been on the "cutting edge" of ministry, but now concerns about liability and accountability (from accountants and lawyers) are blunting that edge. This is a common aspect of American society at the end of the twentieth century. Columnist George Will noted, "Girl Scouts must sell 80,000 boxes of cookies just to pay their liability insurance."⁸

In spite of this effort to "neuter" collegiate ministry, we continue to see creative, aggressive ministries on campus. Ministry will always involve risk, but we must determine what is an acceptable level of risk. If we cannot take some risks, we might as well get out of the ministry.

• *Organizations in Flux.* In state Baptist conventions across the country, a rash of "reorganizations" seems to reflect faddism rather than true reform. Although most of these restructuring efforts have the goal of "serving the churches more effectively," they are often difficult for the local churches to comprehend or accept. Organizational change agents stress that it takes five to six years for corporate cultures to change. Some state convention reorganizations do not last that long as the conventions continue to "tinker" with their structures.

In all of this, there is no consensus about where collegiate ministry fits. In Tennessee, collegiate ministry has been placed in the Christian Growth Development Group with the former programs of Sunday School, Discipleship Training, Family Ministry, and Media Library. In South Carolina, the Campus Ministry Department is part of the Evangelism Growth Team (although this is the third location for the department in eight years). In Oklahoma, collegiate ministries is part of the Church Outreach Team along with missions and

evangelism. In the Northwest convention, the program is assigned to the Leadership Services Group with functions such as stewardship and church administration. In Virginia, there is still a Student Ministries Group but there are added assignments to transition high school students into college and support church ministries with college students. The Canadian Convention of Southern Baptists still has a National Student Ministries Consultant. In Arkansas, the Student Ministries Team is one of seven teams in the state convention's new structure.

On the national level, reorganization seems to be less about efficiency than about the concentration of power and the financial "bottom line." A committee of the Baptist General Convention of Texas reported that some see the reorganization of the SBC as "centralizing authority" and "efforts to control state conventions."⁹ There also seems to be an increasing concern among some national SBC agencies about profitability of ministry activities. The question has changed from, "Can a ministry with college students pay for itself?" to "How can we make a profit on work with college students?"

Although all of these reorganizations--state and national--seek to "serve the churches more effectively" and talk about "vision" and "the future," they tend to ignore the need to invest in future leaders for the churches through viable, creative, Baptist-oriented collegiate ministries.

• *Attempt to Redefine the Identity of College Students.* Are college students to be considered young adults or older youth? The use of the inclusive term "student ministry" to cover everyone from middle school or junior high through college ignores years of research in human development.¹⁰ The nature of collegiate ministry is to "pull" college students toward full adulthood rather than encouraging them to identify with youth. Both the Baptist Sunday School Board and the North American Mission Board seem ready to put aside years of research and lump college young adults with youth. For example, the Student Volunteer Mobilization unit (Student Missions Department) of the NAMB includes not only summer and semester missions (for college students) but also youth mission teams and World Changers (which is primarily a youth program).

Cooperative relationships with youth ministers can benefit collegiate ministries, but ministry with college students must have a different focus, dealing specifically with the developmental needs of young adults.

• *Generational Changes.* Generational theory and its emphasis on the common characteristics of age-related segments of the population has transformed our way of looking at marketing, politics, culture, and ministry. William Strauss and Neil Howe are leading proponents of this approach.¹¹ The Baby Busters or Generation X have been on our campuses for several years. They are "spiritual" but not necessarily Christian. They exhibit shifting loyalties with no allegiance to denominational labels. Some of them resent

Boomers (the older generation) for "holding them back" and controlling all the resources. They tend to be alienated and self-sufficient.¹²

The "millennial" or "bringer" generation is coming or may already be with us. What will they be like? Some say that they are the next "power builders" or civic-minded generation.¹³ Only time will tell, but this provides me with some hope!

- *The Virtual Campus.* Leadership guru Peter Drucker recently wrote, "Thirty years from now the big university campuses will be relics. Universities will not survive. It is as large a change as when we first got the printed book."¹⁴ Technology will bring (in fact, is already bringing) classes to residence halls, apartments, homes.

Despite Drucker's warning that college campuses will become wastelands, at least one campus minister indicates that "a large number of parents will continue to buy reputation rather than value."¹⁵ There are people standing in line to pay the \$20,000 to \$30,000 annual expenses at prestige schools (such as Harvard, Yale, Princeton, Stanford, Duke, Emory, and Vanderbilt).¹⁶ Since these "high end" schools produce leaders in business and government, do we want to give up on them? Other campus ministries specifically target these overachievers.

Undoubtedly, the primary impact of the on-line, "virtual campus" programs will be on community college students, lower division students in large universities, and non-traditional students. There are aspects of technological innovations (such as E-mail) that we can use to our advantage in collegiate ministry.

- *Postmodernism.* There is a new way of thinking that pervades our society and our educational system. It is called post-modernism. It is not a fad, and it will be with us for the foreseeable future. Stanley Grenz in *A Primer on Postmodernism*¹⁷ illustrates this by pointing out the difference between two popular television series: *Star Trek (The Original Series)* and *Star Trek: The Next Generation*. In *ST:TOS*, man could solve all problems with logic and intellect if given enough time and study; and human standards were superior to alien approaches. In *ST:TNG*, there is an awareness of man's fallibility, as well as a strong emphasis on negotiation and respect for all cultures and life forms. Spock wanted to be purely logical; Data wants to be human.

Our postmodern culture is less rational and more metaphysical. We are painfully aware of human limitations and the failure of science to solve all of our problems. Remember the Challenger explosion? We are not only into diversity. We have also embraced relativism. In fact, our world is philosophically much like the one that Jesus and the first century church faced. That is quite a challenge!

Positive Responses

What can we do in light of these trends and others unnamed? They provide us with a number of opportunities. Here are a few responses and some examples. Perhaps you will add others.

- *Paradigm shifts.* We will have to change the way we “have done business” for the last couple of decades. This will mean new approaches to funding such as Baptist Collegiate Ministries of Memphis. When the local Baptist association decided to phase out its support of collegiate ministries in the area, the Executive Board of the Tennessee Baptist Convention established a subsidiary corporation with its own board of directors. This entity allows local churches to continue funding and to provide guidance to the collegiate ministry. Campus ministers are still TBC employees, but they are “loaned” to the corporation to carry out the ministry.

The new environment may well mean fewer student center buildings, more staff members with multiple campuses and/or multiple ministries, campus ministers as adult educators and equippers of volunteers for direct ministry with students, and “worker-priest” staff and intentional bi-vocational personnel on college and university campuses.

In this setting it might be helpful to recognize students as a “people group” requiring a mobile, site-flexible ministry rather than ministering in fixed geographic locations. The best placement for collegiate ministries may be with the evangelism program of the state convention.

- *Partnerships.* Although we have often said that collegiate ministry is the hand of the churches reaching out to the campus, our talk did not always match our actions. Working with churches is not an option; it is a necessity. We must be a resource to the churches and be proactive in developing partnerships with churches. Every campus minister must be ready and equipped to resource and train lay workers with students in the local churches.

We must develop other partnerships as well. When we overcome our pride, we can find friends in a number of places. These include other denominational ministries, ecumenical organizations, student affairs personnel, and local businesses. Habitat for Humanity is a good model for this type of partnering. They form alliances with churches, businesses, and community organizations which share their goal of providing quality, low-cost housing for people. And they do this without compromising their identity as a Christian organization.

Ask yourself this question: “How can we make our collegiate ministry ‘indispensable’ in this community?” Answering this question led Steve Roper at Cleveland State Community College (Tennessee) to establish Ocoee

Outreach. This ministry involves not only students but the local association, churches, area businesses, and visiting mission teams to improve the housing for people in this southeast Tennessee county.

- *Proactive in outreach.* More of our programs must be geared toward the secular student. We must engage the "seekers" in our college settings. The methodology will differ from place to place, but for many of us this will require a broader concept of ministry which moves beyond nurture to discipleship and evangelism. At the same time, we must find ways to develop relationships with prospective students from Baptist churches before they get to college. Networking with key youth ministers is a significant first step.

- *Proven approaches.* Baptist ministry with college students has always emphasized personal relationships. We are an "incarnational" ministry which stresses interaction between students and the personal ministry of the campus minister. This will be harder in the future, but it will still be important.

Leadership development is an area where we have excelled, but there is always room for improvement. Don Shockley, leader of United Methodist campus ministry says of his denomination's work, "We must be intentional about the role of campus ministry in preparing a new generation of Christian leaders."¹⁸ We have developed leaders through two emphases characteristic of Baptist collegiate ministry: small groups and missions involvement. In a "high tech" culture, the "high touch" experience of small groups (Bible studies, discipleship groups, leadership teams) fills a vital need in the lives of students. In a like manner, personal involvement in missions is not only a ministry but an important way to reach and involve students.

- *Priesthood of Believers.* Baptists say that we believe in the giftedness of all believers. Are we ready to practice it in collegiate ministry? Professional campus ministers need to learn how to give the ministry back to the laity. It was started in churches and on college campuses by committed lay people. They should be key players today. More than ever before, people want to be participants, not observers. They will support those things in which they participate, so we need to find ways for them to get involved in this ministry.

Conclusion

Collegiate ministry may be facing the greatest changes in its history. It is a challenging and exciting time. How will we respond?

Leonard Sweet of Drew University has observed that there are three ways to respond to the "wave of the future." One can say, "It's not really a

tidal wave. It's different out there but not that different." That denial will lead to the demise of effective ministry.

A second approach is to respond, "Yep, it's a tidal wave and I'm outta here." This withdrawal creates an isolated counterculture of like-minded people, but what does this do for a hurting world? Not much.

The third approach is to say, "Surf's up!" Can we learn how to ride the new wave? Sweet says that other Christians are learning how to do it. "They're doing it by relying on the first seven words of the Church: "I can do all things through Christ."¹⁹

1. For a brief review of the beginnings of the student ministry, see Samuel Sanford, Jr., *Baptist Campus Ministry at Crossroads* (Franklin, Tennessee: Providence House Publishers, 1997), 19-38.

2. Executive Board Ministries of the Tennessee Baptist Convention is using the term "collegiate ministries" to denote the convention's ministry with college and university students. Several other states have adopted this same terminology. By the time this article is printed, the Baptist Sunday School Board may have adopted this as well. The use of the term is an attempt to clarify the focus of the ministry, since many churches (and some denominational agencies) now use "student ministry" to encompass everything done with junior high or middle school students through college.

3. "Editorial: The Chaos of Autonomy," *Religious Herald* (May 8, 1997).

4. "NSM launches 'radical' initiative to reach 21st century students," Baptist Press release, August 15, 1997.

5. "Perspectives on Baptist Denominationalism: Anticipating the Future," *Findings* (Atlanta: Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, 1996), 103.

6. See William Easum, *Dancing with Dinosaurs* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1993), 29; also George Bullard, "Things I have Learned: One Year as National Consultant for Denominational Transformation," *The Bullard Journal* (May 1997).

7. Personal conversation.

8. "Consensus and Ladders," *Newsweek* (May 12, 1997), 92.

9. "Texas Baptist study committee suggests publishing venture," Associated Baptist press release, August 27, 1997.

10. This writer's Doctor of Ministry project, "Equipping Church Leaders for a Ministry with Carson-Newman College Students" (Southern Seminary, 1984), reviewed the faith, cognitive, social, and psychological transitions from youth to young adulthood.

11. See *Generations: The History of America's Future, 1584 to 2069* (New York: William Morrow, 1991); *13th Gen: Abort, Retry, Ignore, Fail?* (New York: Vintage Books, 1993); and *The Fourth Turning: An American Prophecy* (New York: Broadway Books, 1997).

12. See Kevin Graham Ford, *Jesus for a New Generation* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1995); Tim Celek and Dieter Zander, *Inside the Soul of a New Generation* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 1996); and William H. Willimon and

Thomas H. Naylor, *The Abandoned Generation* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans, 1995).

13. See George Barna, *Generation Next* (Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 1995); and Thom S. Rainer, *The Bridger Generation* (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 1997).

14. *Forbes Magazine* (March 10, 1997).

15. Personal conversation.

16. *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (May 30, 1997).

17. (Grand Rapids, MI: William Eerdmans, 1996); see also Walter Truett Anderson, *Reality Isn't What It Used to Be* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1990).

18. Notes from the Southeast Campus Ministers Conference, Scarritt-Bennett Conference Center, July 1997.

19. *Religious Herald* (May 1, 1997), 1-2.