

Coping with Change in Collegiate Ministry

Association of Southern Baptist Campus Ministers Annual Meeting
Orlando, Florida – June 12, 2000

By John Tadlock

Church historian Martin Marty passed along a story which he attributes to Joel Anderle of Grand Rapids, Michigan: After living what he believed to be a grace-filled, faith-filled life, a Lutheran dies and finds himself baffled by the heat and flames of the afterlife. He gasps to another Lutheran through clouds of sulphur, “It’s not exactly the way we pictured heaven would be is it?” “No,” his acquaintance replies. “Let’s go ask Brother Martin to explain this supposed ‘paradise.’” They find the still-portly Martin Luther, alone and sweating profusely, and asked him what went wrong. Luther pauses, sighs and says with resignation, “It was works.!”

While I would not have you believe that I have abandoned a strong Christology informed by and established in Grace, the temptation of all Christendom has been to emphasize the to (grace) to the exclusion of the other (works). And BOTH are crucial to the development of our capacity to manage change.

Virtually everything that touches our lives has experienced rapid, unpredictable, nerve-shattering change. In the past, we seemed to have the luxury of changes occurring incrementally. We could make long-range projections and strategies decisions with some degree of confidence. But, the current rate of change has accelerated exponentially, shifting so fast it is touch to get a fix on much of anything.

Researcher Carol Childress of the *Leadership Network* spent a good long while looking at trends and predicting some shifts in the way we (individuals, churches, society) look at things as we begin to prepare for changes. In the process of her research, she quoted a statement which I think has great significance for us: “*We may be driven into the future by fear or drawn into the future by a vision.*”

I am wondering if one of the barriers to our capacity to manage change might be FEAR. What is going to happen next? Will the SBC's continued rightward turn affect our ability to conduct a ministry that is both priestly and prophetic as we seek to reach students? What impact does the "electronic" technology have already in our ministries? (Virtual classrooms, virtual commencements, etc.)?

How do we meet the challenge of reaching postmoderns? How do you even DEFINE it? [By the way do you know what you get when you cross a Mafioso with a postmodern? You get an offer you don't understand!] One of you asked me to take a stab at trying to define postmodernism, but that is a very difficult order. Like spirituality, it is very difficult to define, but I will try to do so with a baseball analogy:

1. Pre-modern umpires say, "I call them as they are."
2. Modern umpires say, "I call them as I see them."
3. Postmodern umpires say, "They don't exist until I call them!"

While that is a bit of an oversimplification, that is my best attempt.

Bob Dale, Assistant Executive Director of the Virginia Baptist Mission Board and Director of the Center for Creative Church Leadership Development in our shop, suggested that perhaps another description of this age might be "**post-family.**" Certainly, the fact that it seems that most of our students come to us from broken families would attest to that perception. What will happen to our ministries when financial resources continue to shrink as the offering plate dollar and the denominational "loyalists" age? And other "schisms" develop in state Baptist conventions as they have in Virginia and Texas (with the possible difference that the "moderates" as the dissenters), and competition for churches and Cooperative Program funds increases?

Calvin Millers, in his book *When the Aardvark Parked on the Ark*, tells the story of Catherine Caterpillar who is afraid to become what all caterpillars grow to become. After a bid of dialogue, Catherine said:

“Mother, it’s you. I’ve lost all my legs, I think I will die.”
“Nonsense: you’re at the beginning of life-You’re not going to die. You’re through crawling, dear Catherine, look up at the Sky! When God takes our legs, he expects us to fly!”

So, what to do? How can we learn to fly like Catherine? I offer some suggestions drawn from Arthur Gordon’s *A Touch of Wonder*.¹ The underlying theme of the book is there is much more to commonplace happenings than meets the eye and that most people would find a lot more in them by taking the time to truly see. In giving advice to his god-son, Gordon lists six maxims:

1. **First, if you can’t change facts, try bending attitudes.** In all probability, we won’t be able to change the facts of our situations. So the only choice we have is to change *ourselves*. Paul Tillich was fond of saying the *“we must adjust to reality for reality will not adjust to us.”*

Leonard Sweet said in a speech in Richmond a couple of years ago that in the church as it takes shape in the 21st century, *“inspiration and spontaneity will count for something.”* And he made some intriguing observations based on a visit to Steven Spielberg’s *DreamWorks* animation lab. At *DreamWorks*, none of the employees are hired to fill specific job descriptions; rather people are hired based on passion, enthusiasm, a willingness to take risks. The emerging church in the form of collegiate ministry in this postmodern age must also be marked by the same qualities of exuberance.

2. **Second, don’t come up to the net behind nothing.** One of the very first things tennis players are taught about the game is that you don’t charge the net unless you have a good idea where you want to try to place the ball. Moreover, placing the ball where you want takes preparation and planning...and disciplined practice. To chart a new course for this ministry requires that we are prepared mentally, emotionally, and spiritually-and that we recognize as quickly as possible that there are new challenges that face us.

In 1905, football was a low-scoring game of running, blocking, tackling, and kicking. The offense consisted of formations like the “**flying wedge**,” in which seven players ran together into the middle of the opposition in the hope of gaining a few yards at a time. When the forward pass was legalized in 1906, most teams stayed with their conventional “**three-yards-and-a-cloud-of-dust**” running game. The coaches of St. Louis University realized that they were entering a new era in which the old strategy would soon become obsolete, so they switched to an offense that used the forward pass extensively. That season, they outscored their opponents 402-11!

3. **Third, when the ball is over, take off you dancing shoes.** I guess what Gordon means is that there is a time for work and there is a time for celebration. I would add “Sabbath” to the mix. I doubt that there has ever been a time when the need to understand the rhythm between the three has been greater.

The campus ministers with whom I work in Virginia have insisted that we declare a moratorium on campus ministry “workshops” (alternately called “retreats”) which we generally have in May of each year. Little or no work-related content is allowed. It is a time to get in touch with our spiritual sides in a more intentional way. For the past several years, we have used the general theme of Sabbath for these events and the experience has been very positive.

Just last month, the Eastern Slope retreat was held at the Skycroft Conference Center in Maryland. One of our leaders was Stephen Brachlaw, professor of worship and spirituality at the Baptist Theological Seminary in Richmond. He pointed out something that had never really occurred to me: that “rest” (sleep?) is a gift of God’s grace. Our days usually begin in the morning. But, Brachlaw suggested that, in reality, the day begins for most of us in the evening and that sleep is one of its functions. The Jewish Sabbath begins at sundown on Friday and ends at sundown on Saturday. Brachlaw pointed out that, even the creation story supports this: “. . .the evening and the morning were the first day; . . . the second day. . .” etc.

The theology behind this is that God's activity is seen as active while we are at rest; and when we awake in the morning, we join God in God's activity." And rests, sleep, Sabbath, are critical components of what it takes to be faithful followers of Christ.

It was said that, if Alexander the Great had not learned how to balance the three, he would be known only as "Alexander *the Pretty Good*."

4. **Arthur Gordon would advise us to shine up our neighbor's**

halo. A strong sense of Community is critical to our broad effectiveness...with all that implies. It is a symbol of one of our greatest strengths to be able to create a climate of mutual respect, support and affirmation, even when we disagree with each other. Like the old Vidal Sassoon ad: "*If you don't look good, we don't look good.*" And we all look better with clean halos, shine, not by ourselves-that's impossible-but by each other. It is important to remember that we are not self-sufficient on this journey; but neither are we alone.

5. **Keep one eye on the law of echo.** What does an echo do? It repeats the same thing over and over. Have we become content with the *status quo*? One of the easiest ways for a veteran campus minister to lose his/her edge is to become satisfied with what is.

I have read a number of books dealing with change, most of them related to the business world; but I think the best one is a book by Robert Kriegel and Louis Patler, *If It Ain't Broke, Break It*.² In the book Kriegel describes himself as an ardent body surfer. He pointed out that the "rules" of body surfing are much like the rules for successful ventures coping with change where we invest our lives.

1. **Passion rules.** The best surfers spent little time on the beach talking about surfing. . . they weren't the *hodads*" with fancy equipment, right clothes, the right jargon. They loved the water and were totally committed---body, mind, and spirit---to be "out there" looking for a wave. (The theological term for this is *incarnation*.)

2. **No dare/No flare.** They are constantly pushing their limits, combining skill and preparation with boldness and daring, trying new moves, going for bigger waves and longer rides. Staying ahead of a wave demands taking risks and constantly challenging yourself and those around you.
3. **Expect wipe-out.** For good surfers, says Kriegel, changing, uncertain conditions are not a source of fear; rather, they are. . . an opportunity to test strength and agility. They know that if they are not “wiping out,” they are playing it too safe and won’t keep improving.
4. **Don’t turn back on the ocean.** Understanding the nature of the environment, surfers know that they are dealing with forces beyond their control. Because they respect the power and uncertainty of the ocean, they never take it for granted. They always seem to understand and honor their environment, but they also always seem to challenge its limitations.
5. **Keep looking “outside”.** In surfing lingo, “outside” refers to the waves coming in on the horizon. You have to pay attention to the wave closest to you and, simultaneously, to what’s coming. It is important to be ready to take advantage of the window of opportunity and to anticipate the future at the same time.
6. **Move before it moves you.** To catch a wave, you have to begin moving well before it comes to you. If you wait too long, it will pass you by and leave you struggling in the backwash.
7. **Never surf alone.** Surfers know the importance of having the support and the challenge of a colleague, a partner. It is more fun to share hopes, dreams, as well as to have the support of one who is a genuine friend when things are not going smoothly. This is the final rule, but in terms of its connection to our ministry, to my mind it is the most important—because it is characterized, once again, by “community.”

8. **Finally, don't wear your raincoat in the shower.**

We aren't afraid of new adventures; afraid to get wet.
We want to look ahead, to widen our circles, look for
new ministry opportunities and new stories to tell.

Frank Leavell once wrote: **“Our challenge to Christian youth is to break away from trite, nonchalant, laissez faire Christian Living. It is a challenge to divine daring, to consecrated recklessness for Christ, to devout adventure amid ridiculing contemporaries.”** I think he was saying, “don't be afraid or content; don't shy away from hard work or a vision that no one else understands-divine daring, consecrated recklessness, devout adventure. Those are great images and incredible challenges with which to work.

I read somewhere that most trees have two kinds of roots and the roots perform two basic jobs. There are structural roots and absorbing roots. The structural roots provide a framework for the tree, radiating outward and downward. These roots grow thicker every year. The absorbing roots spread out; they seldom grow much larger than 1/8 of an inch and may live only a short time. The structural roots are anchors-tradition, foundation. The absorbing roots are feeders; they reach out for the new-nutrients, water, rich soil.

No tree or plant, nor student will grow without proper nourishment. That's the bottom line. We need structure and foundation, but we also need nourishment and new growth. Our nourishment comes from God, Creator and Sustained. Jeremiah 17:7-8 reminds us,

“Blessed is the man who trusts in the Lord, whose confidence is in him. He will be like a tree planted by the water that sends out its roots by the stream. It does not fear when the heat comes; its leaves are always green. It has no worries in a year of drought and ever fails to bear fruit.”

We are setting our roots into a deep and abiding faith; sending out roots for nourishment, for newness, to welcome change. . . as friend, not enemy. . . “like a tree planted by the water-it has no worries in a year of drought and never fails to bear fruit.”

Postscript: What About The Students?

Today's institution of higher learning really is not your father's university! In 1959, John Henry Cardinal Newman set forth his ideal of a university in his book, **The Idea of a University**. It was a residential community of idyllic proportions (more or less) and tutorial superintendent. He saw the university as *alma mater*. This was also Thomas Jefferson's idea, an academical village in which students and faculty would engage in dialogue over the components of a classical education.

Arthur Levine says that this institutional model, if not dying, is ailing. He describes the reason in a very well-researched book, **When Hope and Fear Collide**,³ a sequel to **When Dreams and Heroes Died**, published twenty years earlier. Levine asserts that the major reason is simply demographic; more racial diversity, more older students, more students working (often full-time). Today fewer than one in six fit the traditional stereotypes of between 18 and 22 years of age and living on campus.

This means that higher education is not as central to today's undergrads. In fact, college is just one of a multiplicity of activities, and not the most important. Home, work, and family are priorities—and then school. As a consequence, students want a different relationship with college, very much like the kind of relationship they have with their bank or supermarket. In short, they are more *consumer* than anything else.

What do students want in a university? According to Levine, they want the functional equivalent to an ATM, no lines, easy access, parking, quick deposits, and no mistakes in processing (unless in their favor). They look for convenience, quality, service, and cost-effectiveness. But they do **not** seem to want softball leagues, religious counseling, and health services. In short, they are looking for high quality education, but at a good price and no extras, stripped-down, no-frills education...and they don't want to pay for services they won't use.

Today's students increasingly are drawn to distance learning. They are less interested in involvement in campus government, such as discipline, residential regulations, etc. On the other hand, they are interested in input and governance in admissions decisions, degree requirements, and faculty appointments.

The contemporary student arrives on campus more damaged than in the past. Student Counseling services report a rise in eating disorders, classroom disruption, drug abuse, alcohol abuse, gambling and suicide attempts. They report they are frightened by the deteriorating social and environmental conditions, conflicts and terrorism. They acknowledge the presence of multiculturalism, value personal relationships and are worried about financing their education. Nearly one-third of all college freshmen (30%) grow up with one parent. The effect of these accumulated fears and hurts is to divide and isolate them from one another.

The irony is that, at a time most students need a sense of community, they seem to retreat from it. Many students fear intimacy in relationships. Withdrawal is easier and less dangerous. Traditional dating is largely dead across the country. It has been replaced by “group” dating with students traveling in unpartnered packs because of the need to protect themselves from deeper relationships. Because many tend to be loners, Housing Offices report that requests for single rooms in dorms are up. Students at the University of Colorado said that the best adjective to describe this generation is “TIRED!”

Academic officers report that students are not as ready as they think for the rigors of academic demands. In the annual survey conducted by UCLA and reported in the Chronicle of Higher Education, incoming freshmen are less prepared than they perceive themselves to be. Nearly one-third (32%) of all undergraduates surveyed reported having taken a basic skills or remedial course in reading, writing, or math.

This is a generation of students desperately clinging to the American dream. Nearly nine out of ten (88%) students are optimistic about their personal futures, but their hope, though broadly professed, is delicate. Their lives are being challenged at every turn: in their families, their communities, [their churches], their nation, and their world. Perhaps the best way to describe this generation of college students is a generation “**where hope and fear collide.**” Perhaps more than anything else, it is an exciting time to have the privilege of ministry among some of God’s brightest and best.

1. Gordon, Arthur. A Touch of Wonder. Mass Market Paperback, reissue edition, September 1991.
2. Kriegel, Robert and Louis Patler. If It Ain't Broke, Break It: And Other Unconventional Wisdom for a Changing Business World. Warner Books, March 1992.
3. Levine, Arthur and Jennette S. Cureton. When Hope and Fear Collide: A Portrait of Today's College Student. Jossey-Bass Publishers: San Francisco, 1998.