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Vocation-Specific Missions and the Creation of Communities of Transformation

by Todd Lake

The debate over whether or not students at Christian colleges and universities should be engaged in serving the poor is over. Catalogs from Christian colleges abound with pictures of students engaging in community service projects, and of student groups helping the poor overseas. Christian colleges offer myriad opportunities for students to “build community” by serving together to serve those in need. It appears that the 20th-century rift that once existed between Christians who called for warm-hearted piety and verbal evangelism and those who strove to serve the needy has ended. Instead, there is recognition among the current college generation that conversion of the heart naturally leads to service to those in need.

If one were to select a patron saint for service to the needy, it would very likely be the late Mother Teresa of Calcutta. She is almost universally admired for her work on behalf of the poor. She formed communities of Christians known as the Sisters of Charity to serve “the poorest of the poor” around the world. Her memory is invoked when young Christians want to talk about the model for serving others. It is without question appropriate to admire, and even emulate, Mother Teresa in following God’s call to serve those in need. Christian colleges should and do promote opportunities for direct service to those in need. They are one good way to begin to build community among students.

Nevertheless, there is something profoundly lacking when direct service is the primary way for Christians to come together at college to build community. Direct service usually means that students are involved in ministries that have nothing to do with their academic pursuits. But universities are places where students gain specific knowledge in specific academic disciplines. Business majors are gaining a different set of competencies from psychology majors, who in turn differ from those who focus on the natural sciences or the visual arts. The entire structure of the university moves students to increase their competence in particular areas. Student life professionals have the opportunity to help students existentially discover how to serve God and neighbor through their specific calling.

The sacred/secular dichotomy is done away with as students begin to see their papers and exams and majors as opportunities to worship God. This reality is reflected in the Hebrew term for “worship,” *avodah*, which also means “work.” Likewise, in the New Testament the fellowship with God and with others is captured by the one term *koinonia*. This is lived out by sharing what one has with others, as well as living life together in Christ. In the monastic period, Christians affirmed the interrelatedness of worship and work with the phrase *orare est laborare*, to work is to pray/to pray is to work. And during the Reformation, Martin Luther and John Calvin stressed

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that serving in one's occupation is worship toward God in that it is service to one's neighbor, who is made in God's image. Calvin underscored the need for Christians to transform their professions that they might better serve as vehicles of true service to the ends for which God had ordained them.

At a Christian university, student life professionals should be engaged in encouraging students to discern and follow their calling. The Siren song of parental expectations and market forces always threatens to drown out the still, small voice of God. By creating opportunities to reflect and act on one's calling, students can see how their professional lives can be used in service to others. They will see that they are gaining knowledge and abilities, not so much for their sakes, but *ad maiorem dei gloriam*, for the greater glory of God. Further, by seeing how Christian professionals are using their abilities to help God transform the world, students will realize that they have a mission to fulfill as engineers, doctors, lawyers, scientists or business people.

The Dutch Christian educator and statesman Abraham Kuyper said, "...there is not a square inch in the whole domain of our human existence over which Christ, who is Sovereign over all, does not cry, 'Mine!' That cry we have heard, and this work, far too great for our own strength, we have taken up in reply to this call." It is the glory of the university to prepare students to learn the skills and techniques of various disciplines. It is in and through these academic disciplines and professions that students can fulfill their God-given mandate to understand and help transform the world. The trajectory of this work finds its fulfillment in that day when "the kingdom of this world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ." Moreover, students are called to be co-laborers with God in transforming the very professions they will enter. As Christians, they cannot be defined by whatever the secular world (and, alas, most of the Christian world) means by the title "businesswoman" or "lawyer" or "scientist." Instead, they should be put in contact with those who are not conformed to the pattern of this world's definition of "doctor" or "journalist," but are engaged in transforming the world through their vocations.

What does this mean for the formation of community? It means that each student should be given opportunities to serve God by using the specific set of skills they are gaining through their studies. The pre-med student does not differ from the pre-law student in the nature of their initial call to life in Christ. There is "one Lord, one faith, one baptism" (Ephesians 4:5). However, "to each is given the manifestation of the Holy Spirit for the common good" (1 Corinthians 12:7). Each student will be able, thanks to their education, to serve others in ways opened up to them by their training and experience. They are able to present their new competencies to God and allow God to use them as agents of transformation.

The trajectory of students' lives moves from taking classes to exploring and choosing majors to entering particular professions. General interest mission trips are a good first step for students to come together to serve. But general interest mission trips, where those with no theater background put on skits and those with no background in education run Vacation Bible Schools, are far from the best that Christian colleges can offer either their students or the world. One might call the focus on general interest trips a lowest common denominator approach to missions (whether local or international). It is not that such trips are not good per se, but they are not the best that a university can offer. In the life of local churches, a general-interest approach to service

and community-building is often the best possible approach. This lulls many student life professionals into thinking that if it's good enough for the Church, it must be good enough for the university. Yet the Christian university has opportunities for building community that are unique.

The great enemy of Vocation-Specific Missions is the hidden assumption that the real work of serving Christ is carried on by those who work as ministers or missionaries. In the Catholic Church, men and women who are engaged in church-based work are even called "religious," in contradistinction to the laity. Among Protestants, the only people regularly said to be "called by God" into their life's work are ministers and missionaries. The laity are left with the impression that church-related missions and ministry are the only two careers about which God cares. This leaves the 99% of college students who will never work full-time in a church or through a mission agency with the distinct impression that God is not terribly interested in their careers. Neither would such a God care what one majored in, unless of course one were deciding whether or not to major in religion.

Vocation-Specific Mission Trips thus serve several functions at once. First, they help create a more robust notion of calling, rescuing the term from being reduced to only church-based work. This is critical at Christian colleges, which must lead the way in embracing the Reformation idea that all professions are potentially callings that can be lived out in service to God and neighbor. Second, vocation-specific mission experiences expand the horizons of students by familiarizing them with Christian professionals who view their work as a calling. Thus begins the formation of Christian community centered not in one's general calling to follow Christ, but in one's specific calling into the world. Finally, Vocation-Specific Missions create intense common experiences that build community.

Of course, the common experience of rooting for the same team or participating in the same fraternity will build community too. But these communities are not centered in Christ, nor are they integral to the university qua university. The only community worthy of the name "Christian" is one that arises as a response to God's redemptive work in Christ. A student life program that aspires to be Christian cannot rest content with building community through sports or Greek life or even by holding big Christian concerts on campus. These may be aids in beginning to build community, but they cannot ultimately build the kind of Christian community God desires.

Vocation-Specific Mission Trips can be the nexus for worship and work and service to God and neighbor. They expose students to the radical, ancient idea that God cares as much about the calling of a teacher as of a pastor, as much about the calling of a businessperson as a missionary. By creating VSMTs, student life professionals are creating communities of faculty and students united by their specific callings, as well as by their shared Christian commitment. These communities, bound by vocational interests, will endure long after the specific missions activity is ended. Indeed, the mission experience—whether local or international—is only one step in the formation of communities of interest centered on vocation.

The need to create genuine community is best served if the communities created are integrally related to the educational and spiritual mission of the college. It is true that dorm pizza parties and intramurals create community. But these communities are unrelated to the educational and spiritual mission of the college. Christian student

affairs professional are called by God to create communities that are nourished by the gospel, where reflection and action are mutually reinforcing, and where members of the community are transformed by Christ in order that they might in turn transform the world.

The creation of community around a common vocation allows students to engage in conversation with each other and with professors about how God is calling them. Guides for reflection, worship and Bible study should be made available to the members of Vocation-Specific Mission Teams. The written guides help form the communities of students who are serving together alongside professors in their discipline. Before the discipline-specific mission experience, the participants can discuss, pray and read articles that relate to vocation in general and the trip in particular. During the trip, they see how their possible future profession can make a difference in the world. Just as important, they can reflect together in “real time” on what they are learning from their experiences and from Scripture. After the trip, the groups engage in the process of integrating what they have learned from God through the trip into their work in the classroom. More importantly, they are encouraged to reflect on how what they have learned changes how they view their potential career. Thanks to Vocation-Specific Mission Trips, unthinking assent to the American Dream is challenged by reflection on being a co-laborer with Christ for the Kingdom of God.

Students will spend most of their waking hours for most of the rest of their lives in their careers. It is in their careers that they will live out a discipleship of loving God with their heart, mind and soul and loving their neighbor as themselves. Christian Colleges have the unique opportunity to form community centered on the various academic areas into which students are called. These communities can serve and reflect together on the Christian life in ways far beyond what those outside those academic disciplines could ever do.

Christian colleges can and must raise the conversation about the Christian way of being in the world to a higher level. It is not enough for such colleges to replicate what local churches already offer. General interest mission trips and Bible studies are fine for a congregation, but not for a college which is preparing the next generation of Christian professionals. This is not elitism, unless training future biologists and lawyers and doctors and businesspeople and educators is elitist. The Christian university, or the campus minister on a secular campus, must create communities of students and faculty who think together at the highest academic level about their disciplines in light of the gospel. In this way, students will “not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing” of their minds (Romans 12:2). They will discover, in the very specificity of their vocation, that is indeed by Christ and through Christ and for Christ that all things are created [see Colossians 1:15ff.], and that it is in Christ that their discipline finds its true end.

The student affairs staff must not allow its programming to be a mix of Christorainment interlarded with general interest Bible studies and mission trips. Student life professionals have the opportunity to pick up where the academic division must leave off. If we are to take our rightful place in the university, we must value what a university is all about: creating the next generation of professionals in a variety of fields. It is through working with students and faculty to create community centered on vocation that we will have the most enduring impact on our students and on our society.