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Realizing Our Intentions: A Guide for Churches and Colleges with Distinctive Missions

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Meyer, A. J. (2009). *Realizing our intentions: A guide for churches and colleges with distinctive missions.*

Abilene, TX: Abilene University Press.

Reviewed by Chris Abrams

Even a cursory examination of the history of Christian higher education reveals the struggle Christian institutions had and continue to have functioning according to their distinct missions. And for many CCCU institutions, this does not just mean functioning in a “Christian” way but according to their historical and denominational foundations. This is not a new conversation within Christian higher education, as I find myself having this type of conversation nearly daily at the institution where I serve. However, in Albert Meyer’s book *Realizing our intentions: A guide for churches and colleges with distinctive missions*, Meyer encourages the reader to go beyond the conversation to action if Christian/denominational colleges are to live out their distinct missions. Meyer is well equipped to further this conversation as he has served on the North Central Association Committee on Liberal Arts, as CEO for the Mennonite Board of Education, and as visiting fellow at the Center for the Study of American Religion at Princeton University.

Meyer’s text is divided into four parts: (1) *The Larger Scene*, (2) *Who Might Want Schools that are Different*, (3) *Current Issues*, and (4) *Healthy Long-Term Church-School Relationships*, with each part divided into multiple chapters. Most sections examine historical as well as present-time elements that have greatly influenced the current state of church-related higher education. Meyer also injects unique facts that help the reader to understand better the difficulty church-related institutions have meeting their missions while increasing their viability within the greater academy. For example, “The AAUP denies to religiously based institutions the name ‘university’ because ‘they do not, at least as regards to one particular subject, accept to the principles of freedom of inquiry’” (p. 142). Interesting, considering that over the past 20 years, many church-related schools associated with the CCCU have changed from “college” to “university” yet the organization that represents faculty from coast to coast does not recognize the name/structure/status of the institutions where many of their members serve.

Part one, *The Larger Scene*, examines trends, recent developments, the secularization of higher education, organizational dynamics, generalizations from experience, the recent past, and the present situation in order to assist the reader in understanding the challenges intentionally denominational colleges have, are, and will face. In this section, Meyer discusses what some have noted as a nearly irresistible trend toward secularization for many denominational institutions along with the research showing that in terms of enrollment, institutions with distinctive denominational affiliations greatly outperformed those with “nominal” denominational affiliation between 1980 and 1991. In part one, Meyer also examines many of the legal issues denominational institutions face and will continue to wrestle with and how those issues effect funding. The reader is also equipped to realize what is meant by the “secularization” of higher education.

In part two, *Who Might Want Schools that are Different*, Meyer discusses a “different”

curriculum, “different” instruction, why some churches might want schools that are different, and international secularization. Meyer helps the reader appreciate the tug-o-war between higher education and the public interest for what is found in the curriculum as well as how faculty many times arrive at what is found in general education. He also suggests that it is imperative for denominational institutions to understand who they represent and what the educational needs are of that constituency in order to have missions that meet their distinctive purpose. This section also encourages denominational institutions to examine “community” as an element of the teaching-learning relationship between the institution and the students they serve, among many other areas of conversation.

In part three, *Current Issues*, Meyer articulates multiple areas that institutions with distinctive missions must address. The first is diversity. Many denominational institutions have historically been homogenous. Thus, helping students interact with the greater world is imperative, but can be difficult. Meyer also discusses the ever-increasing pluralistic society Christian higher education must navigate, as well as the idea of academic freedom and institutions where faculty and staff are required to affirm a particular Christian worldview.

In part four, *Healthy Long-Term Church-School Relationships*, Meyer’s discussion moves to institutions with distinctive missions moving forward. The author examines student peer culture, enrollment and growth considerations, how Boards of Trust should be involved in the process, as well as thoughts on how Churches can more intentionally direct institutions under their care. Meyer offers some interesting thoughts regarding Boards of Trust involvement that I found quite different from my experience working with Boards of Trust in the past, for example, Board involvement in the formation of institution-guiding documents, unlike the current process where Boards approve documents created by faculty, staff, or administrators.

Realizing Our Intentions is an important work for any administrator, faculty, or staff member working at an institution with a distinct denominational/Christian mission. Meyer brilliantly analyzes historical foundations, current events, denominational mission, societal shifts, and means for advancing the calling of denominational Christian higher education in a clear and succinct method. Although I agree with nearly everything discussed by Meyer, I am still left with one main question. How does Meyer bring together his understanding of how institutions with distinct Christian missions should operate with the current financial viability questions that face many of our institutions today?

In Meyer’s chapter entitled *a student peer environment that furthers the mission*, he suggests that the idea that institutions must increase enrollment to increase revenue is not necessarily true. However, two of the three institutions he uses as examples are Haverford College and Harvard University; the other is a state institution. As we all know endowments have dropped over the past few years; with that being stated, Harvard’s endowment, according to the *Chronicle of Higher Education* August 22, 2010 almanac issue, stands at a meager 25 billion and Haverford’s is 336 million. I would ask Meyer to compare apples to apples. The majority of CCCU institutions or institutions with distinct Christian missions have endowments below 50 million with not one within 80 million of Haverford’s 336 million. Revenue through tuition is the lifeblood of the majority of CCCU institutions. Harvard will survive if not one student shows up next fall. However,

its reputation will always ensure that more students will desire to attend than Harvard is willing to accommodate. The conversation I would like to explore further is minding mission at an institution that relies on tuition so heavily and doesn't have the reputation to attract ten times the number of students it can accommodate.

Next, as Myers accurately reports, between 1980 and 1991, few institutions grew like CCCU institutions. However, this has not necessarily been the case over the past few years. A recent examination of North American Coalition for Christian Admissions Professionals (NACCAP) 2010 Fall Day 10 report data shows 55 percent of CCCU institutions that participated in the survey reported their institution failing to meet enrollment goals. And a recent study by the CCCU indicated that distinctive missions and faith-learning integration are not nearly as important to prospective students as was once the case. How do recent enrollment challenges, an economic downturn, and changing student perceptions play into how institutions mind their missions? These are the questions that have the rubber meeting the road.

As stated previously, everyone associated with the distinct missions related to denominational Christian Higher Education should embrace *Realizing our intentions* as an excellent resource and as a place to get us steps closer to meeting our unique educational goals, however challenging questions on how to direct distinctly denominational Christian colleges in these challenging days still abound.

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