

BOOTS ON THE GROUND:

Recruiting a New Generation of Full-Time Christian Ministers

By Jim Musser

Our culture continues to change at mind-numbing speed. Technology continues to amaze us with TVs as thin as the width of a ruler and phones that are now more hand-held computers than devices with which to call a friend. Cultural changes, such as the increasing acceptance of homosexuality and heterosexual couples living together, and the pursuit of fame as an end in itself, leave many of us with our mouths agape in dismay. We look around the world and see the rise of radical Islam while in our own country we see increasing numbers turning away from the church to live self-focused lives.

How can the church meet the challenges of proclaiming the gospel to a world in such great need of its message and transformative power?

Greater Involvement

The answer, to use a military phrase, is to get more boots on the ground. We need more Christians involved in the battle to win the souls of men and women. We can accomplish this by giving our young people a vision for full-time Christian ministry and by challenging them to prepare themselves accordingly. So then, we urge more young people to go to Christian colleges, right? Well, yes and no.

Without a doubt we need more young people to consider careers in full-time ministry. The local church needs more men and women equipped to lead it and to plant new churches. Christian colleges do an excellent job training young men and women for ministry vocations. They are crucial for producing the leaders needed to equip the saints for kingdom work (Ephesians 4:11, 12).

Yet an army can't win battles with generals alone. It needs a committed group of officers and infantrymen to be victorious. Churches often rely heavily on their staffs to lead the charge in reaching their communities, but this ignores the teaching of Ephesians 4. The saints are the ones who are to do the charging.

The Priesthood of All Believers

I recall as a young Christian hearing teaching about the priesthood of all believers based on 1 Peter 2:9: "But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light."

I had understood it was the ministers who do ministry. They were the ones who presented the gospel to unbelievers and reached out to people in the community. First Peter 2:9 opened my eyes to a new way of looking at ministry. It is not limited to the professionals who get paid to lead churches, but includes everyone who is a follower of Jesus. This teaching has been an operating principle for my ministry on the university campus and has major implications for how the church reaches the world for Jesus.

How can the church meet the challenges of proclaiming the gospel to a world in such great need?

Full-Time Christian Ministry

Every Christian is in full-time Christian ministry. True, some earn a living from doing ministry, but when anyone chooses to lay down his life to follow Jesus, it is never a part-time commitment.

Unfortunately, the concept of full-time Christian ministry has often been reduced to those who choose ministry as a vocation. But if this is our view, we will never get enough boots on the ground to impact our nation and our world. In 2005, 17.5 million students enrolled in U.S. colleges. Of those students, about nine percent were enrolled in "religiously-affiliated" colleges. The vast majority of college-bound students, even among the young people in our churches, are going to a state university or secular private college.



A New Vision

Statistics like these need not be so daunting if we integrate the concept of the priesthood of all believers into the life and ministry of the church. Imagine this. In your youth group, there are 10 students graduating. One has decided to pursue vocational ministry and heads off to a Christian college. The other nine enter several different state universities. All move into this new phase with the idea they are in training for full-time ministry because your church emphasizes that as Christians we are all ministers. The Christian college student has set his mind on being a local church minister, while the others are planning to enter the fields of medicine, architecture, education, accounting, business, engineering, graphic design, sports administration, and music performance.

Now it is easy to see the full-time ministry of the Christian college graduate, but what about the others? Research over the past decade clearly shows a decline of interest in and respect for the church as an institution. A 2007 Barna research study revealed only 16 percent of 16 to 29-year-olds had a favorable impression of Christianity, and only three percent of the same age group thought favorably of evangelical Christians. Unbelievers have increasingly been turned off by the local church, as much by perception as reality. But for them perception is reality, so fewer are open to coming to our churches.

How to Reach Them

So how do we reach them? We reach them with new boots in the form of the doctor, the architect, the public school teacher, the accountant, the small business owner, the civil engineer, the graphic designer, the athletic director, and the professional musician. Each one of these men and women will be interacting with people outside the church who are out of the reach of most ministers. They will use their professions to be ambassadors for Christ, carrying his message of love and mercy through their words, attitudes, and actions. The same can be said about reaching many around the world. While many countries close their borders to missionaries, they open them wide to doctors, engineers and other professionals. Increasingly, university graduates have greater opportunities to be the church's missionaries to many nations of the world because their degrees and experience open the doors.

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COLLEGE POV

For a better understanding of how American young people view Christianity, check out:
unChristian
by David Kennaman and Gabe Lyons
(Baker Books, 2007)

To learn more about ministry on campus and how to connect college-bound students to campus ministries, these Web sites will be helpful:

www.aofcm.org
(Association of Collegiate Ministries)
www.heartofcampusministry.com
(the ACM blog)
www.ivyjungle.org
(The Ivy Jungle Network)
www.theprojectex.com
(Project Ex)

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Promoting the Vision

Christian young adults need to understand they will have a full-time ministry regardless of their profession—to be ambassadors for Christ. They need to know this type of ministry is as valued by the church as vocational ministry. The church can help by connecting them with a campus ministry at the school they are planning to attend (or with a local church if it has a similar vision for students). Through involvement in a campus ministry, they will receive further training and experience for their lifelong ministries.

Training for Full-Time Ministry

University campuses provide the ideal setting for training in full-time ministry because they are a microcosm of the world. A myriad of lifestyles and philosophies are lived out there, along with the problems and pain that accompany them, providing opportunities for students to practice sharing the good news of Jesus. Campus ministries are there to help them in their training and provide support and encouragement in an often challenging and hostile environment.

The ministry I direct at Appalachian State University emphasizes students' roles in reaching their peers with the gospel. We emphasize their role on campus as Jesus' ambassadors; that they—not the campus ministry staff—are in the best position to reach their peers. Recently Charles, one of our student leaders, invited several classmates to our ministry's large group meeting. This invitation was several months in the making as he built relationships with them. Another student, Chad, invited his friend Heidi to hang out with some others involved in our ministry. She was at a difficult place in her life and was drawn to the love and acceptance she received. At the end of last semester, she decided to follow Jesus.

Since I am a campus minister, these students were out of my reach until Christian students took advantage of their interaction with them to begin leading them to a knowledge of the Lord. The boots were on the ground and working effectively.

If the church will embrace this vision of every believer as a full-time minister and pass it on to our young people, we will begin to put the boots on the ground we desperately need, boots that can transform this desperate world with the good news of Jesus. *

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