

Ministry to Students by a Church

Fundamentals

All effective ministries share the same fundamentals: dependence upon God, constant use of scripture, constant prayer, care for people, holy living, zeal for Jesus' Kingdom, solid theology. Pastors must attend to these fundamentals first, and continue to keep them strong. After this there are some other factors which affect the success and satisfaction of ministry to students.

Scope and Interest

As a church begins to consider ministering to students, initial considerations must be the scope proposed for the ministry, the interest level for that ministry, and the resources that can be committed. The most important issue is that each church do what they are persuaded God is calling them to do. Any effort to minister to students, no matter how small, if it is led by the Spirit will change lives and produce lasting fruit in students. A larger scope, accompanied by a stronger interest and more abundant resources, of course has the potential to produce a larger harvest. Jesus is Lord of the Harvest. Let every church be led by Jesus into its part of the field.

We will discuss three levels of ministry to students. For convenience, they will be labeled university ministry, student ministry, and student engagement. The scope of "university ministry" is the whole university, primarily students, but also faculty, administration, staff, academic departments, and program offices. The interest is first and foremost conversion of the lost and discipleship of believers, but also in the process to have a gospel impact on the whole university as a community and an institution. The scope of "student ministry" (as we are using that label here) is simply students in the university: conversion of the lost and discipleship of believers. The scope of "student engagement" is ministry to any students that find their way onto the church: effectively connecting with them and interacting in a productive gospel-saturated way.

University ministry requires a deep and sustained interest in having a gospel impact on the university. Such an influence takes many years to build and sustained commitment of resources. Ordinarily a full-time ordained minister is the prime mover of the ministry, and the church must be able to provide the resources for his salary and the expenses of the ministry. The church may obtain funds from interested parties outside the congregation, but ultimately the burden of resourcing falls to the church. Very few individual congregations can do this on their own. This approach to ministry with students is more likely supported by a presbytery or denomination. The cost is high, but the result can be enormous: influence throughout the university. If this is out of reach at present, this might be a visionary goal for the next generation.

Churches who do not have the resources for a ministry within the university might still be able to devote substantial resources to students. A church might be able to assign one of its pastoral staff to focus on students for one or several days each week. We are labeling this "**student ministry**." Such a man's job description will specify some time spent at the university where he will lead Bible studies and meet with students. He will not be able to have the depth of influence of a pastor who devotes all his time to campus, but he can have a powerful impact in the lives of many students. His job descrip-

tion will also specify his responsibilities for ministry to students in the congregation. This approach to ministry is not so dependent on permanent staffing and funding, so it offers a lot more flexibility. The impact on the university will be substantially less than a *university ministry*, but the cost is dramatically lower.

A church that is very limited in resources can have a major influence on those students who find their way into the congregation. The focus of a “**student engagement**” ministry is to recognize the special needs, perspectives, and interests of students, and endeavor to incorporate those insights into existing ministry activities. The cost can be negligible, but the return can be impressive.

Of course healthy ministry adapts to real people and real situations, and people and situations vary widely – so no ministry will fit perfectly into one of these three levels, nor should it try to do so. Nor should these levels be understood to identify the success or maturity of a church. “There are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who empowers them all in everyone.” (1 Corinthians 12:6) Some churches may honestly be called to focus on ministry other than students. These levels apply to some degree when ministry to students is engaged. Let each church be fully persuaded of its calling before God in the ministry of the gospel.

Location: Where to Meet Students

People are naturally more comfortable and more receptive to learning in a familiar environment. This is not an endorsement of the “homogeneous church planting movement,” although we would be wise to notice why that method has attracted so much interest. The more people feel that “this is our place,” the more receptive they will be to learning new things. Even more so, the more they feel “these are our people,” the more they will be open to change. Now it is vital for Christian growth and maturity for Christians to be stretched out of their “comfort zone,” but to engage people, it is important to be aware of what their comfort zone is. This true for all people and all ministries, whether planting a church or reaching university students.

For most students, an important comfort zone is their university. The university is “their place,” and it is occupied by “their people.” In most cases a local church is not their comfort zone, unless it is the church in which they grew up or unless the university environment is overtly hostile. In varying degrees Christian students may welcome the opportunity to worship in a local church on Sunday. A much smaller number may wish to fellowship with the congregation outside of the worship service. But most Christian students, and essentially all non-Christian students, will be reluctant to participate in activities centered in the church. This reluctance can partially and temporarily be overcome by a superbly engaging student minister, but ministry built on the attractiveness of one man is inherently unstable.

A better approach for a church interested in student ministry is to take the ministry to the university. A church may use the same people and do the same activities, but it will be much more effective in reaching students if the ministry is held in the university. Now, certainly it is necessary for Christian students to worship with the congregation on Lord’s Day, and any student ministry which takes the place of Lord’s Day worship – consciously or unconsciously – is hampering the spiritual

growth of the students. Therefore one function of the student ministry is to connect students to Lord's Day worship. But if that is the only purpose of the ministry, students will soon feel that they are being used to build the ministry program of the church, and their commitment will remain shallow. And rightfully so! Any ministry which uses people for its own glory deserves to shrivel. However a student ministry which genuinely cares about students and their university not only will be initially attractive, it will also generate strong commitment.

Some universities may appreciate the partnership of a church in caring for their students. They may welcome the involvement of a pastor, make university facilities available to the church, and even offer modest assistance to the programs. The attitude of other universities to church involvement with their students may range from indifference to hostility. In such a case nothing can be accomplished by responding in kind with a negative attitude toward the university. Scripture teaches us that there are enemies of the faith in the world, but it also teaches us to pray for our enemies and do good to them. Even in an environment which is not welcoming to a church, ministry might be conducted in the university by proceeding at the invitation of students who want the assistance the church can provide. The procedure to implement this approach will vary from university to university, so some investigation will be required to discover how to proceed. Once established, it is vital that the church always work through students in its connection to the university. The minister must never request facilities or attend meetings for student organizations, unless specifically invited. If the university begins to think that the church is using its property and influencing its students without permission, the university may decide to ban all further ministry activities.

It is quite reasonable for a *university ministry* to be located in the university. The full-time minister can spend each work day in the university, where he can do much of his preparation and correspondence in between time with students. The minister will be able to eat lunch there and attend university events such as sporting activities and concerts. It is more challenging for a level two, *student ministry* with a part-time minister to have a sustained campus presence. Nevertheless, what time he does have can be spent in the university. It might be easier and seem more efficient to hold student meetings in the church building, but that is a serious misstep. It is far more effective to be in the university as much as possible. If there is no one specifically designated to minister to students, yet students are attending the church (level 3, *student engagement*) the impact with those students will be amplified if some small time can be carved out to meet them in the university. It would be ideal for the pastor to have lunch with those students who attend his church once each semester in the university dining hall or food court. Perhaps an elder or deacon would be able to do this also. Perhaps they will enjoy it and do it repeatedly! Such gestures go a long way to making students feel genuinely welcome, and hence more receptive to ministry.

The reason for locating student ministry in the university is to reach students "where they are," literally and figuratively. But no ministry ought to leave students where they are. The goal of ministry ought to be to present students mature in Christ, so that increasingly they will join a church, and be willing and eager to serve in all sorts of settings among all sorts of people, beginning with the marginalized students in their midst and extending even to the lost in different cultures in foreign lands.

Effective Ministry in the Congregation

Locating student ministry in the university is by far the most effective way of engaging students, but leaves the congregation on the sidelines. There are important ways a church can minister to students within the congregation. The critical issue is to identify what ministry is most effective in the congregation. This will vary from church to church, university to university, even year to year – so the church must always be evaluating how well it is serving students.

One constant category of student ministry that is best done within the congregation is teaching on denominational distinctives. Each denomination has beliefs and practices which it considers important, but which are not held, or are even denied, by other denominations. If they are important, they ought to be taught to everyone coming to church. But if they are not widely held, they will be confusing or offensive if taught in the university. For example, some churches believe that only psalms should be sung in worship. They consider this to be a very important biblical principle. Therefore such a church should teach this view robustly to those who join them in worship. But most students at the university go to other churches or no church at all. This is not a doctrine which affects their spiritual development at this time unless they attend such a church. It would be confusing and alienating to teach this in the university, but it is necessary to teach it to those students who come to that church. The congregation is the best place to teach systematic theology to students, and also the principles of church government.

When a church attempts to provide teaching oriented to students, the best teachers must be engaged. All week students are in classes with outstanding scholars and educators. A church might not be able to rise to the standards of a well-resourced university, but she should make best use of the resources she has. Students will not stay at a church which has poor teaching. A congregation can minister to students by assigning their best teachers to a class or Bible study where students are attending, and by encouraging the teachers to work at improving their skills.

Some pastors and churches make the mistake of assuming that students are smart and educated, and attempt to teach esoteric subjects, or teach in a “scholarly” or “academic” manner. This comes across as pretentious and irrelevant. Students, even smart ones, are real people who have the same interests and struggles as anyone else. Most students are far more concerned about dating and roommate issues than obscure theological points. Other pastors and churches make the opposite mistake of assuming that since biblical illiteracy is rampant in the culture, teaching to students must be “dumbed down” for students to understand it. This is insulting, and students will not attend a church which treats them like children. It is true that in many quarters students have a shockingly poor knowledge of scripture and theology, but it is also true that they have an interest and aptitude for learning (or they would not be enrolled in a university). The most profitable approach is not to assume a lot of prior knowledge, but do assume they are intelligent and will learn rather quickly – which is not at all the same as talking to them in academic language.

Another category of student ministry that is best done within the congregation is hospitality. This can take many forms, and what is effective will change over time. A church might welcome students at the beginning of the semester with a dinner and other programming. Some churches match

students with families who take students home for dinner after the service. This author's church offered breakfast to students whose dining hall did not open until after worship began. It is vital to learn from the students what form of hospitality may be meaningful. University culture changes quickly, and what was meaningful for adults when they were students may be irrelevant now. Even what was meaningful a few years ago may not be so now.

A church may minister to students by offering special programs which may interest them, such as a speaker which the student group could not afford to invite. And a church can provide very important ministry to students by involving them in the life of the congregation. Students can help at work day, serve in the nursery, sing in the choir, etc.

It is vital that a church coordinate the university activities of students with congregational activities. Each side of student ministry can suffer substantial harm if the two sides are competing with each other. It makes no sense to schedule a student conference and a church work day on the same weekend and expect students to participate in both. It is wonderful when students are heavily involved in ministry in the university and in the congregation, and this is possible when there is strong communication between all leaders in the congregation and in the university.

The Minister to Students

It is widely understood that to be effective with students, a minister must be young, extroverted, and current with youth culture. I frequently hear people commenting along these lines, but none of it is true. The qualities of an effective student minister lie somewhere else.

The *fundamental quality* of a minister to students, like any minister, is godly character. He must have a strong and growing relationship with God, love for scripture, and good morals. After character, the *most important quality* in a minister to students is liking students. Most people older than 30 years quickly become frustrated and angry with students. No one will admit this, because it is a damning character flaw – but it is true. Students are immature and foolish, and they do immature and foolish things. They do not show up for events which they said they would attend, or come late, and do come to events at which they are not expected. A few people think such students are charming, and encourage this behavior. None of this is good, and none of these things should be considered acceptable, but it takes years for students to grow up and learn how to conduct themselves as mature adults. An effective minister to students will constantly lead students to mature behavior, but enjoy their antics in the process.

A *third quality* in an effective minister to students is training. Student ministry is very much like any ministry, but there are significant unique aspects. A man who wishes to minister to students will be much more effective if he receives the special training necessary.

The *fourth issue* in minister effectiveness is time. Some men working with students may be focused on that calling, but others need to cover other responsibilities. A minister must make the best of the situation in which he finds himself. As resources become available, here is how time affects student ministry.

The most effective way to minister to students is to place a full-time (paid) minister on one university. This is what we do (or seek to do) with our congregations – a full-time minister for the congregation (or neighborhood if we are planting a church). (Sometimes this cannot be done and a minister must divide his time between several universities or congregations, or supplement his ministry income with a different job.) A full-time minister can be in the university every day. He can meet with students one-to-one, he can lead prayer meetings, he can lead Bible studies on any day of the week. He can be available whenever the students are available, in between classes and labs and sports and clubs. He can be present to handle urgent issues which spring up. He can prepare sermons and Bible studies in the library or coffee shop or student center. He can lead a public meeting for singing and preaching in which he can proclaim the gospel to the whole university. The biggest benefit to the minister's being in the university every day is to become, as much as possible, a part of the university. Of course he is not *technically* part of the university. But functionally, if he is present every day and joins public university events (sporting events, concerts, etc.) students, faculty, and administrators will begin to look at him as part of the university community. He begins to be seen by students as belonging to "their place" and as one of "their people," which will make his ministry much more effective. We cannot emphasize strongly enough how powerful this is for ministry effectiveness.

Churches that cannot afford to place a man in the university full-time, or who cannot find a suitable man willing to serve in that way, may assign one of their pastors or a qualified layman to spend part of his time in student ministry. Such a person may be able to meet with students and lead a few Bible studies. It is possible, but more challenging, to preach every week at a preaching meeting if he is ordained. However, his time will be more limited and his attention will be distracted. The biggest loss in this arrangement is the identity with the university. He will always be considered an outsider. The biggest difficulty with this arrangement is that his student time will have to compete with other congregational demands. Inevitably, the needs of parishioners who are always present and pay the bills take precedence over students who will be gone in a few years and contribute essentially nothing to the needs of the congregation.

If it is not possible to place a man in the university even part-time, a volunteer can make some efforts to reach students. This may be the pastor or a gifted layman. He may meet with students one-to-one and lead a Bible study, but not much else. Praise God that the word of God is going forth! This arrangement is unlikely to reach more than a few students, but it may be a powerful force in the lives of those students.

An effective minister to students may be of any age or personality if he genuinely likes students and enters into their lives. Such a person will be more effective if he is ordained and able to devote himself full-time to the university. When this is not possible, God will use whoever is able to care for students and minister the gospel to them.

Whole-Person Engagement

Our goal in ministry is to present students mature in Christ, and this means growth in all areas: piety, scripture knowledge, work ethic, relationships, etc. Such growth has a cognitive component, but also includes emotions, habits, and all the dimensions of life. Such growth cannot be accomplished

by teaching or preaching alone. Preaching is the core of Christian ministry and ought to occupy the central place in a student ministry program, but full engagement of the whole person demands repeated interaction and practice. A fully developed student ministry therefore will incorporate preaching to the whole group, Bible study and prayer in small groups, and one-to-one follow-up.

Small group Bible studies must be interactive. This is where students learn to think, to encourage and correct each other, and to interpret the Bible accurately. Without interactive Bible studies, ministries often produce students with theological prejudices. They believe what they have been taught, but have no depth and cannot defend their beliefs. Such students are easy prey for shallow ministries or false teaching, or even the lies of Satan. To be a bit simplistic, the student minister should preach the gospel with a well-digested text in the gathering of all students. Then the students should be turned loose to explore the Bible on their own in the Bible studies without a lecture from the leader. Now for this to be effective and to prevent pedagogical chaos requires trained Bible study leaders. This has been explained extensively elsewhere.¹

An idea circulating among some ministries is that every Christian needs to be discipled. What is meant by this is that everyone must have one-to-one teaching. This is not supported by scripture, and is practically impossible. Christians do need to grow as disciples. This happens primarily through strong preaching within a supportive community. Consequently a mature student ministry will feature robust preaching, dynamic small group Bible studies, and trained, committed leaders. One-to-one ministry is mainly necessary for special purposes: to welcome new members, answer difficult questions, counsel troubled souls, warn the wayward, train and support the leaders, etc. This last purpose is vital, for without a growing group of trained, supported leaders everything is going to fall onto the minister. In that case over time he will burn out or the ministry will shrink, or likely both.

The chart below illustrates (crudely) the degree to which a ministry might engage and penetrate the social fabric of a university in coordination with the programs it can offer and the staff it can support.

University Engagement at Different Levels of Program Development

Program Participation	# of students	Engagement Level	Staff
Attendance at Worship	Variable	Little	0
1-1 in the university	1	1 + friends	Volunteer
Bible study at church	3-12	3-12	Volunteer
Bible study in the university	3-12	3-12 + friends	Volunteer
Fellowship and preaching at church	20 or more	20 or more	Part time
Fellowship and preaching in the university	20 or more	Students + friends	Part time

Fellowship and preaching + Bible studies in the university	20 or more	University	Part to Full-time
Fellowship and preaching + Bible studies + leadership training in the university	20 or more	University	Full-time

Doctrine

Some ministers and churches are so zealous for their doctrine – all of it – that they alienate people who do not see things their way. Others are so zealous for outreach that they compromise their doctrine for the sake of attracting more people. Most student ministries tend in this direction, and it is generally assumed that a significant student ministry cannot be developed if there is a firm doctrinal stance. Most people try to split the difference, keeping enough doctrine to maintain their sense of integrity, but throwing overboard as much as possible to attract people. A better approach is to hold firm on all points of doctrine, and maximize your appeal to outsiders. There are four elements to accomplishing this.

First, teach and preach in such a way that you handle doctrines according to their relative importance. For example, all ministers must emphatically, clearly, and unequivocally teach the full divinity and full humanity of Christ. Less important is whether we baptize the infants of believers. Even less important is our view of Genesis 6, whether the “sons of God” were fallen angels or the descendants of Seth. In our zeal for the truth, we can fall into the mistake of treating all doctrines as equally important. They are not, and most people sense this, even if they cannot explain it. So to treat all doctrines as equally important is unfaithful to scripture and alienating to people. Someone will immediately object that all doctrine (including baptism) is important and ought to be taught. Yes! It would be a mistake to deny the importance of all doctrines, and to suggest some should be ignored. Not at all! All doctrines should be taught, but *not with equal emphasis*. Give most emphasis to those which are most important.

Second, emphasize the doctrines which are appropriate to the congregation and situation at hand. The exegesis of Genesis 6 has little application to university students. It should not be ignored or dismissed when studying through Genesis, but it does not deserve much attention. Students will not be having babies (except possibly for the very rare students who are married), so baptism, which is significantly more important than Genesis 6, ought also to receive little attention in a student ministry. But neither should such a doctrine be denied. If a text addresses baptism, the doctrine of baptism should be taught, clearly and with vigor. If a student raises a question about baptism, he or she should be answered with clarity and with the truth as the minister understands it. But everyone should see clearly that this is a doctrine of secondary importance to this congregation at this time.

Third, avoid theologically charged language. For example, it is possible and rather easy to teach God’s sovereign love for His people without using the words election and predestination. Someone may object that that would be capitulating to feeble-minded people. So be it. If Paul could be a Gentile to win Gentiles, we can be feeble-minded to win the feeble-minded. Note that we are advocating to avoid theologically charged *language*, but not to avoid the doctrines they represent.

Fourth, handle doctrinal differences charitably. One can mention the difference in understanding justification between the Roman church and Protestant churches without name-calling or slinging insults. One can say, “Our friends in the Roman church understand justification to mean infusing righteousness, but we do not see that taught in this passage. Our conviction is that this passage teaches that righteousness is imputed.”

It is possible for a church to take a firm, robust doctrinal position and also attract a diverse group of students. Students will be offended by doctrinally correct, but socially insensitive and personally uncaring pastors. Students will be unattracted to doctrinally careless pastors. Students will be attracted to pastors with deep convictions yet love people whether they hold those convictions or not. By emphasizing doctrines according to their relative importance and their appropriateness to the context, by avoiding theologically charged language, and by handling differences charitably students will be attracted to a strong, relevant, and caring ministry, even if they disagree with some elements of it.

Student Leaders

A robust student ministry will have student leaders. Students whom God has blessed with leadership gifts will naturally develop these and be eager to use their gifts. Mature student leaders will then multiply the impact of the university minister. Gifted students will maneuver to use their gifts in any ministry, but if the ministry is immature, the student leaders will be immature. Immature student leaders can cause problems for a ministry, so sometimes student leadership is unwelcome. This is foolish and shortsighted. The solution to immature student leaders is to ramp up the quality of the ministry overall, and to carefully mentor, train, and supervise students in leadership.

If a ministry is to have leaders, they must be developed. Too often, as needs arise a pastor will call for volunteers to manage the nursery or teach Sunday School. This is a perilous mistake. It leaves open the possibility that incompetent people will volunteer, and often they do, which opens up endless problems. As needs arise, the pastor should begin looking for people who might have the qualifications for the job. Recruitment begins with a clear understanding of the job and potential recruits. These people will be engaged in discussion about the job description, and ultimately selection is made. That is only the beginning! The next step is careful training in the job. When someone is trained and placed, he must receive regular supervision and periodic evaluation. This may sound long and complicated to some, but it is the only way to have leaders who reliably enhance the overall ministry. When a pastor develops leaders, students can perform astonishing ministry.

If a ministry to students wishes to develop leaders, the process begins when freshmen arrive. From day one the pastor and current student leaders are looking for freshmen who exhibit the potential to be leaders. Now leadership is as broad as ministry, and widely diverse people can exercise strong leadership in diverse arenas. The person who leads a worship team needs the same general qualities as someone who leads the large group meeting, but they may be very different people. Therefore the search for leaders must include individuals as diverse as the ministry. Within a month or two, there should be some tentative ideas of who might be potential leaders. Of course a fundamental qualification must be faithful participation in the ministry up to that point.

The next step in developing student leaders is to engage them in the work of ministry. They should be invited to do small, but important tasks. This will test their reliableness and also bond them more strongly to the ministry. It is usually counter-productive to enroll potential leaders in a class at this point. Such a move almost always communicates that leadership consists of knowledge, not service. The third step is to engage recruits in several other activities to expand their practical knowledge of ministry. Eventually some teaching on ministry and leadership is necessary. As a student grows in ministry ability and faithfulness, there will come a time to discuss possible leadership roles for him. After he takes a role, the minister or some older student will supervise his performance and provide helpful feedback.

This is a quick sketch of a leadership development process which has been expanded elsewhere.² Leaders can be developed for small tasks quickly. This author had a ministry in which one task was to bring Bibles to the weekly meeting. It took less than an hour to train someone to do that acceptably, but it took two years before a student was ready to lead a Bible study group. However, the Bible studies were astonishingly good!

Doctrine and Student Leaders

Doctrinal integrity is a special concern with student leaders. A ministry which is concerned to maintain sound doctrine may be hesitant to allow anyone in leadership who does not embrace their doctrine. If the doctrine in question is sufficiently shallow, many Christian students may qualify, but that is not a recipe for a mature ministry. If the ministry embraces a doctrinal position like the Westminster Standards, the Three Forms of Unity, or the Thirty Nine Articles of Religion, there may be very few students who even know such doctrine, let alone embrace it. But it is possible for a student ministry to hold to a high, rich doctrinal position while also including a wide range of students in its work. This requires that ministry be understood as having two aspects: social and teaching. Leadership issues are different in each aspect.

In a robust student ministry many activities will naturally arise. Students will do social activities, service projects, etc. It will also be necessary to plan transportation, food, facilities and other features of events which are primarily focused on teaching, such as weekend conferences. The ministry must make a clear distinction between functions which are teaching and those which support the ministry. Christ has given the teaching ministry to ordained ministers, and it is wrong to allow anyone to teach publicly unless they have been ordained or licensed to do so. However, responsible students may exercise all sorts of non-teaching roles even if their doctrine is shaky or even deficient. Of course the key qualifier here is "responsible." It is foolhardy to allow any willing or enthusiastic person to assume a role until the minister has determined that they are able to execute it well. Having identified students qualified to take leadership positions, it still remains for them to be trained, and ongoing supervision is vital in any organization.

It is more challenging to involve students in positions which include an element of teaching, or which seem to overlap teaching and non-teaching functions. The leader of a public teaching meeting is an example of this. The person who leads a meeting and introduces the pastor is not in a teaching position, but his role is so close to the teacher that his comments will create an atmosphere over the

group – and we want that atmosphere to be healthy and doctrinally solid. Bible studies are unambiguous teaching events, and it is a mistake for students to teach, even in small groups. But students can be extremely effective at leading a Bible study which is strictly a discussion of the text. Mature students of various backgrounds can do this if three conditions are maintained. *First*, students are directed that they may never, in the Bible study meeting, do direct teaching. *Second*, students must be thoroughly trained so that they are able to foster healthy, vigorous discussions about the text without allowing those discussions to wander aimlessly and become fruitless. *Third*, students must agree never to publicly contradict the doctrine of the church. They may, and should be encouraged, to discuss their own opinions freely with friends and neighbors. But when they are exercising a leadership role in the ministry of the church, they must either support the doctrine of the church or remain silent. This is as much a matter of good manners as anything.

By following these practices a student ministry may promote a rich doctrinal understanding while also incorporating students who do not yet embrace that doctrine.

Beginning a Ministry to Students

At the beginning, when there are no members or leaders, the minister will need to do everything. More has been written elsewhere about the process of starting and building a ministry³, but here we will sketch the outline. The minister will begin by connecting with students wherever he can find them: already coming to the church, or in the university, or by referral from other people, or otherwise. When several students show interest in his help, the minister will gather them into a Bible study group. As this group grows, and as more students are contacted, the minister will establish several Bible study groups of size convenient for discussion, roughly 4-10 people. When there are enough students, he should begin a meeting for singing and preaching in addition to the Bible studies. (“Enough” can vary widely, and is determined by the social sensitivity of the students.) He should invite the students to participate in both the preaching meeting and the Bible study, since both are necessary for Christian growth. Meanwhile, the minister will be noticing students with the maturity and aptitude for leadership and begin training them to share the ministry with him.

This ministry will be far more effective if it can be conducted in the university where the students are studying. But of course the pinnacle of Christian experience is Lord’s Day worship, and students should be urged to participate in Lord’s Day worship every week. Students with no church background, or a weak connection to church, can be urged to join the minister in his congregation. Students who do have a strong church connection will usually prefer to worship in a church similar to their home congregation. That is better than not worshipping at all and so should be supported for Bible-believing gospel-preaching churches. If students attend a church which is faithful but weak, they will discover this with time.

Parachurch vs. Church

A church in a town or city with a university may not have the funds or a suitable person (or even the desire) to operate a ministry to students. In such cases the elders may decide simply to leave student ministry to a student ministry organization. If that is all they do, they are avoiding responsibility. Jesus entrusted the ministry of the gospel to the church, which is the institution for “gathering and

equipping the saints.” The church may enlist other organizations to assist it, but the church cannot “out-source” the ministry of the gospel. A more responsible approach is to establish a partnership with the student ministry organization. It need not be a legal arrangement with written documents, although it could be. A simple understanding to work collaboratively might be successful. This is not an ideal solution, but God can use such an arrangement.

Student ministries such as Cru or IFES are called parachurch organizations. “Para” means “around.” These are organizations formed and operated by laymen to supplement the work of the church. God has certainly used such organizations, and it would be foolish to deny their role in God’s Kingdom. But it is important to keep in mind that such organizations are not the church. They are not authorized to preach the gospel, so the preaching component of ministry will be absent. Sometimes parachurch ministries address this by bringing in a pastor to preach. Parachurch organizations also are not authorized to administer the sacraments or exercise church discipline. As organizations focused on reaching many students, their doctrinal base is rudimentary and teaching can veer in awkward directions.

Parachurch ministries are beneficial to the extent that they strengthen the church. Often they do, and sometimes they do not. Without care, a student ministry organization can create a false image of the church such that students refuse to join the church. Similarly, the need for staff of such organizations can draw money and manpower away from the church. Any collaboration between a church and a parachurch organization should address these issues and attempt to solve them in advance. At least the parachurch staff must teach clearly and emphatically that the Christian life is centered in the church, and set a good example.

If a church is unable to operate its own student ministry, collaboration with a parachurch group may be a temporary way to minister to students. But a church should never out-source its responsibility to proclaim the gospel to everyone in its community. Collaboration should mean joint activity, not neglect by one party.

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Pentecost 2024

1. <https://cdavidgreen.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/leading-bible-studies.pdf>
2. <https://cdavidgreen.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/developing-student-leaders.pdf>
<https://cdavidgreen.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/leadership.pdf>
3. <https://cdavidgreen.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/group-development.pdf>