

# 10 Shifts Needed in Campus Ministry

## by Steve Lutz

In college ministry, it's no longer enough to attract a crowd. We have to mobilize our students for mission to their campus and beyond. Many current practices of college ministry fail to do this. We need a missional shift, a willingness to change our methods in order to introduce people to Jesus Christ. Let's take a look at five shifts to missional college ministry that you can start making right now.

### **Shift #1: From Religion and Relationship to Gospel**

It's common for well-meaning Christians on campus to say, "Being a Christian is not about religion. It's about a relationship." But in our post-Christendom era, this line is both tired and discounted by the unchurched and dechurched. Secularists rightfully point out much that is still "religious" about the Christian faith. (If they're really savvy, they'll reference verses like 1 Timothy 5:4 and James 1:26-27.) Neither do they find talk of relationship very persuasive, because non-Christian "spiritual" people already have a crowded buffet of spiritual relationships from which to choose.

Both *religion* and *relationship* capture helpful aspects of what Christianity is, but neither word is strong enough to fully encapsulate what Christianity is about. Only *gospel* can do that. The gospel alone is the power of salvation for all who believe (Romans 1:16); no amount of our religious observance or relational feeling has the power to save.

Many of us are aware of how religion easily becomes a work, through legalistic observance of rules and rituals, but sometimes we forget that relationship can fall into the same traps. While the legalist chases adherence to the rules, the relationist chases the next feel-good moment. In this sense, relationship can become just another type of salvation by works among

pietistic people, going from one passionate mountaintop experience to another.

Christianity is expressed and experienced in both religion and relationship. But it's not about either. Only the gospel occupies that central place. The gospel is not merely an initiation for new converts but the foundation for everyone. The gospel—in all its depth, riches, and fullness—must be repeatedly proclaimed to believer and unbeliever, church and unchurched alike.

## **Shift #2: From Building a Large Group to Reaching a Large Campus**

Where do many college ministries spend the greatest amount of time, energy, and resources? Generally, it's on the weekly large group meetings, complete with polished worship teams, fun activities, and funny emcees—all arranged to attract a good crowd. While this isn't all bad, such meetings cannot be our sole or even primary focus. We need to shift our priority from attracting a large group to reaching a large campus. We need to invest our time, energy, and resources in comprehensive, campus-saturating strategies. Let's be honest: there are huge segments of the campus population we will never see at our weekly large group meetings.

What we really need is a perspective shift: "From now on we regard no one according to the flesh" (2 Corinthians 5:16). Our missional identity changes how we view the non-Christians around us. It changes how we perceive our gatherings so we view them as the coming together of God's people on mission, rather than merely a place or event.

## **Shift #3: From Head Counting to Seed Spreading**

The missional approach also changes how we measure success. Traditionally, our metric of success has been pretty simple: "How many people are you getting?" We look at our head counts as the source of our success and legitimacy.

A missional approach knows things aren't so simple. What are a few hundred people among 40,000? What are 50 people among 5,000? The need is so much bigger, and fruitfulness will need to be measured by things other than weekly attendance. We should be figuring out ways to assess how well we're doing at discipling people for lifelong fruitfulness. We all measure things, and we all keep score. But are we counting the right things?

## **Shift #4: From Bible Studies and Small Groups to Missional Communities**

For years, we've gathered students for Bible studies, small groups, community groups, and the like. It's no longer okay to gather only Christian students in groups merely to focus on Bible knowledge and prayer requests. These elements should be part of your ministry, but if your group meetings don't act as a means of equipping students to reach their campus, you're better off not having them, because you're not discipling them for a life of mission.

Instead, we need missional communities—groups of students who share a burden for a particular people group. They come together for prayer, study, community, and the shared purpose of reaching that group together.

These groups work best when their students are reaching the people they already live, work, and study with all the time. But we also need students who will engage students who are different from them: the partying kids, the LGBTQA community, the atheist-agnostic community, Muslims, and so on. Your campus has no shortage of unreached (or barely reached) people groups. A network of gospel-centered, mission-driven, student-led missional communities is the best way to saturate your campus with the knowledge of God.

## **Shift #5: From Compartmentalizing Faith to Full-Life Engagement**

Many campus ministries believe they are adequately equipping students to

live out their faith. However, too many of us focus only on private spiritual disciplines. While we must teach our students these things, missional campus ministry realizes that students must be equipped to think and live Christianly in every sphere of life. As people on mission to the world of higher education, we intentionally and rigorously develop the intellect. This means calling students to whole person transformation—mind, body, and spirit—through the gospel, a transformation that begins through the renewing of their minds (Romans 12:2).

Missional campus ministry constantly helps students make sense of their lives from a deeply Christian perspective. Students are helped to view sex, relationships, work, school, money, entertainment, partying, alcohol, justice—and many other issues—from this Christian perspective.

Missional outreach is familiar with and engages the various "gospels" proclaimed in culture, particularly through movies, music, TV, and the internet. This takes wisdom and discernment, as well as a deep awareness (and appreciation) of both the biblical (meta)narrative and the cultural narratives.

My hope is that you will examine what you're currently doing (or not doing) and make the shift to a more thoroughly missional ministry. And I hope that churches will place a greater emphasis on intentionally reaching this crucial people group. The future health and vitality of the church in North America will likely depend on it.

### **Shift #6: From Reaching Vague 'Everyones' to Specific 'Someones'**

Missional college ministry works hard to understand the people we seek to reach. If you have never spent hours on your school's website viewing all the demographic data that is publicly available, you have more work to do.

Statistics aren't sufficient though. We must work hard to engage the legions of students who will never walk through the doors of our large group

meetings. If you have never struck up random conversations in the student union building with your agenda being to listen and learn, stop reading and get to work. Your campus is not only unique but always changing. Jesus became a human being in order to save human beings. He "dwelt among us" (John 1:14). We need to "dwell" among those we serve. We need to spend the time listening to and learning about the people we seek to reach.

Ministry that tries to reach a vague, generalized "everyone" often fails to reach anyone. We must continually ask, "What does it look like to communicate the gospel in *this* particular place, at *this* particular time, to *this* particular people?"

### **Shift #7: From Students-Only to Institutional Effect**

Missional college ministry works hard to understand our context of higher education/academia. This is arguably both more difficult and also more important than knowing our students. Most campus ministers are very relational people, so getting to know students comes relatively easy to us. Institutions? Not so much. But particular students come and go; universities remain.

Location is not an irrelevant or extraneous detail. Each campus, and each city or community in which it is placed, is unique. Ministry to, and by, these campus communities must be shaped by context. We should be asking, "What is it about higher education---and this institution--that makes it a particularly challenging, strategic, and exciting mission field? What are the institutional, social, and cultural obstacles to the gospel here? What would this place look like if it were increasingly renewed by the gospel?"

Campus ministers should not only pursue relationships with students, but also the faculty, staff, administration, and others who make up a university. It is tragic and shortsighted to work on a campus for many years with only a narrow focus on students. Rather, missional campus ministry believes that

God has brought us to this institution so we can be part of his work in reconciling all things to himself (Colossians 1:20).

## **Shift #8: From Talking *at* People to Talking *with* Them**

Too much of campus ministry is spent talking about the unchurched/dechurched, rather than talking with them. Instead of arguing or retreating, we must be ready to respectfully engage people with the questions they are asking (1 Peter 3:15-17). We must be willing to discuss and respond to the common objections to the gospel.

Listen well, and you should start piecing together the objections that regularly combine to make Christianity seem unbelievable to non-Christians. On many campuses, these include several common charges: Christians are intolerant, Jesus can't be the only way, the Bible is historically unreliable, choosing a religion isn't necessary, Christianity is just a proxy for political power, and others.

Missional ministry takes these objections seriously and humbly interacts with those who hold them. These objections will not be addressed through shrill debates but respectful dialogue. My ministry has featured a weekly forum for skeptics of all types to question faith and doubt. It has given me a relational context for engaging with any and all questions that non-Christians may bring. This lets me simultaneously engage both Christians and non-Christians. Doing so communicates to unbelievers that we are listening and models to believers how to engage in these conversations in informed, winsome, courageous, and most of all, loving ways.

## **Shift #9: From Evangelism as Occasional Activity to a Way of Life**

In the campus setting, many students regard canned, impersonal evangelistic campaigns as ineffective, reinforcing the objections they hold against Christianity. As a result, many Christians on campus (even ministers)

rarely, if ever, share the gospel.

To many students, talk is cheap, but actions speak loudly. Missional evangelism reunites deeds of mercy and justice with the verbal proclamation of the gospel as signs of the kingdom. An excellent example can be seen in the many unbelieving students who joined Christian ministries for Katrina relief. The context of mercy and justice becomes an appropriate and authentic arena for sharing the faith.

But sharing the faith verbally remains absolutely essential. Actions without words are unintelligible. If you do good deeds silently, people will think you are a good person. If you do them for Jesus and in his name (Mark 10:42), they will (at least) think Jesus is good and want to find out more. Talk is cheap, and actions alone are incomplete; but (gospel) talk with (gospel-shaped) action is incredibly powerful.

### **Shift #10: From Insider Clique to Comprehensible Community**

Missional ministries must not hide our lamp under a basket (Matthew 5:15). Unfortunately, our insider lingo can have this veiling effect. In our communications, we can't assume people are fluent in "Christianese." Terms must constantly be explained. This doesn't mean watering down the gospel. Rather, great effort and care are taken to speak faithfully about spiritual things in ways non-churched people can understand.

Missional speakers do not assume we are reminding people of what they already know, but that we are explaining new things to them. In every meeting, every event, every setting, we always assume that unbelievers are present, people who are likely biblically illiterate and whose own faith comprises a hodgepodge of spiritual ideas.

This is important in setting the tone for Christian students as well, because it models to them how to speak with unbelievers while also encouraging them

to invite their friends, roommates, and classmates into Christian community.

The motive for working hard at changing our language is not marketing but love for our neighbor. It expressing our willingness to do anything and change anything---even dearly loved traditions or practices---so that some would be saved (1 Corinthians 9:22).