

“Do You Love Me?”

A feasibility study on establishing a CRC Campus Ministry
University of Calgary

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December 1999

For: Classical Home Missions Committee, Classis Alberta South

Introduction

The genesis of this report was a simple, short, yet eloquent expression of love. It was so transparent and pure it left me exalted, yet stunned. For in the words of invitation spoken to me that day, I heard the voice of God. Such encounters are set apart; they are holy.

It happened on November 9, 1998 when I visited the University of Calgary to attend the semi-annual meeting of the National Secretaries of University Ministries. After the meeting, I wandered over to the Chaplains' office just to check it out. And that's where I heard the voice of God.

Rev. Mel Cruickshank, the Southern Baptist Chaplain at the University of Calgary showed me around the office for a while and then took me aside. Then, with an intensity born of love, he challenged me: “Why aren't you guys here? Why doesn't the Christian Reformed Church have a campus ministry here? We need you. You have things to offer that we don't have.” Mel then went on to explain that he had first served in campus ministry at the University of Alberta where he had been mentored by Rev. Tom Oosterhuis.

At the time, I first thanked him for such a wonderful testimony to our work at the U of Alberta under Tom, but then posed a few possible obstacles to setting up a CRC campus ministry at the U of Calgary. But Mel would have none of it. He answered my every objection, handily hurdling every obstacle I put in his way.

One such encounter is stellar. It is truly amazing, therefore, that this individual encounter of 1998 characterized the on-site visit the feasibility study team enjoyed earlier this month with the whole U of Calgary chaplaincy team.

The study team—Layne Kilbreath, Phil Reinders, Martin Contant, Bill Van Groningen—met for breakfast with the Chair of the Classical Home Missions committee (Rev Michael Reitsma). Following that meeting, we visited with Professor Warren Piers, with the University of Calgary Chaplains, and with some Inter-Varsity staff. Unfortunately, the Associate to the Vice President (Student Affairs)—Dr. Peggy Anderson—was out of town. We did, however, stop in at her office and chatted briefly with her assistant, Linda. We also briefly interacted with one student who serendipitously happened to be loitering in the hall. Not surprisingly, no CRC students made it out of bed on Saturday morning to meet with us at that unconscionable hour. Sunday morning we joined in the 3yr birthday celebration of New Hope Church.

“I Will Lift Up Mine Eyes”

The University of Calgary is a young (1966), largely generic, technologically proficient, educationally precocious, mid-sized Canadian University that aspires to be bigger, better, and innovatively faster than any of her peers. The university describes itself as “a research and teaching university of growing national and international stature.” In conversations on campus, it became quite clear that the order of terms in that self-descriptive statement is intentional: research is being emphasized to the point where teaching is at times compromised—more and more students are accepted but the teaching faculty does not grow proportionately. Further, the “growing” is a determination that stature will be achieved, come what may perhaps?

Indeed, the entrepreneurial determination, coupled with the western ethos of the greater Calgary region—people still “stampede” here annually, with thousands of outsiders packing the “trails” (main streets) to get to the spectacle—also characterizes the mood of the campus. Largely a commuter campus, most of the 17,000 students live “around”. There is no residential center to the university, much like the city lacks a defining center/identity. The university is served by both bus and rapid transit systems, allowing many students to live/work where-ever and “attend classes” at the university.

The MacEwen Hall (Mall?) student center obviously caters to this drop-in traffic, and it is also the location of the Chaplains offices. Not surprisingly, the chaplains noted that it is difficult to sustain a student group on the

campus, though singular events have at times been quite large (a debate sponsored by Campus Crusade for Christ drew about 400, for example).

Generally, the city seems to be booming, big new developments are being pursued downtown and new subdivisions of expensive housing mushroom all around. There is obviously big money here; paradoxically the church leaders worry about finances. I suspect that money flows to where one's eyes are drawn—I lift up mine eyes to... new houses, advanced technological toys, SUV's, weekends of sport/entertainment in the mountains, the capital it takes to live a contemporary Canadian lifestyle of plentiful and pleasurable consumption. Not surprisingly, therefore, a chaplain noted that there were no "subcultures" on campus: students seem largely unaware of social justice issues; they too have already bought into "Canada's consumer culture of self-sufficiency".

As with many entrepreneurial enclaves, there seems to be a camaraderie, an "esprit de corps" throughout the Calgary community. The chaplains at the University are not only amicable, but genuinely supportive and communal in their endeavors. The local Ecumenical Ministerial Association is reported to share the same characteristic and lately rallied the church community in Calgary against the VLT initiative. But while there is a civic pride, a cleanliness, a spirit of volunteerism, I also detected a shallowness in that same spirit. The ethos is real and genuine, but definitely limited. One can't help but wonder if the limit is perhaps a function of the entrepreneurial caste: nothing may challenge or obstruct the right to "try anything once"; but woe to anyone who never lets go or moves on. As a local Church leader said, "persevering commitment seems hard to come by."

"Street evangelism" would therefore not likely work here over the long term. A day or two, possibly even a week, perhaps. Largely, however, persons utilizing such tactics would be compelled to "move on." (The University of Calgary Chaplains' Association has a fine document on Roles, Functions, and Guidelines for campus ministry activity that encourages and defends the religious activity on campus but proscribes proselytizing behaviour. Copy attached.) Large single events have the greatest chance at drawing a crowd while regular weekly activities will most likely be small.

The religious presence on campus bears this out. The largest student groups (weekly) number about 100. Several smaller enclaves of spiritual quest and religious discussion are dispersed throughout the campus. The most successful kinds of events are public "handouts" during orientation or small (in size) mission trips. (See the University of Calgary Chaplain's Association, 1998-99 Annual Report, attached.)

Christian intellectual formation seems almost non-existent. Indeed, one para-church staff worker described Christian student gatherings as intellectually hostile. Not only was there a generally anti-intellectual bias, there was overt resistance to sustained or rigorous teaching in their activities. Interestingly, while there is yet no sustained missional/intellectual engagement with the academy per se, there is an annual lecture sponsored by the Chaplains, the Department of Religious Studies and the Faculty of Humanities. Furthermore, the recent appointment of Dr. Shantz (Religious Studies, Chair of Christianity) was cited by several persons as presenting a new opportunity in this regard.

To focus the issue: Do You Love the U of C?

As I reflected on our visit, prayed, and pondered over what we had seen, heard, and witnessed, I was puzzled for some time because I could find no words or images to adequately convey my impressions or advice. Indeed, it seemed I could not figure out what I thought or felt about the matter. Nothing I could think of to say seemed to fit quite right. Anything and everything I could come up with to say seemed somehow empty in the end. It just seemed insubstantial and inconsequential, shallow.

Perhaps you will have to forgive me for this, for perhaps I did not listen carefully enough, probe deeply enough, or discern what I had heard clearly enough. But it occurred to me that much of what I heard and witnessed during my short stay in Calgary might actually fit that meagre description of my own reflections. For while there is obviously no lack of activity, initiative, progress, money, athleticism, research, ingenuity and know-how in the area, various voices ventured the opinion that there didn't really seem to be a richly textured relational fabric undergirding and sustaining all this activity. In their own way they subtly questioned whether all this "harumph" could be sustained for the long term.

On further reflection, it occurred to me that Nicodemus typified a somewhat similar situation as he approached Jesus late one night. By every worldly standard, Nicodemus was "on track." Seemingly industrious, apparently successful, obviously secure inside the socially acceptable religious boundaries of the day, Nicodemus nonetheless inwardly yearned for something more. He acknowledges Jesus as a significant religious authority, ... and Jesus' response is an extended reply that centers on love. God so loved us, says Jesus, he moved into our neighborhood. "God so loved" (John 3:16) ... "that he tabernacled among us," (John 1:14).

Perhaps this is the heart of the matter for us to. As we consider the possibility of establishing a Christian Reformed Campus Ministry at the University of Calgary, it is helpful to somehow focus in on the heart of the issue.

And the heart of the issue, I want to suggest, is a matter of love. To get to the heart of the matter, we need to ask rhetorical questions, not as statements of judgement, but rather, as filters which help us focus on the specific concerns that we must face if we are to establish a successful and enduring campus ministry at the U of C. If we are to commit ourselves to a campus ministry at U of C, we need to know if the world of higher education, specifically that particular part of the world of higher education that is the University of Calgary, is a focussed, compelling element of this supporting community's love for the world. Do we love the U of C so much that we want to "move into that particular neighborhood?" Are we so committed to the people that inhabit that part of the world of ideas, research, and teaching, that we want our lives to be lived also in and among them?

Please let it be very clear that the issue we are focussing on here is not a judgement on or about the people (particularly the CRC people) of Calgary. The issue is rather a matter of discerning who has what kind and scope of focussed commitment. An analogy may be helpful: God loves all the world. His tabernacle, his dwelling place, covers all the earth. But when we ask the question where, in all the earth, should we—as agents of God's love—send missionaries, we do not presume that we should literally go everywhere. Rather, on the basis of prayerful discernment, our love for this or that place becomes a compelling focus for our lives and mission. Clearly, the CRC people of Southern Alberta have already demonstrated just such a love for the work of Christian elementary, secondary, and even tertiary education. The question before us now is, does that same love now also extend into an embrace of educational mission at the U of C.

We know that the churches of Classis Alberta South love the universe of learning. We know that the people of the Christian Reformed Church in Southern Alberta love ideas and intellectual formation. We know that they love the creatures of God's creation known as educational institutions. We know that they are moved to wonder and praise as they see these educational beasts in action. But before we commit ourselves to establishing a Christian Reformed Campus Ministry at the University of Calgary, we must now also know what our answer would be if the University (appropriately, insistently even, perhaps three times in a row) asks us "do you really love me? And unless we know that our answer is unequivocally and compellingly, "Yes! You know we love you!" we should not be there.

Of course, the legacy of the Christian Reformed Church disposes us to answer that indeed, we do love the university. After all, you don't really "get us right" unless and until you understand our investment in education. We have a rich theological heritage. Our commitment to an educated clergy runs long and deep. And you haven't really understood what, or how, we hope to be in the world unless and until you understand our involvement in Christian educational endeavors—elementary, secondary, tertiary, and beyond. Equally, however, though we readily discern Reformational truths, champion Kuyperian constructs of cosmic obedience, proclaim prophetic calls for justice and peace to embrace, encourage all our own kids on campus to excell, understand all God's mysteries and all knowledge, if we even have faith to move mountains like those just West of campus, without love it still amounts to nothing! And that is why the U of C may appropriately focus the question for us yet more directly by asking, "But does the CRC support community truly love *me*?"

Let us not be hasty to answer. Let us first consider briefly just a few of the characteristics of love.

Love is patient. Campus ministry is not a quick trip. Educational institutions move like glaciers—even young, precocious, technologically cutting edge institutions like the University of Calgary are not nimble creatures. It takes time to enter into the life of a university. It takes time to pick up the habits, to discern the culture, to identify the unwritten but defining social codes for students and staff. It takes time to make a difference, and all the more so when the change originates and is owned indigenously. Love is patient; so are the best campus ministries.

The history of Christian missionary enterprises is filled with tales of well-intentioned but horribly cruel activity. Sadly, contemporary campus ministries of every variety all too often add to those tales. With noble intentions to "bring the gospel" to this or that crowd of people, campus ministries all too quickly plunder and pillage the campus, eager to "get students" for their groups, or to "save them" from intellectual evils. But love is kind and campus ministry should be no less. Campus ministry must think well of the university before criticizing it. It must think well of the University's intentions and habits and concerns before (even prophetically) calling it to task. It must think well of other religious groups, other enterprises seeking the attention of students and staff, and only after doing all we can to honor our neighbor, may we then engage in constructive, critical interchange. Campus ministry must be gracious and kind, period. For only in the context of grace are the principalities and powers, like all the rest of us, ever redeemed.

Love does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful. It rejoices in truth—always and everywhere. Love is not envious or arrogant or boastful or rude. Campus ministry must therefore seek the fellowship and support of the entire university community. No campus ministry, not even our own, must think of itself as superior to other ministries; rather, we do well to follow the lead already shown by the Calgary chaplains. Thinking of others more highly than themselves, they invited us to "come on over" and join with them.

Love never ends. Having taken on the life of the university, we do not “play at” campus ministry. Love endures. It does not “let go and move on”. Campus ministries worth their salt are not “fly by night” operations. Rather, they slowly take root, extending deeper and deeper into the sustaining fabric of the university, reaching ever outward into participation with and a partnering influence in its mission. Love is not first of all functional. Rather, it is a way of being. So, too, a campus ministry: it is not first of all to “get students into churches, or campus groups, etc.,” it is not first of all to “bring salvation” to the evil intellectual world. Rather, campus ministry takes up the life of the university, sojourning with it, bearing witness to (and extending) the grace of God already there. It does so as love incarnate. It should do so, if at all, because we so love that world.