


Spring 2000

Why Do We Do the Things We Do? Questions to be Asked by Follower of Jesus

David M. Johnstone

George Fox University, djohnsto@georgefox.edu

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/student_life_works

 Part of the [Higher Education Commons](#), and the [Student Counseling and Personnel Services Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Johnstone, David M., "Why Do We Do the Things We Do? Questions to be Asked by Follower of Jesus" (2000). *Staff Publications - Student Life*. Paper 2.

http://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/student_life_works/2

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Student Life at Digital Commons @ George Fox University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Staff Publications - Student Life by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ George Fox University. For more information, please contact arolfe@georgefox.edu.

Why Do We Do the Things We Do?

Questions To Be Asked by The Follower of Jesus

By David M. Johnstone

It was another Friday night. This time it was 2:00 a.m. A half-dozen friends and classmates had completed their weekly pilgrimage roaming the pubs and clubs of the downtown core. Their constant quest was to find a later and later "last call." Each crawled back into the residence hall in their varying degree of haze and stupor. Each was also unable to assist their fellow "drinking buddy." I rolled out of bed and quickly assessed the situation. As in previous weeks and months, I proceeded to assist my classmates struggle into their beds and safety.

My experience as an undergraduate at a large public research university was not unusual. Drunkenness, sexual license, drug use and the hedonistic pursuit of pleasure was and is a part of many campuses. The one "absolute" value that was universally esteemed was the loyalty displayed to friends and peers. As with my generation, the present one immensely values loyalty and relationships. Speaking of his students, Tom Beaudoin comments that:

"They were generally unafraid of transgressing almost any boundaries (irreverence-whether political, religious, or sexual-was almost a way of life). My students trusted their friendships over all other relationships, playfully ironized and satirized themselves and their culture..." (1998, 17)

Unfortunately, as Kenneth Cragg has observed in other cultures, relationships often tend towards a situation where "allegiance takes precedence over conviction. Belonging dominates believing." (1964, 222-223) In other words, if your convictions, values or faith take precedence over your loyalty to a "neighbor" your whole character becomes suspect.

Yet we are living in a time when even this basic absolute has started to come under scrutiny. North American culture is in such flux and change that many are reexamining their core beliefs and primary worldviews. Wuthnow suggests that:

"Faced with growing uncertainties and with ample opportunities for choice, people will need to spend more time than ever reflecting on the deep values that make life worth living and the sources of those values, including spirituality." (1998, 14)

We therefore have a culture, reflected in our undergraduate population, which is desperately trying to understand its relationships, its values and its spirituality. Those who have the opportunity to work with college and university students have the challenge of impacting what Levine and Cureton have called a "transitional generation." (1998, 145-167) This opportunity is even more significant for those who follow Christ and seek to encourage their students "to do everything" Christ has commanded. (Willard, 1998, 311-313)

We therefore have a culture, reflected in our undergraduate population, which is desperately trying to understand its relationships, its values and its spirituality.

Twenty years ago the caution was articulated that: "The single most striking fact in the life of our churches these last twenty years is the rapid erosion of concern about whether people believe in Jesus." (Burtness, 1982, 190) If this com-

North American culture is in such flux and change that many are reexamining their core beliefs and primary worldviews.

mentary is contrasted with the current rise in concern over personal spirituality, followers of Christ have the potential to significantly impact the current generation. The challenge is presenting Christ in ways of depth and integrity which will penetrate to the heart of the struggles faced by those growing to maturity in the beginning of the twenty-first century. Many have and are exploring these attempts to present the hope, thrill, joy and faithfulness of the Gospel.¹

I believe that the message and presentation of the Gospel is fundamental, yet particularly for this generation, the messenger becomes paramount in importance. With a generation that esteems loyalty and relationships, the daily interaction becomes essential for any communication. It is in this daily contact that young adults will begin to glimpse the values and depths of one's priorities. My concern is for those who happen to be in an environment where there is an opportunity to significantly touch maturing adults. If a follower of Christ is not convinced that he or she has been placed there by God's design, how do they intentionally impact young adults?

In North American culture, one of the most significant arenas for having contact with this generation is on college and university campuses. One of the principal positions in which to make an impression on the lives of students is within the sphere of student development. The college campus is a place where one is able

to interact relationally, pedagogically, and spiritually with students. It is a place that allows the freedom to move beyond the academic to draw into and touch all aspects of a student's life.

I believe that the message and presentation of the Gospel is fundamental, yet particularly for this generation, the messenger becomes paramount in importance.

In my time as a student and a professional, I have observed two types of student development professionals. These types are not distinctive and the descriptions tend to blur, but they are constant enough to make generalizations. The first type is the individual who moves into the field of student development as a professional career move. Let us use the Resident Director as an illustration. Not only does it provide for most of the positions in student development, it is also the primary contact that students have with the field. As well, it is the most practical entrance into the world of student development.

Many move into a Resident Director (RD) position, not because they feel a "call" to be there by God, but as that first, not so pleasant, but necessary step into the field. Unfortunately this pragmatism is also displayed by some institutions. Many colleges and universities approach the position of RD as little more than a constant presence in a hall. As in my own experience, the residence life staff was only present to assist in evacuation of the buildings in case of fire or a bomb scare. Fortunately, most Christian colleges affirm a greater presence for the RD by articulating a pedagogical, mentoring and programmatic role. Admittedly, an individual can pursue these aspects of their job description with great expertise, integrity and professionalism.

The second type of individual I have observed has been the one who feels that

God has called him or her to touch the lives of students. Student development becomes a strategy for the vision towards which the Holy Spirit is directing them. It takes on a deeper meaning and is viewed with more importance (both personally and institutionally) since it has a place in the work of the Spirit of God. And, the Resident Director is no longer identified as or feels like a cruise director, a medic, a youth pastor or a policeman.

As a follower of Christ working on a campus, I believe that being a student life professional is not a career path or a professional track. It is a call from God. I would assert that any other view fails to provide the vision and purpose necessary for those functioning in student development. Without a sense of God's presence and direction there will most likely be instability, transience and lack of peace. *What has God called me to do? What strategies has He brought before me to accomplish this vision?* These are the larger questions that should be present in the thinking of the Christian student development professional. These are the questions that should be asked before individuals move into the vocation and these are the questions upon which they should be asked to reflect during their tenure.

In most spheres these questions revolve around the creation of institutional and personal mission statements. Yet for the follower of Christ, the "big picture" questions are even more critical and far reaching than the hopes which lie within such a statement. Determining what God has called you to do will enable you to evaluate the activities in which you immerse yourself and whether or not it is the most appropriate season to pursue a given strategy.

Without a sense of God's call [or viewing student development as a *vocation* in the truest sense of that word] an individual will struggle with stability, peace and transience. Wrapped around these areas are the notions of effectiveness and purpose. The assessment of effective programs is needed and desirable, yet assessment is also needed to evaluate why we have pursued and are present within the sphere

of student development. The issue is not our effectiveness; the concern is whether we are being obedient in our response to God. Our obedience and clarity of vision allows us to examine our programs, staff personalities, goals, etc.

Let us return to the illustration of the Resident Director and make it personal. In my first year as a Resident Director, I brought my young family to live in an undergraduate hall of 200 men and women. We had traveled several thousand miles and moved into an area with no family, friends or acquaintances nearby. My wife and boys have flourished with the interaction of our students who flow with energy, creativity and emotion. It has been rich, nourishing and fun; yet, at the same time it takes its toll. We are compelled to live transparent lives as these young adults witness the realities of our family intimacy and discipline. We are impacted daily by the lives of students sharing in their triumphs, medical emergencies, discipline issues, crisis, joys and frustrations. There are phenomenal things about being a Resident Director, yet even the good things are exhausting. Emotions and "good times" are not enduring in this position. Yet we believe that God has placed us here.

This simple conviction allows me to evaluate my programming, the growing maturity of my staff and the depth of crisis faced by the students. It is a reality check for how I balance my time between family and students. It shapes how I extend mercy and redemption in discipline issues and how I intervene in the lives of my students. The sense of God's call on how I live my life helps to bring focus to the activities in which I invest. It tempers the seasons of burnout because it forces a balance in my approach to my vocation.

Within Christian student development there needs to be a deep reflection on why and how we do the things we do? As followers of Jesus we must be cognizant of the Spirit's role in our work and play. If we fail to recognize these movements of God on our lives then this highly perceptive and intuitive generation will dis-

cern that a very real part of our lives is lacking in integrity and consistency.

This brief and inadequate reflection is meant as a primer for those who assertively follow Christ and have the privilege of working with college and university students. This generation is not only poised to enter a new millenium, but they are prepared to provide leadership for those who come after. Are we prepared to invest in them with depth, integrity and consistency of faith? I believe most would reply in the affirmative, but the bigger questions must be asked in order to discern the strategy we must each take to fulfill our role in His Kingdom. Soli Deo Gloria!

Notes

- ¹ See Kevin Graham Ford, *Jesus For A New Generation: Putting The Gospel In The Language Of The Xers* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1995); Jimmy Long, *Generating Hope: A Strategy For Reaching The Postmodern Generation* (Downers Grove, IL; InterVarsity Press, 1997).

References

- Beaudoin, Tom (1998). *Virtual Faith: The Irreverent Spiritual Quest of Generation X*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers.
- Burtness, James H. (1982). "Does Anyone Out There Care Anymore Whether People Believe In Jesus?", *Dialog: A Journal of Theology*, Summer, 190-194.
- Cragg, Kenneth (1964). *The Dome and The Rock: Jerusalem Studies in Islam*. London: S.P.C.K.

Levine, Arthur & Jeanette S. Cureton (1998). *When Hope and Fear Collide: A Portrait of Today's College Student*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers.

Willard, Dallas (1998). *The Divine Conspiracy: Rediscovering Our Hidden Life in God*. USA: Harper San Fransisco.

Wuthnow, Robert (1998). *After Heaven: Spirituality in America Since The 1950s*. Berkeley, CA: University Of California Press.

David M. Johnstone and his wife Heather and their two sons live in Santa Barbara, CA., where he works in the residence life department of Westmont College. He has graduate degrees in church history and student development.

David wishes to acknowledge Julie DeGraw's contribution to this article in the form of her experience and penetrating questions.