

GEORGE FOX UNIVERSITY

BAPTIST STUDENT MINISTRY:
OBJECT LESSONS IN THE NEW REALITY FOR DENOMINATIONAL
MINISTRIES

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BY
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Nick Howard
Houston, Texas
January 8, 2006

Introduction

The world in which we live is a world filled with opportunity. It is an exciting time to be alive and involved in ministry. This is especially true for those who minister to the more than 14 million university students on campuses across America today.¹ To work on a university campus is to experience the quickening of the Spirit. There is a very real sense that one is ministering on the cusp of the postmodern world. In contrast with earlier generations of students, the beginning years of the 21st century are times in which students are characterized by an optimism very different from the cynicism and hopelessness of their Gen X older brothers and sisters. Indeed, instead of a countercultural rejection of society's institutions, there is almost a "heroic" desire to improve these institutions and make society better. Neil Howe and William Strauss, characterize this generation as the next "great generation," a reference to the World War II generation of Americans.² Or, as Ann Quindlen of *Newsweek* put it as quoted in *Millennials Rising*, "Meet the Millennials and rejoice!"³

For those who ministered on the campuses of the 80s and 90s the tide of change which has swept across the face of the college campus is breathtaking. There is indeed cause for rejoicing; rejoicing and reassessing. The joy of working with students who

¹ *Countries with the Most University Students*, 2003 [online], available from <http://www.aneke.com/students.html>, accessed 7 December 2003.

² Neil Howe and others, *Millennials Go to College: Strategies for a New Generation on Campus: Recruiting and Admissions, Campus Life, and the Classroom* (Washington, DC: American Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers, 2003), 14.

³ Neil Howe and William Strauss, *Millennials Rising: The Next Great Generation* (New York: Vintage Books, 2000), 3.

desire the greater good of humanity, and are willing to work hard to make it happen is mitigated somewhat by the challenges of working with what may well be the first truly postmodern generation. This is a generation of students for whom the tension of living with paradoxical and conflicting belief systems is simply a normal way of life. They are a generation which works best in teams, yet look for customization in every aspect of life. They favor institutions as tools of change, yet hold little loyalty to those very institutions, quickly moving on to something or someone else if it is perceived to have a better answer at the moment. The same is true in the realm of spirituality. On the one hand, the person who enters into conversation with today's student quickly discovers that there is an unparalleled openness to spiritual things. Conversations about God, prayer, and the role of spirituality in their lives flow easily, yet their beliefs are as eclectic and, as often as not, contradictory. While this is a generation which grants its members incredible freedom of expression in many areas, it also exerts tremendous pressure to fit into certain sociological molds, including the pressure to accept a bland form of spirituality which, as one educator has put it, is "... a ubiquitous 'spirituality' that is clogging the internet and cluttering campus bulletin boards. Unfortunately, the garb of spirituality is a bleached if companionable substitute for faith."⁴ As might be expected when one understands the dynamics of postmodernism, openness to spiritual issues should certainly not be equated with openness to Christianity, at least not in any orthodox sense.⁵

Step onto a university campus and step into the future. I believe that the trends we see on the university campus are a powerful indicator of the future we face. If that is true,

⁴ Donna Schaper, "Me-First 'Spirituality' Is a Sorry Substitute for Organized Religion on Campuses," *The Chronicle of Higher Education* 46, no. 50 (2000), A56.

⁵ Rick Richardson, *Evangelism Outside the Box: New Ways to Help People Experience the Good News* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 46.

then it would behoove us to be students of students, to make every effort to understand the culture which arises from the hallowed halls of academia and the dorm room of the freshman. What are the trends? Where is the disconnect between student life and the church? What must happen in order for students to experience the transforming power of Christ in their lives and the church to experience the transforming power of God at work through this generation?

These challenges are, indeed, significant. But for those who work with students, the changes taking place and the resulting threats to existing structures and institutions are not limited to those faced on the university campus. The very cultural trends which may be seen clearly on the university campus are making their way into church culture, among others, where they cause further issues for the student minister as an employee of a denominational institution. Where student ministries are denominationally based, these student ministers face a somewhat uncertain future. A glance at the Texas A & M University website illustrates the point well. Whereas a student generation or two ago would have found a few religious organizations listed in the student handbook, most of which, with only a couple of exceptions, were defined by the denominational sponsor. Today there is a dizzying array of 77 religious clubs and organizations listed in the religion section of the clubs and organizations page of the TAMU website. Most of these organizations were founded in the last decade and many within the last five years.⁶ The point is well taken; while the determination to change the world is often expressed through institutions, the individualistic nature of this generation is expressed by the rapidity with which new clubs and organizations are founded, without regard to existing

⁶ *Texas A & M Department of Student Activities: Organization Search*, 2005, [online], available from <http://studentactivities.tamu.edu/orgsearch/>, accessed 7 June 2005.

organizations which often share the same stated goals and vision. Along the same lines, denominational loyalty has reached an all time low and will, in all likelihood, continue to ebb. From mainline churches to Congregationalists, church leaders are coming to a frightening recognition: for this generation of Christians occupying places in the pews of their churches, the vast majority hold alignment with the denomination to be inconsequential at best and detrimental at worst. As Nancy Ammerman reports after surveying 549 congregations as a part of a study done by the Hartford Institute for Religion Research; "The phenomenon of "switching" is relevant to a lot of congregations. Indeed, nearly three-quarters of the white Protestant congregations we studied reported that *half or more* (emphasis mine) of their members grew up in another denomination."⁷ It is significant that this study took place in 1998 and most likely illustrates a trend which has not abated in the years since the survey.

In the wake of these developments, denominational ministries are coming to grips with the fact that a significant transition is underway which will affect every aspect of their ministry. Baptist Student Ministry serves as an example of such a ministry. The reality with which those who work in Baptist Student Ministries is far different from that of twenty-five or even ten years ago. Not only have students changed, but the very denomination from which they draw their support and purpose has gone through a radical transformation. As those who minister on the on the leading edge of cultural change, student ministers are in a unique position not only to encounter those cultural shifts, but to suggest ways in which the evolution of culture will impact the life of the church. Further, the student minister has the opportunity to assist the church as she seeks to

⁷ Nancy Ammerman, *New Life for Denominationalism*, 2000, [online], available from http://hrr.hartsem.edu/bookshelf/ammerman_article3.html, accessed 12 June 2005.

creatively minister within this new context. I believe that Baptist Student Ministry and other denominational ministries can and, indeed, must be on the forefront of a new paradigm of understanding denominationalism as a kingdom movement – that is, focused on the growth of God’s kingdom and rooted in the local expression of that Kingdom as its purest expression - rather than a tribal institution – in which the particular “branding” or “tribe” becomes of more importance than the kingdom and in which the purest expression is understood to be in the institutions of the denomination - in order for the ministry itself and denominationalism as a whole to flourish in the emerging culture.

This work will be in three parts. In Part One I hope to establish the historical perspective from which student ministry arose. We will explore the early student movements in America and their impact on the growing Christian community in the United States. We will also explore the introduction of denominations to student ministry and in particular the introduction of Southern Baptists into the world of ministry on the university campus. In an effort to provide a manageable and clear example from which to work, our next step will be to narrow the focus to Baptist Student Ministry, specifically, Baptist Student Ministry in Texas. We will explore not only its origins, but also its structure and philosophy of ministry. Finally, in Part One we will examine the mindset of today’s student. In particular, we want to discuss the emerging culture, most often described by the use of the word “postmodernism.”

In Part Two we will discuss those challenges facing the church in today’s culture. We will expand our discussion of the emerging culture to see how those changes embodied in this new way of perceiving reality have impacted the church and its ministries. We will then examine the specific challenges facing Southern Baptists as one

example of a denomination impacted significantly by the massive changes taking place around us.

Finally, in Part Three we will deal with the specifics of how the changes in culture, in the student population and within the Southern Baptist Convention and its churches have impacted Baptist Student Ministry. We will discuss not only how this ministry has experienced change to this point, but how the repercussions of current and future trends will continue to reshape the context of this ministry in the future. In addition we will address the specific issue of resourcing ministries and the challenges faced by those in a denominational context. And in closing we will explore new models for ministry, both for Baptist Student Ministry, but also for denominations as a whole. We hope to at least offer suggestions on directions denominations might take as they seek, not just to survive, but to flourish and continue their significant contribution to the Kingdom.

PART 1: Student Ministry: A Historical Perspective

Chapter One

Student Ministry in America

Chapter Two

Southern Baptists Enter the World of Campus Ministry

Chapter Three

Baptist Student Ministry in Texas: The State of the Ministry Today

Chapter Four

Understanding Students in the 21st Century

Chapter One

Student Ministry in America

Christian ministry to university students has a long history. In fact, there are those who would trace its history back as far as Paul, who is described in Acts 19 as moving from the synagogue to the "lecture hall of Tyrannus" due to the lack of acceptance of the gospel in the local synagogue.¹ Even though this historical underpinning for student ministry may stand on shaky ground, it is clear that ministry to students in higher education and those students themselves have long had a tremendous impact on the world. The earliest records we have of such a movement of God among university students dates to 17th century Europe. In the intellectual and spiritual ferment which boiled in Europe in the days of Bacon, Descartes and the emerging Enlightenment era, it appears there was a movement among university students to participate in the *missio dei*, the mission of God. It seems that seven German law students from the area in and around Lübeck went to Paris to in 1628 to study at the University of Paris. While there, they came under the influence of what Clarence P. Shedd calls the "enlightened" or "enthusiasts", apparently a group of Christian students who were meeting together for Bible study.² By 1630 revival had broken out among the group, with the result that at

¹ Jay Gary, *Agenda for Student Ministry*, 2003, [online], available from <http://www.jaygary.com/agendastudents.shtml>, accessed 20 April 2004.

² Clarence Prouty Shedd, *History of the World's Alliance of Young Men's Christian Associations* (London: Published for the World's Committee of Young Men's Christian Associations by S. P. C. K., 1955), 3.

least three and perhaps four student missionaries were sent in to Africa in 1632.³ We know the names of three of these students as well as something of their fate. Hieronymus von Dorne and Andreas Blumenhagen went to the Middle East where Blumenhagen was killed almost as soon as they had arrived. Peter Heyling, the leader of the group of Germans, spent two years in Cairo and then moved from there to Ethiopia, where he ministered for twenty years and translated the Bible into Amharic before he was killed because of his faith and work on behalf of the Gospel.⁴

If the seventeenth century was the beginning of this kind of student witness, it was certainly not the end. During his studies at the University of Halle, Count Nicholas Ludwig von Zinzendorf and several other young nobles formed a secret society, The Order of the Grain of Mustard Seed. As recorded on the official Zinzendorf website, “The stated purpose of this order was that the members would use their position and influence to spread the Gospel.”⁵ Zinzendorf went on to form the “Herrnhuter Brüdergemeine” or Brethren Church of Herrnhut, a church built on the principles of the Moravians, who had requested and received permission to live on the young Count’s lands. Zinzendorf became so convicted by the lifestyle of these Christians that he left public life altogether. By 1732 the Moravian Brethren living in Herrnhut had sent their first two missionaries to St. Thomas.⁶ Meanwhile, in England in 1726, John Wesley began his “Holy Club” while

³ Dennis Gaylor, ed., *Reach the U: A Handbook for Effective Campus Ministry* (Springfield, Missouri: Chi Alpha Campus Ministries, 2003), 15.

⁴ David M. Howard, *Student Power in World Missions*, 2d ed. (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1979), 64.

⁵ John Jackman, *Count Zinzendorf*, [online], available from <http://www.zinzendorf.com/countz.htm>, accessed 15 June 2005.

⁶ *Graf Ohne Grenzen*, [online], available from <http://www.zinzendorf.de>, accessed 15 June 2005.

a student at Oxford. It was this “Holy Club,” which would eventually evolve into the Methodist movement.⁷

On the shores of the new world, higher education fulfilled a two-prong need. The first of those needs was obvious. The new colonies would need trained, literate clergy and it would be these colleges which would provide for that need. The second issue was, however, just as important to those early settlers and that was to provide educated leaders for every arena of life. As one of the founders of the College of New Jersey (renamed Princeton) remarked, “Though our great intention was to erect a seminary for educating ministers of the gospel, yet we hope it will be a means of raising up men that will be useful in other learned professions – ornaments of the state as well as the church.”⁸ This is an important point, for it helps us to understand the continued development of the American university. Although each of the earliest schools was established for the purpose of educating clergy, none saw this as their exclusive assignment. This led quite naturally to a very high tolerance for those of other denominational backgrounds or even other faiths. Yet this tolerance also led to many struggles, including the role of faith on the university, the level of piety which would be expected of faculty and students alike and strained relationships with the denominational bodies which were instrumental in the founding of the institutions.

Historian Frederick Rudolph has expressed the opinion that the founding of these earliest universities was not simply an expression of pride or stubbornness, but there was a sincere need in the purpose of the colonies. As Rudolph says, “Unable to set the world

⁷ Gaylor, ed., 16.

⁸ Christopher J. Lucas, *American Higher Education: A History* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1994), 105.

straight as Englishmen in England, the Puritan settlers of Massachusetts intended to set it straight as Englishmen in the New World.”⁹ And so it was that the first school to be established in what would eventually become the United States of America was Harvard College, founded in 1636 through the bequest of Reverend John Harvard, a Cambridge educated Puritan pastor. Harvard, whose name the school still bears, bequeathed 779 pounds, 17 shillings and 2 pence towards the establishment of the college.¹⁰ As a Harvard brochure, published in 1643 put it, the university was established; "To advance Learning and perpetuate it to Posterity; dreading to leave an illiterate Ministry to the Churches."¹¹

Other universities quickly followed, including an Anglican college, William and Mary College in Williamsburg, Virginia, which had as its express purpose, "...furnishing a seminary for ministers of the Gospel and training youth in good manners."¹² The establishment of William and Mary College in 1693 was greatly assisted by the gift from King William and Queen Mary of 2000 pounds. Yale College followed in 1701, was created through a gift from the Congregationalist, Elihu Yale.¹³ In the coming years, Princeton (1746; New Lights Presbyterian), Columbia (1754; Anglican), Brown (1765;

⁹ Frederick Rudolph and John R. Thelin, *The American College and University: A History* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1990), 5.

¹⁰ J. Edwin Orr and Richard Owen Roberts, *Campus Aflame: A History of Evangelical Awakenings in Collegiate Communities*, (Wheaton, Illinois: International Awakening Press, 1994), 18.

¹¹ *The Harvard Guide*, 2003, [online], available from <http://www.news.harvard.edu/guide/intro/index.html>, accessed 8 December 2003.

¹² Orr and Roberts, 18.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 19.

Baptist), and Rutgers (1766; Dutch Reformed) all would be established, in each case, for the cause of training young men for ministry and for civil service.¹⁴

Ironically, although in each case the colleges established remained, at least in principle, committed to the idea of tolerance, it was most often the question of doctrine which led to their establishment of many of these institutions. Both Yale and Princeton, for instance, were established by former Harvard supporters and graduates who had become dissatisfied with the spiritual direction of the school. Cotton Mather, himself a member of the Harvard corporation wrote to Elihu Yale hinting that the new college which had been established in Connecticut might bear his name, should he support its establishment.¹⁵ In the mid-1700s, the Great Awakening brought revival to the colonies; it also brought about the establishment of new colleges, each with a renewed commitment to both spiritual zeal and to the notion of tolerance of others who did not share their particular view. Early Baptist founders of the College of Rhode Island illustrate the challenge of living within the two, sometimes seemingly, cross-purposes of the university. As Christopher Lucas says;

Yet even as the rising tide of denominationalism engulfed America's colonial colleges in the eighteenth century and traditional patterns of shared collegiate governance between established church and secular state were being challenged, agencies of higher learning lost little of their sense of broad purpose and function. When the College of Rhode Island was chartered in 1764, its founders stressed the point that 'institutions for liberal education are highly beneficial to society by forming the rising generation to virtue, knowledge and useful literature and thus preserving in the community a succession of men duly qualified for discharging the offices of life with usefulness and reputation.'¹⁶

¹⁴ Highbeam Library Research, *Encyclopedia.Com*, 2004, [online], available from http://www.encyclopedia.com/html/section/collsNun_Colleges.asp, accessed 28 November 2004.

¹⁵ Rudolph and Thelin, 9.

¹⁶ Lucas, 106.

It is interesting to note that Baptists, who have often been suspicious of the education of its ministers and have not always been known as the most tolerant of denominations, are not only among the founders of these early institutions, but also understand the purpose of education to be much broader than simply the education of ministers. In point of fact, leaders among both the Armenian “General Baptists” and the more Calvinistic “Particular Baptists” were almost all well-educated men with degrees from Cambridge and Oxford.¹⁷

We know little about the spiritual atmosphere on these early campuses. It might be reasonable to assume that universities which were formed for the purpose of training young ministers would be places of spiritual encouragement. There are, however, indications that this was not entirely the case. It seems these colleges, while interested in the *training* of future leaders in the spiritual establishment and the world, did not perceive a need to provide points of contact, at least in terms of dedicated staff, for spiritual guidance on a more intimate and personal level. As Donald G. Shockley points out in his book *Campus Ministry; The Church Beyond Itself*, “Although the Reverend Naphtali Daggett was appointed chaplain at Yale in 1755 he never had a peer to talk to; it would be over a century before another college made such an appointment.”¹⁸

Whether it was because of dissatisfaction with the spiritual state of affairs on campus or the tendency of students to take matters into their own hands, we do not know, but we do know that by 1706 Harvard College showed evidence of having some sort of

¹⁷ Richard T. Hughes and William B. Adrian, eds., *Models for Christian Higher Education: Strategies for Survival and Success in the Twenty-First Century* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: W.B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1997), 368.

¹⁸ Donald G. Shockley, *Campus Ministry: the Church Beyond Itself* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster / John Knox Press, 1989), 27.

student religious society. As chronicled by Shockley, “In the sermon at the funeral of a young schoolmaster, Cotton Mather, told how the deceased had joined with a few other students to create a Christian society at Harvard in 1706.”¹⁹ Mather, as has already been pointed out, felt that Harvard was drifting from her original commitment to the gospel. Because of his experience with such groups when he was a young man (his involvement in such was instrumental in his spiritual development and his ability to speak publicly), it is very likely that Mather encouraged these groups of students and felt that Harvard would benefit from their presence. One of the most interesting, and perhaps telling, aspects of these early Christian societies at Harvard was the secret nature of their existence. Clarence P. Shedd, the earliest researcher into student ministry America, points out that:

These earliest student societies at Harvard have added significance because of their existence at a time when the control of student conduct and religion by the colleges was most complete. It is possible, but cannot be proven that this official control of student life had some bearing on the secrecy of those societies.²⁰

Although we are not entirely sure of either the number or nature of these early religious societies on America’s universities, there is ample evidence that there was a concern on the part of students for both their own spiritual well-being and that of their fellow students.

As Shockley points out, one must remember that these early days of student societies took place in a historical context in which devotion to Christ was not as popular as one might think. In his history on evangelical awakenings on college campuses, J.

¹⁹ Ibid., 13.

²⁰ Clarence Prouty Shedd, *Two Centuries of Student Christian Movements, Their Origin and Intercollegiate Life* (New York: Association press, 1934), 17.

Edwin Orr quotes an early observer, Lyman Beecher in describing a typical campus in 1795:

College was in a most ungodly state. The college church was almost extinct. Most of the students were skeptical and rowdies were plenty. Wine and liquors were kept in many rooms. Intemperance, profanity, gambling and licentiousness were common... Most of the class before me were infidels and called each other Voltaire, Rousseau...²¹

In fact, by 1800, only 14 percent of the general population were members of a church. This tendency towards a secular and, in many cases, atheistic society, was felt especially on the college campus. For instance, Shockley says; “In the Dartmouth graduating class of 1799, there was only one student who was known to be a confessing Christian.”²² At Bowdoin College one student noted, “Religion was connected with the College only in the person of President M’Keen. He was a Christian, courteous, accessible, venerable, and universally beloved; but what could this avail, when, in each college room, there was a sideboard sparkling with wines and stronger stimulants?”²³ In light of the fact that support for Christian enterprises was less than forthcoming from college establishments (not to mention local clergy), and that fellow students would also be unlikely to be supportive, it is, perhaps, more understandable that students would be reticent to proclaim the existence of these religious societies.

It is into this spiritually dismal period of American history that God began to move in extraordinary ways. In the latter part of the 18th and beginning of the 19th centuries, when it seemed that the spiritual conditions in the new country and on campus

²¹ Orr and Roberts, 32.

²² Shockley, 14.

²³ Shedd, *Two Centuries of Student Christian Movements, Their Origin and Intercollegiate Life*, 35.

were at their lowest point, revival swept the country. Not only that, but it seemed that the college campus would be at the forefront of the new revival movement. In 1802 the President of Yale University, Timothy Dwight, not only preached evangelistic messages to his students, but fully one third of the student body made decisions to follow Christ.²⁴ The awakening was not an isolated instance, but rather a moving of the Spirit on campuses all across the United States. By the second and third decade of the 1800s, most universities were very different places from those at the close of the 18th century. Instead of finding a handful of believers on a campus it was not unusual for fully one third to one half of the student population to profess faith in Christ.²⁵

As Milfred Minatrea points out in his book, *Shaped by God's Heart*, a passion and love for God very naturally translates into a love and passion for being involved in missions.²⁶ This was certainly the case for the early student movements. As the stirrings of the Second Great Awakening began to sweep through America in the early years of the 19th century, those same winds swept the college campus. Increasingly, student meetings took on a more missionary zeal and flair. Groups of students met for the specific purpose of praying for missions. For many, the “haystack prayer meeting” of 1806 exemplifies this early trend. Five students from Williams College met for prayer for the salvation of their fellow students. Because of a sudden thunderstorm, the students found refuge in a haystack. Inside this haystack, these students began to pray for revival among the student body. Samuel Mills, a freshman, turned the focus to the missionary obligation of

²⁴ Gaylor, ed., 16.

²⁵ Orr and Roberts, 40.

²⁶ Milfred Minatrea, *Shaped by God's Heart: The Passion and Practices of Missional Churches*, (San Francisco, California: Jossey-Bass, 2004), 22.

Christians. It seems that they had discussed Asia in the classroom and now Mills wanted to discuss the spiritual needs of Asia. Mills proposed that they challenge the American Church to “an interest in foreign missions...” Not only did God use these five students to awaken the church to the cause of missions, but the students themselves gave their lives to missions.²⁷ In fact, growing out of the Haystack meeting grew a formal society of Christians at Williams College, called the “Society of Brethren.” This was also a secret society, as were earlier societies, but the reasons were somewhat different. This society was formed for the cause of calling members to service in the cause of missions. Those who formed the society felt that possible failure would expose the cause of Christ to ridicule. They also felt that there might be those who would discount their zeal as simply the zeal and fanaticism of young men and that the cause of missions might therefore be brought into disrepute.²⁸ This was not to be the case. In fact, in the sixty-four years of its existence, over two hundred and fifty of its members were called and served in missions.²⁹

Not only had these young men from Williams College impacted the cause of missions among the “heathen”, they had, at least to some degree, shaped the face of what would become known as student ministry, that is, ministry to and by students at institutions of higher learning. Although other concerns and aspects of the Christian life have been and continue to be important aspects of this kind of ministry, from this point forward there would be a strong identification of student ministry with missions and

²⁷ Shockley, 15.

²⁸ Charles Ashby, *31 Great Years of Texas BSU Happenings: W.F. Howard-"Mr. BSU", 1943-1974* (Fort Worth, Texas: Baca Publishing Company, 1978), 5.

²⁹ Shockley, 15.

evangelism. The need for new missionaries increased the need for institutions which would train these missionaries. For instance, Luther Rice returned to the United States 1813 after serving as a missionary to India. The interest in missions was so compelling in the places that he visited, that Baptists established five colleges in the wake of his travels.³⁰ In addition, there was an explosive growth of student groups on campus. By 1856 between ninety and one hundred new ministries existed in approximately seventy campuses across New England. Unlike earlier societies, these organizations were open and not secret. Although missions continued to play an important role in many of these organizations, other groups had different objectives, including theological discussion and debate, devotional and spiritual growth, and study and action on ethical issues.³¹

In the midst of the rise of missionary fervor and the formation of so many new colleges by denominational bodies, it would certainly be logical to assume that the denominational flavor to these campuses would become more pronounced. While it is true that all of the colleges formed during these years required attendance at religious services such as chapel, it is not the case that the denominational affiliation of the colleges was seen to be a drawing card for the college. Indeed, while denominations might (and often did) fight among themselves over points of theological differences, and while these controversies were often themselves reason enough for a particular denomination to establish its own college, that did not translate into a strong tie between the college and denomination. College administrators were much too concerned with the survival of these schools to be drawn into controversies which would endanger their survival. As Rudolph reports, "The colleges could not really afford to make themselves

³⁰ Rudolph and Thelin, 72.

³¹ Ashby, 5-6.

any more unattractive than they frequently were, and for most Americans there was something unattractive about the bickering controversies which denominations sometimes got themselves into, much to the damage of their own reputation and to the good name of religion itself.”³²

The year 1858 would be an extremely significant year in the history of student ministry. Fourteen years earlier, in 1844, the Young Men’s Christian Association (YMCA) had been formed by a group of twelve London dry good clerks who sought to integrate their faith into their everyday work world. The idea spread quickly and soon there were YMCAs in other cities across Great Britain. Andrea Hinding recounts how this movement reached the shores of the United States:

In the United States, Thomas Valentine Sullivan, a retired sea captain and lay missionary for the Baptist Church, also worried about the temptations facing young men in large cities. In October 1851, he read an account of the London association in the Boston *Watchman and Reflector*. He visited the London association and then returned to Boston to convene a meeting, on December 15th to discuss the forming of the association on that city.³³

When T.H. Gladstone visited the YMCAs in North America in 1856 he said of them; “Born in a day, they spread through the length and breadth of the land with a rapidity unexampled amongst the experiences of our more quiet and slow going nations of the Old World.”³⁴ Indeed, the YMCA movement in the new world not only grew rapidly, but in ways not experienced on the continent. One of these new developments occurred in 1858, when YMCA was to play a distinct and unique role in the history of American Christianity and in student ministry. Once again, revival was sweeping the

³² Rudolph and Thelin, 75.

³³ Andrea Hinding, *Proud Heritage: A History in Pictures of the YMCA in the United States* (Norfolk, Virginia: Donning Company, 1988), 15.

³⁴ Shedd, *History of the World's Alliance of Young Men's Christian Associations*, 68.

country. In some ways, this awakening was, however, unique. For one thing, it was accompanied by an unprecedented emphasis on prayer. In city after city, prayer meetings were established where Christians gathered to pray for the salvation of friends and neighbors. But not only that, this was an awakening in which lay persons were at the forefront. It is in this respect that the newly formed YMCA played a unique role, for it was lay leaders from the YMCA who played an especially significant part in the spiritual renewal taking place.³⁵ Not only was the general public deeply affected by this awakening, but thousands of students came to a personal faith in Christ. At the University of Virginia, students were active in promoting prayer on campus. Then, in October 1858, seven years after Sullivan first read about what God was doing through an organization in London called the Young Men's Christian Association, this group of students formed the first Collegiate YMCA. Almost simultaneously, a similar group was formed at the University of Michigan. Both of these groups had a decidedly evangelistic emphasis. As J. Edwin Orr says; "Without a doubt, the first of the College YMCA fellowships was evangelistic rather than social."³⁶ The growth of the student groups was exponential and within twenty years, there were chapters on more than forty campuses.³⁷

The role of the YMCA in the continued development of student ministry cannot be underestimated. For the first time, an outside group with adult leadership was targeting students for ministry, working alongside of students in a missional approach to the university. By 1877, more than fifty colleges had a collegiate YMCA chapter. This movement only continued to gain steam when, in that same year, twenty five of these

³⁵ Orr and Roberts, 67-68.

³⁶ Ibid., 77.

³⁷ Shockley, 16-17.

campuses met together in Louisville, Kentucky met together for an independent conference and elected Luther Wishard to be the first corresponding secretary of the Intercollegiate Y. M.C.A. movement.³⁸ Now, instead of being strictly dependent upon students for the leadership and development of programs and strategies, men such as Robert Weidensall, Luther Wishard, Charles Ober and John R. Mott served as counselors, encouragers and evangelists, all as a part of their duties as secretaries of student work in the Collegiate YMCA.³⁹

The fervor and excitement of these early days of what now might be truly called “student ministry” must have been an incredible experience. Indeed, it is an amazing set of circumstances which came together in the closing days of the 19th century. Luther Wishard, the secretary for the Intercollegiate YMCA had met evangelist Dwight Moody while a student at Princeton University when Moody came to preach a revival on that campus in 1876. Ten years later the two men were to meet once again. Working with the Intercollegiate Committee, Moody and Wishard planned a conference for students at Mt. Hermon, Massachusetts at which Moody would speak. Some 251 young men from 22 states and Canada gathered for the meeting, which lasted for almost a month, from July 7 until August 2, 1886. This meeting would be far more historic than the organizers could have guessed.⁴⁰ It seems that one of the students, Robert Wilder, who was a student at Princeton, came with his own agenda in mind. He and his sister, Grace, had been praying for a renewed sense of missionary calling on the part of students. So he came to the

³⁸ Ibid., 20.

³⁹ Hinding, 40.

⁴⁰ *Student Mission Power: Report of the First International Convention of the Student Volunteer Movement for Foreign Missions, Held at Cleveland, Ohio, U.S.A., February 26, 27, 28 and March 1, 1891*, (Pasadena, Calif.: William Carey Library, 1979), 21.

meeting and challenged students attending to sign a simple pledge: “We, the undersigned, declare ourselves willing and desirous, God permitting, to go to the unevangelized portions of the world.”⁴¹ At first, the response was less than enthusiastic and only 21 students answered the call. Then, after the conference had been going for two weeks, an evening meeting was held by Wishard which would come to be known as “the meeting of the ten nations.” The story of this meeting is told in the minutes of a later convention:

It was addressed by sons of missionaries in China, India, Persia and by seven young men of different nationalities – an Armenian, a Japanese, a Siamese, a German, a Dane, a Norwegian and an American Indian. The addresses were not more than three minutes in length and consisted of appeals for more workers. Near the close, each speaker repeated in the language of his country the words, “God is Love.” Then came a season of silent and audible prayer which will never be forgotten by those present.⁴²

Wishard described the meeting later as “a night of decision and destiny.”⁴³ By the end of the conference, more than 100 of those students attending had signed the pledge. More importantly, they took copies of the pledge back with them to their campuses, where the movement began to spread. In fact, the movement was so strong that the organizers of the YMCA and YWCA movements were concerned that this missionary zeal might become the single focus of the organization. In order to prevent that, a separate organization was formed, the Student Volunteer Movement for Foreign Missions with John R. Mott as its head.⁴⁴

⁴¹ Shockley, 21.

⁴² *Student Mission Power: Report of the First International Convention of the Student Volunteer Movement for Foreign Missions, Held at Cleveland, Ohio, U.S.A., February 26, 27, 28 and March 1, 1891*, 22.

⁴³ William Henry Morgan, “Student Religion During Fifty Years: Programs and Policies of the Intercollegiate Y. M. C. A” (PH. D. Thesis, Columbia University, 1935), 27.

⁴⁴ Shockley.

Five years after the meeting at Mt. Hermon, twelve years after the formation of the Intercollegiate YMCA and a mere forty years after the establishment of the first YMCA in the United States, the first International Convention of the Student Volunteer Movement for Foreign Missions was convened in Cleveland, Ohio in February of 1891. In the short five years since those first 100 students had signed a pledge, over 6000 students had given their hearts and lives to the cause of missions. Of this number, 558 gathered for this first convention, representing over 151 schools and 20 different denominations.⁴⁵ The theme of the convention, “The Evangelization of the World in this Generation” was the expression of hearts burning to be faithful in loving service to our Lord. Although the forms of evangelism and missions were not always healthy from our perspective, surely we can appreciate the desire of these students to be at the forefront of God’s activity among the nations. In fact, over the life of the Student Volunteer Movement, almost 100,000 students would volunteer. Of that number, 20,000 would actually go to the nations of the world to preach the gospel while the other 80,000 remained as ardent supporters and co-workers in the United States.⁴⁶

In the meantime, the YMCA itself continued to develop new strategies for reaching students for Christ. Looking back, the strategy is not so far removed from the strategies used on campuses today. As Wishard reported in 1884;

The Committee on Membership privately assigns each unconverted student to some Christian who prays for him, invites him frequently to the meetings, and whenever possible speaks a word which is calculated to help him settle the great question of life.⁴⁷

⁴⁵ *Student Mission Power: Report of the First International Convention of the Student Volunteer Movement for Foreign Missions, Held at Cleveland, Ohio, U.S.A., February 26, 27, 28 and March 1, 1891*, 3.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, IX-X.

In addition, these collegiate YMCAs targeted incoming freshmen with special fellowships, Bible studies and prayer groups. Training in evangelism, small groups, large group meetings and fellowships were all a part of the ministry of these early student groups. Students were challenged to live according to high Christian standards and to be ready to go anywhere, anytime in response to the calling of God. Summer and annual conferences were held at a variety of locations around the country. By the turn of the twentieth century, the Intercollegiate YMCA movement was an effective ministry with thousands of students involved across the country.⁴⁸

At this juncture it would be entirely appropriate and understandable to pose the question; “Where were the churches and denominations in these exciting days of early student ministry?” We should, perhaps, be reminded that most of the institutions of higher learning in the United States were not only founded by churches, but for most denominational bodies, the assumption was that work with students was synonymous with the establishment of Christian colleges and universities. In fact, at the time of the civil war, 175 of the nation’s 182 institutions were church related. Unlike earlier in their history, these campuses often had full-time chaplains who were assigned to help promote the spiritual welfare of the students. It is entirely within the realm of possibility that most churches and denominations felt that these efforts were more than adequate for the spiritual care of students. Even those colleges which were not directly under the control of the church often had clergy at their helm.⁴⁹ At the same time, there was significant reason *not* to begin ministries on secular campuses. Most churches wanted their students

⁴⁷ Morgan, 12.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 35-40.

⁴⁹ Shockley, 27.

to attend a church related school, feeling that this atmosphere was most likely to protect the student and give them the solid spiritual footing needed in life. Certainly, most church related institutions would have encouraged churches to keep their focus on the institution, rather than on ministries on campuses not directly related to the church. But, as Shockley points out; “Here again, as we have seen, students took matters into their own hands and began to develop the YMCA and Y.W.C.A. organizations to meet their needs.”⁵⁰

Indeed, the entire educational scene in the United States was changing rapidly at the beginning of the 1900s. There was a huge increase in the number of students who were attending the university and, in stark contrast with earlier trends, many of these students were choosing to study at a public university. In fact, between 1856 and 1890 the number of state institutions had more than doubled, from fourteen to thirty. By 1909 that number had climbed to 89 and in 1910 a committee of the Northern Baptist Convention declared, “The growth of state universities is one of the most striking phenomena of the day.”⁵¹ Not only was there growth in the number of colleges, especially state supported colleges, but the numbers of students was skyrocketing. In the period between 1870 and 1930 the general population of America tripled. In that same period of time, the university population increased by fourteen times.⁵²

In light of the tremendous growth in the student population and the decision of an increasing number of these students to study on a public college, churches began to re-

⁵⁰ Shockley, 33.

⁵¹ Clarence Prouty Shedd, *The Church Follows Its Students* (New Haven, London: Yale University Press, 1938), 6-7.

⁵² Shedd, *The Church Follows Its Students*, 8.

evaluate their long held belief that the primary focus of their student ministry would be to establish denominationally supported schools. In addition, some questioned the ability of the YMCA movement to keep students tied to their local church. One very influential denomination leader, Dr. Joseph Wilson Cochran, Secretary of the Board of Education for the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), expressed the concerns of many denominational leaders when he said:

The Christian Associations have wrought a notable work in our colleges and universities. The World's Student Union [World's Student Christian Federation] is the most powerful organization of college men in existence. The far-sighted leaders of the YMCA have been a generation ahead of the churches in their address to the religious needs of college men. While church leaders have been expending their energies upon denominational problems in education, the Christian Associations entered church and state institutions alike.

The question is often raised whether the Associations are real extensions of the church or actually separate denominations supported by the Church.... They are charged with a policy that tends to wean the student away from his old time religious affiliations; when he returns to the world of affairs, he finds himself detached from any organized form of religion.⁵³

Whether it was out of a growing sense of competition with the Intercollegiate YMCAs or that churches began to develop a more missional view of the university campus is not known for certain, but we do know that by 1890 several denominations did indeed have student ministries. The first denomination to introduce direct ministry on the campus was most likely the Unitarians. They began a ministry at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor in 1865 which saw significant success in drawing large numbers of students into the ministry, which of course meant that others would soon follow. By

⁵³ Ibid., 10.

1890 Presbyterians, Episcopalians, Methodists and Roman Catholics all had active ministries at the University of Michigan.⁵⁴

Once it became clear that certain denominations were going to break from the tradition of allowing the YMCA to be the primary ministry to the church's students, other denominations began to examine their response. By the early 1900s most denominations were involved to some degree in student ministry. Obviously, this was not without controversy and challenge. Many leaders within the denominational colleges argued that this move would mean the death of the denominational college. Others argued that the YMCA was an established, effective ministry and that there was no need for the duplication of this ministry by the individual denominations. Many feared sectarian rivalries and a loss of funding for student ministry. In spite of these concerns, the pioneer spirit was simply too strong to resist. Here was a new mission field, ripe for the harvest. As churches saw their students turning from the denominational schools to the new state supported colleges, the church did what it had always done, it followed its students.⁵⁵

The early decades of the twentieth century were decades of experimentation and adjustment. Some of the trends predicted by the prophets of these early days were correct. State universities did indeed grow at a rate far higher than that of religiously affiliated schools. Yet most of these schools did not close, they simply began to play a unique role for a unique group of students who continued to seek out the more sheltered atmosphere of the denominational college. One trend which caught some by surprise was the move of many denominational schools away from their historical roots. In light of the fact that those denominational ties had always been somewhat of a quandary, providing

⁵⁴ Shockley, 33.

⁵⁵ Shedd, *The Church Follows Its Students*, 12-18.

sources of income, yet by their very nature discouraging some students from considering a particular college as a choice, perhaps this trend should not have been surprising. Yet every major denomination lost schools who were to become independent or only marginally aligned with the denomination.

Now, denominations are once again approaching a crossroads. What will the future of ministry to students look like? Is there a continued future for a denominational presence on campus and, if so, how will that look? The changing world which holds such opportunity demands a requisite cost; we must change. We cannot remain the same and continue to minister effectively among the students of America's campuses. Are we up to the task? Exactly what are the challenges which face us as churches, as denominations, as Christians as we seek to continue to minister on the mission field which is the university campus?

Chapter Two

Southern Baptists Enter the World of Campus Ministry

The story of how Southern Baptists became involved in campus ministry begins in Waco, Texas in 1903. It was then that a group of students from Baylor University began to see a need for denominational student ministry on their campus. This conviction was strengthened by the attendance in 1904 by three students of the Student Volunteer Convention in Kansas City. As Joseph P. Boone would describe it, these Student Volunteer Conventions occurred once a student generation and became the “great missionary influence to supply workers for the Baptist Foreign Mission Board.”¹ Upon their return to Baylor, these students encouraged their peers to begin to pray with them that God would open the door for a student ministry to begin at Baylor. But it was not until the fall of this same year that the movement began to gain steam. As Boone relates the events, three Baylor students including himself attended the first student conference for the Southwestern States in Ruston, Louisiana. The event was sponsored by the International Committee of the YMCA. Boone says of this conference, “It was in this conference that an unmistakable conviction came to me that a denominational student organization was a necessity. What was being done there for the group could be done in a greater way through denominational leadership.”²

¹ Joseph P. Boone, *It Came to Pass: The Birth, Growth, and Evaluation of the Baptist Student Union and the Baptist Chairs of Bible* (Ann Arbor, Michigan: Edwards Brothers, 1953), 2.

² *Ibid.*, 5.

Why would these students deem it more desirable that a denominational ministry be developed, rather than see students involved in the local chapter of the Collegiate YMCA? After all, as Ashby notes, "...the fact remains that the student YMCA, student YWCA and the Student Volunteer Movement were the dominant forces in the lives of Southern Baptist college students."³

The answers to the questions are not entirely clear. We know that in this period of time there was a growing dissatisfaction with and distrust of the interdenominational student ministry of the YMCA and YWCA on the part of the churches. As Mrs. Louise Foreman Blount, who served as the Southern Baptist Convention's first traveling secretary, would later write:

With the conservative student reaction swinging away from interdenominational **radicalism** (emphasis mine), with the Woman's Missionary Union fostering a college movement, with the Sunday School Board restless from an under-manned student activity, with the Home Mission Board washing its army-experienced hands of inter-denominationalism,, with the Foreign Mission Board always eager for contact with Baptist students, the year for the great denouement was at hand.⁴

At the same time, there was a growing distrust on the part of some church groups with the Bible study materials provided by the YMCA groups, feeling that they were too liberal in some of their interpretations.⁵ We also know what Boone says of his encounter during this conference. Regardless of its source, whether it was denominational distrust or students eager to be on the forefront of something new, God would use the spirit of these times to give birth to Baptist Student Union.

³ Charles Ashby, *31 Great Years of Texas BSU Happenings: W.F. Howard-"Mr. BSU", 1943-1974* (Fort Worth, Texas: Baca Publishing Company, 1978), 12.

⁴ Clarence Prouty Shedd, *The Church Follows Its Students* (New Haven, London,: Yale University Press, 1938), 89.

⁵ Ashby, 10.

These students who attended this early YMCA conference and those who would join with them in their desire to see a denominational student ministry begin eventually became known as *The Covenanters*, because of the covenant which the students submitted to Texas Baptist Convention officers in Texas in October of 1904. This covenant consisted of four points:

1. All agreed to pray daily for Divine guidance in the life of each member
2. To pray daily that Texas Baptists should be awakened to assume responsibility for the creation and maintenance of a denominational religious program for Baptist Students
3. To pray daily that through such a program Christian leaders would be called to serve in Christ's worldwide missionary task set forth in His Great Commission
4. To pray daily that the members of the Baptist churches be aroused to provide greater support for world missions.⁶

Of course, this idea was not without its dissenters. For one thing, many of those who were in some sort of leadership position in the local church were products of YMCA. YMCA had a firm footing and support in the church and on the university and many felt it was ill advised to upset this established way of doing ministry on campus. In 1902 chapters of the Intercollegiate YMCA could be found on 642 campuses around the United States. Almost 127,000 students were involved in this ministry, with over 58,000 of these involved in local evangelical churches.⁷ Just these numbers alone would have been enough to have given many cause to consider a denominational student ministry an ill conceived idea. One of J.P. Boone's closest friends and co-signer of the covenant, Joseph Dawson, expressed his concern that students would lose their "breath of vision

⁶ Ashby, 13.

⁷ J. Edwin Orr and Richard Owen Roberts, *Campus Aflame: A History of Evangelical Awakenings in Collegiate Communities*, (Wheaton, Illinois: International Awakening Press, 1994), 126.

and enthusiasm, if pulled away to form a strictly denominational organization...”⁸

Dawson would later reconsider this earlier judgment and would come to the conclusion that “the religious life of students is seen at its best, when it is united with one’s own distinctive beliefs and particular church.”⁹ Others, especially those involved in the administration of the Baptist Colleges, felt that forming a denominational student ministry at state-supported universities would eventually cause the demise of the denominationally supported colleges, since both students and funding would be channeled into state supported colleges, rather than into existing denominational schools. This debate continued long after denominationally sponsored student ministry began.¹⁰

For Boone, there would be a personal crisis of faith in 1905. In that year, the student department of the YMCA held a meeting in Houston, with the express purpose of beginning a interdenominational student ministry in Texas. At this time there was no such organization in the state. Because of his involvement in student life at Baylor, Boone was called upon to head up this new movement. The pressure was strong to accept this position, both from the YMCA, but also from the President of Baylor University, Dr. S.P. Brooks. In the end, however, Boone’s call to see a new denominational student ministry come into being took precedence and he would not accept the challenge to head the new YMCA organization in Texas.

All in all, it would be fifteen years before the prayers of *The Covenanters* would be answered. In 1907, University Baptist Church in Austin was started as a mission

⁸ Boone, x.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Samuel Sanford, *Baptist Campus Ministry at Crossroads: A Historical and Philosophical Perspective on Its Diamond Anniversary* (Franklin, Tennessee: Providence House Publishers, 1997), 25-26.

church targeting the students of the University of Texas. The work of this church, along with the continued pleas of the Covenanters raised the profile of student ministry and convinced many of the need for a denominational work among students. Finally, at the annual convention of the Southern Baptist Convention in 1914 the first step was taken when a proposal was made for the formation of the Baptist Student Missionary Movement. In November of that year the Baptist Student Missionary Movement was officially formed and placed under the auspices of the Home Mission Board of the Southern Baptist Convention.¹¹ This movement was designed to be the Baptist version of the Student Volunteer Missions Movement which had, until this point, provided so many missionaries to both the Home and Foreign missions agencies of Southern Baptists. In establishing this Movement for directly recruiting Baptist students for the cause of missions, the stage was set for interplay between the national convention and the various state conventions. This interplay was based on Baptist polity in which the state conventions are not subject to the national denominational body, but are, rather, independent and work together on a purely voluntary basis. This would mean that each state convention would make the decisions concerning the establishment and direction of student ministries within their state.

Five years later the Baptist General Convention of Texas voted to establish a Baptist Student Department within the convention framework, electing Joseph P. Boone to the position of state secretary and Dr. O.P. Campbell as the first local student secretary at the University of Texas. The prayers of *The Covenanters* were finally answered and Baptist Student Union (in 1995 the name was changed to Baptist Student Ministry) was

¹¹ Ashby, 15.

officially organized as a ministry to students.¹² Other states would soon follow suit with the Mississippi Convention being the second to establish student ministry as a part of the ministry of the convention in 1924.¹³

As might be expected, given the attitudes at the time, these ministries were understood by the denominations which established them as a method whereby students could be retained for the denomination and its ministries. Although the Texas resolution which established student ministry contains many positive elements, the message is clear that student ministry was intended to keep Baptist students Baptist. The resolution, which was passed in Texas in 1919, leaves little room for misunderstanding:

BE IT RESOLVED: 1. That the executive board of the convention select and direct one of the strongest and most capable men to be secured as Baptist Student Secretary for students in Texas. That this man give his entire time among the Baptist students of Texas emphasizing Baptist principles, interpreting Baptist life, creating and sustaining Baptist loyalty, enlisting and crystallizing a denominational spirit, virile, consecrated and active, and that shall express itself through the local churches where students hold membership.

2. That the Sunday School Board be asked to cooperate in the support of this secretary and that it be understood that this man represents the whole Baptist program rather than any special department.¹⁴

BSM was to be a tool for the denominalization of students. As Samuel Sanford Jr. states, BSM was; “Born out of the fear of the larger ecumenical movement, a distinctive denominational enterprise began at both local and state levels.”¹⁵ Indeed, if one is to isolate the one significant difference between the student ministries which were formed by denominations and those earlier ministries headed by students and the early YMCA

¹² Ashby, 17.

¹³ Sanford, 33.

¹⁴ Ibid., 29.

¹⁵ Ibid., 30.

movement, it would be this issue. Denominations had a goal which went beyond the evangelistic, missions and discipleship goals of the student ministry (which continued and were strongly emphasized). The denomination wanted to solidify the denominational loyalty of its students and, where possible, recruit new members. Baptists are certainly not alone in this heritage. Even as late as 1985, a report prepared for the National Conference of Catholic Bishops states, "Campus ministry gathers the Catholics on campus for prayer, worship, and learning in order that they might bring the light of the Gospel to illumine the concerns and hopes of the academic community."¹⁶ A similar report prepared by the National Commission on United Methodist Higher Education in 1977 states;

The initial impetus for the formation of ministries in state institutions was the church's apprehension about state supported higher education and a desire to nurture Methodist students by offering them a "home away from home." This limited concept of campus ministry has expanded to include a lively concern for the whole campus.¹⁷

As with other denominations, there is no denying that many in voting to establish Baptist Student Ministry were approaching student ministry from a defensive posture.

At the same time as state conventions were beginning to explore this new ministry to university students, the national denominational bodies continued to explore their own options. By the mid 1920s, the Baptist Student Union movement had spread to most of the southern states, with each state responsible for its own programming, but with significant input from the national convention. In May 1920 the Inter-Board Commission

¹⁶ Catholic Church. National Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Empowered by the Spirit: Campus Ministry Faces the Future : A Pastoral Letter on Campus Ministry, November 15, 1985* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Catholic Conference, 1986), 13.

¹⁷ National Commission on United Methodist Higher Education, *Ministry on Campus: A United Methodist Mission Statement and Survey Report* (Nashville: National Commission on United Methodist Higher Education, 1977), 17.

was formed which was made up of the general secretaries of the Foreign, Home, Sunday School and Education Boards of the SBC, along with the Women's Missionary Union. In 1922 Dr. Frank Leavell was elected to be the Executive Secretary of this board, a position he would hold until his death on December 7, 1949. The influence of Dr. Leavell upon the fledgling movement was significant and many of the advances made in the movement were made during his time as executive director. In 1928 the Inter-Board Commission was dissolved, moving the work of the Student Department to the Sunday School Board. Dr. Leavell reluctantly followed the Student Department to the Sunday School Board, feeling that the newly formed Student Department functioned well under the direction of the Inter-Board Commission and that, if the Commission must be dissolved, that the assignment of the Student Department more closely matched the assignment of the Home Mission Board than the Sunday School Board.¹⁸

So what was the nature of this new student ministry? While each ministry and each state continued to have unique flavor aspects to its ministry, there were at least four characteristics which were common to all. This was perhaps best expressed by Dr. I.J. Van Ness the general secretary of the Sunday School Board who spoke to the first All-Southern Baptist Student Conference at Birmingham, Alabama on October 30, 1926. As Dr. Van Ness saw it:

Four simple things are our foundational planks: First, a denominational movement for student life... We come with a distinct sense of denominational responsibility and a direct denominational appeal.

Our second great fundamental principle is reliance upon student initiative... The Baptist Student Union upon the campus is the organization of the students themselves; theirs the responsibility and theirs the opportunity.

Our third great principle is to urge church loyalty and church alignment...

¹⁸ Sanford, 31.

The fourth... principle: The appeal to our students, for and in behalf of our great denominational tasks, to bring to bear upon our Baptist students the need of the work of our Southern Baptist Convention.

It is strange that these principles have not been recognized as clearly as they might have been. It has been hard to convince many leaders, and I say frankly, it has been hard to convince many of our college presidents. And the strangest thing of all is that the quickest response has been from our state schools... But the students have always understood. There has never been a time from the beginning that the students did not understand this simple program and back us up in it, catching the very spirit of this movement of the Inter-Board Commission.¹⁹

It is interesting to note that three of the four “planks” mentioned have to do with the denominational identity. As Samuel Sanford notes in his excellent work on Baptist Student Ministry, “When authors of campus ministry books are chastised for not including the nation’s – if not the world’s – largest campus ministry program in their writings, the answer has always been “your group has never participated on the ecumenical level.”²⁰ This is certainly a legitimate description. H.D. Bollinger, secretary of the Board of Higher Education for the Methodist Church noted, “Dr. Leavell always attended ecumenical staff meetings, made his reports, but did not participate in the deliberations.” In his estimation, “The greatest philosophical weakness of Southern Baptist student work is its lack of willingness to work with similar Christian groups.”²¹ Indeed, Dr. Leavell was an almost rabid denominationalist, feeling that movements towards ecumenism simply diluted doctrinal distinctives and led students away from the local church, which was in Leavell’s mind ultimate expression of Christianity.

¹⁹ Shedd, *The Church Follows Its Students*, 90.

²⁰ Sanford, 32.

²¹ Ibid., 34.

However, where Leavell was very narrow in his denominational focus, he was very broad in his vision. Dr. Leavell had an incredible desire²² to see BSU become an international organization. This desire was thwarted by two things; the first was the simple fact that BSU from the very start was a somewhat schizophrenic organization. As has been previously mentioned, Baptist polity prevented the Student Department from playing more than an advisory role in what was actually taking place on the local campus, this being the domain of the state conventions. The second hindrance was the fact that the Foreign Mission Board consistently prevented missionaries, even those supposedly appointed as student workers, from doing student ministry. It was not until 1959 when Winston Crawley, then the Foreign Mission Board's secretary to the Orient announced that all future student ministry appointments would be honored. By that time, it was too late. Leavell would not see this dream come true and BSU would remain an American phenomenon.

Yet, in America, the progress was astonishing. Thousands of students were linked to local churches and hundreds came to know Christ in a personal way. Between the strong evangelistic emphasis which BSU brought to the table and the desire to see students connected with local churches, BSU was soon well established both on the campus and in the hearts of the local churches who benefited from the flood of students through their doors. By the time of Leavell's death, there were 109 local Directors of Baptist Student Union scattered across the states of the South. These were indeed good times to be involved in BSU.

²² Sanford goes so far as to call his desire an "obsession"; see Sanford, 33.

Sanford says of the 1950s, “In the words of the baseball movie, *Field of Dreams*, ‘Build it and they will come.’”²³ And come they did. Most often, a student center was built, providing a “home away from home” for students of a particular denomination.²⁴ The student center was understood as a place for Christians to gather and gain strength for the rigors of life on campus. Literally hundreds of these buildings were built around the United States for the purpose of encouraging students to become involved in Baptist Student Union programs. By the end of the 1950s there were 190 Baptist Student Union Directors (this title was a change from the original title of BSU Secretary and wouldn’t be completely adopted until 1970).²⁵ Yet the clouds of change were on the horizon and many involved in BSU began to question what the future would hold. For one thing, new types of students began to emerge. The growing number of commuter students was a challenge to the traditional program which relied heavily on traditional campus life. There were also increasing numbers of married students, graduate students and internationals, all arriving on campus and requiring very different approaches to ministry.²⁶

At the same time, the mentality of students was changing. Whereas earlier students came to the university with a positive view of church, as the 60s progressed, there was an increasingly negative view of the church. Church people were often seen as gullible, rigid and socially insensitive. No longer could BSU Directors promise churches that their programs would bring students through their doorways. The fact that so many

²³ Sanford, 48.

²⁴ Ashby, 11.

²⁵ Sanford, 73.

²⁶ Ibid., 50-56.

students now commuted to campus, combined with a growing negativity towards the church as a whole meant that every campus was a campus church. The turbulent 60s left the campus a very different place than it was at the end of the 1950s. By the end of the 60s surveys revealed shocking statistics; more than half of the incoming freshmen had not been involved in any kind of church activity in the previous seventeen months. What's more, these freshmen had little desire to be involved in any kind of church while they were at college. Those BSU Directors of that day suddenly found that their task had changed. They were no longer primarily concerned with the conservation of Baptist students, but with their reclamation.²⁷

By the time the 1970s began life had changed radically and permanently. Charles Roselle was elected Secretary of the Student Department at the Sunday School Board, which was renamed National Student Ministry. Around the country 267 campus ministers were involved with BSU full-time. By the time part-time and volunteer workers were included, more that 516 people were involved in Baptist campus ministry. Roselle brought to NSM the conviction that every church in the convention should consider itself a "college church." In spite of the fact that there was a growing sense of disconnect between state BSU directors and NSM, Roselle assisted all who were involved in Baptist Student Ministry by helping raise the overall awareness of the challenges of student ministry on the part of Southern Baptists. Along the way, significant changes took place. The 1972 issue of the *Quarterly Review* celebrated fifty years of BSU. Roselle wrote in that issue:

We have moved from a history of care for the Baptist student who is away from home at college to ministries to all students everywhere. We are turning a new

²⁷ Sanford, 93.

corner into a great new era challenged by new territories and new methods of ministry.²⁸

Roselle undoubtedly helped BSU win the hearts of Southern Baptists and the ministry continued to grow. By the end of the 70s somewhere between 750 and 900 Baptist Student Ministry Directors were involved in campus ministry. BSU was impacting the lives of thousands of college students from coast to coast. Unfortunately, the most turbulent days lay ahead. By the time of Roselle's retirement in 1983, the Southern Baptist Convention was embroiled in controversy. Charles Johnson, the newly elected head of NSM found himself in a very different environment from his predecessors. His ability to relate to state directors was severely hindered by the dynamics of the increasingly strained relationships between national denominational entities and state conventions. In addition, the distinct lack of support on the part of the Sunday School Board for NSM led to the perception that NSM was out of touch and inept in its direction of any kind of national program or emphasis. In the end, NSM would die a very slow death, losing significant personnel resources in the 1990s. Charles Johnson retired in 1994, leaving Bill Henry, his associate, the dubious honor of seeing NSM absorbed into the structure of LifeWay (as the Sunday School Board was renamed in 1998).²⁹

Yet, even as the national organization designed to encourage student ministry on the part of Southern Baptists has succumbed to the weight of internal Baptist affairs, the ministry on the local campus continues to be vibrant and growing, although very different ministry from those early days of BSU.

²⁸ Ibid., 97.

²⁹ Sanford, 145.

Our heritage is rich, even if it is not untouched by human desires, perceptions and rivalries. Dr. Joseph Boone, the first State Secretary of Baptist Student Union in Texas, recalled that his experience as one of the *Covenanters* at Baylor was, "... only a beginning of God's plan for calling out and training Baptist students for world-wide service."³⁰ Even though we may chafe somewhat at the denomination-centered approach that these early Baptist leaders took in establishing BSU on campus there is doubt that, as Boone's statement reveals, there is not only a desire to somehow "keep" Baptist students within the fold, but also a strong motivation to see Christian students touch their world. It is this missions emphasis which has so strongly influenced the mission and philosophy of BSM throughout the years. We are most certainly not the same organization which was formed these many years ago. The important question is not so much the question of the need or validity of change in light of the constantly changing setting of collegiate ministry. There is no doubt that we must change or face a future in which we cease to be relevant or cease to exist. Rather, the question has more to do with the challenge of being true to both our heritage of Baptist denominational student ministry and the broader heritage we have from the history of student ministry. In what ways do these two streams find expression and a future in the student ministry of Baptists today? Are there ways in which this ministry might give us some inkling into the future of denominational ministry as a whole? To further explore these issues it will be necessary to take stock of student ministry in a specific context today.

³⁰ Ashby, 17.

Chapter Three

Baptist Student Ministry in Texas: The State of the Ministry Today

From the beginning, students involved in denominational student ministry in Texas understood what some within the very churches which brought that ministry into existence did not; that student ministry was primarily a missional enterprise. In July 1920 the first statewide student conference was held in Palacios, Texas. One of the first orders of business was to name the fledgling group. As J.P. Boone, the first Student Secretary, recalls, “The important question was then raised. What about the word Baptist? Would the denominational name be a hindrance to some? Would students who were not Christians be interested and be drawn to the Student Centers?”¹

The answer to this question was not as important as the attitude which was revealed in its asking. From the very beginning, students have helped keep missions and evangelism at the forefront of ministry. That has not changed. Students continue to ask the difficult questions and push at the edges. What has, perhaps, changed, is the fact that the mandate for BSM to preserve denominational integrity is no longer understood to be the primary purpose for the existence of the ministry.

Today the vision of ministry to students through BSM reflects an understanding of the university campus as a mission field. Those who are involved in ministry on the campus are, first and foremost, missionaries. There is a strong emphasis both on outwardly focused ministry (outreach and evangelism) and personal spiritual growth on

¹ Charles Ashby, *31 Great Years of Texas BSU Happenings: W.F. Howard-"Mr. BSU", 1943-1974* (Fort Worth, Texas: Baca Publishing Company, 1978), 18.

the part of those involved. The Baptist Student Ministry New Worker's Manual, used for training new BSM Directors (as campus ministers serving through Baptist Student Ministry are now called), reflects an understanding that BSM fulfills a distinctly missional role.² That is, BSM in Texas seeks to establish a culture in which students are called to a lifestyle which has as its focus living in a missions setting. Most often, this is referred to as a **HARVEST** culture, a culture in which; "...God is glorified, lost students are hearing the Gospel of Jesus Christ and responding to Him, and believers are growing into His likeness."³ This philosophy is also reflected in the five priority areas for BSM; Evangelism, Church Life, Missions, Discipleship, and Leadership Development.⁴

This is certainly not to imply that student involvement in church or the partnership with the local church has been weakened. Far from it! In both policy and practice, Baptist Student Ministry continues to lift up the local church as the primary vehicle which God uses for the announcement of His Kingdom and the growth of His followers. The shift has been rather to an understanding that Baptist Student Ministry can and does play a role that goes far beyond simply the retention and reclamation of Baptist students for Baptist churches. While BSM remains committed to both Baptist heritage in its teaching and Baptist churches as partners, there is a broader opportunity to play a role in the Church in a more universal way. Indeed, as will be explained further in later chapters, this author believes that the future of denominationalism lies in the ability to move beyond traditional boundaries and offer to the Christian community as a whole

² Bruce McGowan, *New Worker's Guide*, (Dallas, Texas, Baptist General Convention of Texas, unpublished training material, 2003), 3.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

those strengths and gifts which God has given us. This is not a call to dilute or dismiss doctrinal differences, but rather to see those in their proper context. Just as individuals have gifts which God uses for the good of the Body of Christ, so too, it seems to me, has God given denominations gifts and strengths which can be used for a great Kingdom purpose, if we will but share those gifts in the larger context.

As non-Baptist students have flooded into our BSM programs over the past two decades, we have been challenged to see the opportunity inherent in the presence and participation of those students. Recognizing the missional emphasis of the ministry, these students have found in BSM a ministry which fits their concept of a ministry which is simultaneously church-centered and Kingdom-oriented.

This shift to a broader focus on the kingdom of God is very likely the change which has altered the course of Baptist Student Ministry more than any other transition in the past twenty years. This perspective places the good of the denomination in a secondary role, seeking rather to impact the world for Christ by working with and investing in people and institutions beyond the scope of Baptist life. This means that many leaders trained through involvement in Baptist Student Ministry have gone on to invest their lives in churches of many different denominations and their institutions. This is not to infer that BSM has only recently been interested in the growth of the kingdom. From the very beginning of its existence, there has been a focus on evangelism. As Orr states; “Denominational witness and fellowship on campus followed the direction taken by denominational leadership – Baptist Student Union in the southern states remained strongly evangelistic in the Southern Baptist Convention fashion...”⁵ A significant part

⁵ J. Edwin Orr and Richard Owen Roberts, *Campus Aflame: A History of Evangelical Awakenings in Collegiate Communities*, (Wheaton, Illinois: International Awakening Press, 1994), 152.

of the heritage of BSM is the missions and evangelism emphasis, not just from its roots in the Student Volunteer Movement and early YMCA, but from the DNA of the denomination which gave birth to it. The shift which has taken place, then, has more to do with the discipleship and training students who are already believers, but are not members of Baptist churches. In enlisting students, BSM Directors emphasize the vision and goals of the organization, seeking students who resonate with that vision, rather than by seeking exclusively Baptist students. In this way, the **HARVEST** vision takes priority over denominational affiliation. The clear message is that all may work together for a common goal, with the denominational preference being a secondary issue. Although this way of thinking harkens back to the days of the Student Volunteer Movement, it is a daring change for a denominational ministry. By making the shift to consciously welcome, involve and train students who may not ever be members of Baptist churches, BSM has taken a stand that the broader kingdom calling is primary and the needs of the denomination secondary.

As might be expected, students have responded well to this understanding of ministry. Whereas twenty years ago, relatively small numbers of non-Baptists would have found their place of ministry in BSM, today anywhere from 30%-50% of the students involved around the state in various BSM programs are non-Baptist⁶. These numbers are higher in metropolitan areas and on state universities, while the percentages are lower on rural and Baptist campuses.

⁶ The figure of 30%-50% does not reflect a scientific study of the numbers of students involved, but rather an informal survey of directors with whom this author works on a regular basis. In spite of that fact, it does represent a fairly accurate assessment of participation trends within BSM.

But it is not just the fact that the students are involved in the programs, but rather, that a conscious decision has been made to involve these students in every aspect of the ministry, including leadership. In the typical leadership group the only position which is “reserved” for Baptist students is the position of President. Initially, this decision to include non-Baptist students in leadership was not necessarily a strategic decision, but rather a recognition of what had become the defacto norm in BSM. Non-Baptist students have always connected with BSM and been drawn to the evangelistic and missional approach to student ministry which has been foundational for the ministry. Over time, those numbers increased and these non-Baptist students began to seek ways of being involved. Before the official sanctioning of non-Baptist leadership, many campuses would either simply ignore the state guidelines or would institute a separate level of leadership for those non-Baptist students, in essence allowing them to be involved in leadership while hiding them within the structure itself.

In the past several years, this policy has been discussed and debated at several levels. On the one hand, a decision to allow non-Baptist leadership is not a decision which can be made unilaterally at the state leadership level. Although the state office sets the overall strategy and emphasis, there remains a strong partnership with the local Baptist association of churches. This partnership most often include a local committee or team of local leaders who work together with the local BSM program in setting the course for that local BSM program. While most of these local committees and teams see the wisdom of a kingdom mindset which opens the door to leadership for students, regardless of denominational background, some still struggle with the role of BSM. For some of these local leaders, two significant questions come to mind. The first is simply

the question of identity. Simply put, they wish to know if our current direction will lead us to become something which may be student ministry, but not *Baptist Student Ministry*? What makes us unique and different from some of the other, excellent student ministries which exist? What are the distinctives of Baptist Student Ministry which make the ministry unique and uniquely Baptist? Does that have more to do with the students in leadership, with the BSM Director or some other, perhaps philosophical or doctrinal standpoint? The second question is whether or not Baptist Student Ministry still plays a role in the retention of students for Baptist churches. It is a return to the original purpose of BSM, that of preservation of Baptist students for Baptist churches which, for some, remains a high priority.

From the point in history on which we stand, the full weight of many decisions being made in our day is difficult to assess. But it is clear that we are, in some ways, caught up in a cultural tide that challenges us to recognize and deal with these currents or cease to be relevant. The decision to include non-Baptist students in leadership is a part of a wider cultural trend, the lack of denominational loyalty on the part of students. Although this will be discussed more fully at a later point, it is crucial to note at this point that BSM Directors have been put under tremendous pressure by students who change their denominational affiliation without much discomfort or sense of loss. In fact, in a survey of student **leadership** (emphasis mine) taken by this author in the fall of 2003, only 1 student out of 211 respondents⁷ indicated that denominational loyalty should play a role in the deciding on a church home.⁸

⁷ This survey, which can be found as Addendum 1, was formulated in such a way to measure not only students' current attitudes, but something about their background. Did they themselves come from a Baptist background or another denomination. An effort was made to measure multiple aspects of their

At the same time, to proceed in a direction which takes us far from our roots, regardless whether one agrees with the original objectives or not, is to be guilty of far more than just ill-conceived strategy. Regardless of perceived pressure, whether from students themselves, BSM Directors or from elsewhere, we must be diligent to make decisions which draws from both a biblical understanding of our missionary task and the task given us by those who provide for our existence. To do otherwise would make us guilty of breaking the trust of those who have granted the privilege of approaching the university campus in a missional way. The investment of churches and individuals throughout the many years of the history of Baptist Student Ministry goes far beyond dollars and cents, but is, rather, an investment of lives past and future. For this reason, it is essential, not only that these questions are given due consideration, but also that there is a clear perspective for the future and that decisions are made based upon that perspective. So let us consider what makes BSM a distinctly Baptist enterprise.

To be distinctly Baptist is to approach ministry from a distinctly Baptist point of view. In his book, *The Doctrines Baptists Believe*, Roy Edgemon identifies several theological standpoints from which most Baptists operate. Although these theological standpoints are not unique to Baptists, it is perhaps unique that these standpoints all come together in the people called Baptists. This would include a high view of scripture as the Word of God which speaks with authority into the life of the believer; a view of the atonement which is centered on the love of God expressed most perfectly in the birth, life, death and resurrection of Christ; a doctrine of salvation by grace through faith as a

understanding of Baptist Student Ministry and its relationship with the greater body of Baptists as well as their own connect with that greater body.

⁸ Nick Howard, *Survey of Student Involved in Leadership in BSM*, (Houston, Texas: unpublished raw data, 2003).

personal decision for each human being; the priesthood of every believer; a believers church, both local and universal as the body of Christ with the understanding that it is in the local body that this body as community is best expressed. Although this is certainly not an exhaustive list of Baptist doctrines or characteristics, it does help us to begin to identify the unique role of Baptists.⁹

A quick look at the list above helps us to begin to appreciate how Baptist Student Ministry uniquely approaches the task of ministry on the university campus. Because of who Baptists are, BSM will very naturally be a ministry in which devotional Bible study, evangelism and missions would be emphasized. It is a ministry which does not see itself as the church, but charges students to be a part of a local body of believers in which they experience not just fellowship with others like themselves, but are also invited to sit at the table with those who are different, be it in age, in socio-economic background or race. They are challenged to see the work of God in their lives and to consider where it is that God may decide to use them or His kingdom. It is, in many respects, a ministry which refuses to be boxed in, preferring to allow students the opportunity to be creative and to challenge those who direct the ministries as much as we challenge them. By being directly accountable to a denomination in which such principles are a part of the DNA, BSM is able to consistently minister in a way which is an expression of a fundamental common set of beliefs.

There are no easy answers and no simple ways to proceed. We are dealing with questions which confront us as a denominational student ministry which we have never faced before in our nearly 100 year history. Questions such as: In what ways should

⁹ Roy T. Edgemon, *The Doctrines Baptists Believe* (Nashville, Tennessee: Convention Press, 1988) 8.

BSM relate to churches of other denominations? How do we keep these Baptist distinctives while opening the door to those from non-Baptist backgrounds? In what ways do we retain a special relationship to local Baptist churches and associations of churches? Ultimately, the question of “why” we have denominational student ministry at all comes into question. If the role of BSM is not to promote and preserve future Baptists, then why does it need to exist? Is there a role that a denominational ministry can play that is a unique Kingdom role, unable to be filled by a non-denominational organization doing similar type of work? Do the words of J.P. Boone that; “what was being done there for the group could be done in a greater way through denominational leadership...”¹⁰ still ring true? This conviction is, after all, the spark which set Baptist Student Ministry in motion. And it is the conviction from which we work today. While these questions will be explored at a later point, such a clarification of the unique place and purpose of these ministries will be essential to a new way of understanding denominational ministry.

Meanwhile students and directors keep the missions vision and passion of the early *Covenanters* alive. Thousands of students are involved every year in missions through BSM.¹¹ Students, both Baptist and non-Baptist, have the opportunity to be involved in missions at every level; by being involved in missions activities locally, by being a part of a mission trip organized by their local BSM and by being selected as a student missionary.¹² Taken together, these opportunities provide a chance for students

¹⁰ Joseph P. Boone, *It Came to Pass: The Birth, Growth, and Evaluation of the Baptist Student Union and the Baptist Chairs of Bible* (Ann Arbor, Michigan: Edwards Brothers, 1953), 2.

¹¹ Joyce Ashcraft, *Annual Statistical Report, 2002-2003* (Dallas, Texas: Baptist General Convention of Texas, unpublished statistical data, 2003), 3.

to gain a new understanding of their own gifting for ministry, the ways in which God may have for them to be involved in His Kingdom and the needs of the world and how those needs may be met. They may be involved weekly or serve for a period of weeks to an entire semester. Their involvement in BSM may take them across town to a homeless shelter or around the world, using GPS satellite technology to map villages not located on any map.

On their campuses, these students are given the opportunity to lead out in a variety of ways, such as leading out in small groups, growing in their faith and sharing with others. They serve their local communities and their fellow students. Ministries to international students provide needed language skills and friendships to those far from home. BSM students have the opportunity to be involved in a huge variety of ministries, representing every aspect of the Christian life.

God continues to bless the enterprise of Baptist Student Ministry in phenomenal ways. In fact, in Texas alone, BSM has ministry on 115 campuses with almost 44,000 students involved. This has been accomplished with 112 staff members, only 45 of which are full-time, long-term workers. Yet, at the same time that BSM impacts the lives of thousands of students, a time when the challenges of the university campus are greater than ever before, the greatest challenge may well be with the churches which brought the ministry into existence in the first place. Because of changing demographics in Baptist churches, many members have little or no exposure to Baptist Student Ministry or other denominational ministries. In fact, many members of Baptist churches are more familiar with other, non-denominational ministries, than with the ministries sponsored by the

¹² Brenda Sanders, *Gonowmissions*, [online] available from <http://gonowmissions.com>, accessed 8 December 2003.

denomination and hence, their own church. For instance, during a recent conversation with a leader in Baptist church, the question was asked if BSM were a part of Campus Crusade. Campus Crusade for Christ, an organization which certainly does a tremendous job of ministry, states on their website that almost the exact same number of students were involved in Crusade nationwide as were involved in Texas BSM and this with a staff of 2900 on 1029 campuses.¹³ This is not to underestimate the impact which Crusade has had in God's kingdom, but rather to highlight the fact that BSM has done an extremely bad job of sharing the news of the blessing of God upon the ministry.

In the changing world in which we live, we do not have the luxury of relying upon either the successes or relationships of years past. We must strive to understand the trends which impact both the lives of students and the church culture in which we live. We must stand with our feet planted firmly on the campus and in the church, all the while drawing from a kingdom mindset which informs the ways in which we work with both.

¹³ *Campus Crusade for Christ*, available from <http://www.campuscrusadeforchrist.com/aboutus/factstats.htm>, accessed 2 December 2004.

Chapter Four

Understanding Students in the 21st Century

In the film “A Perfect Storm,” Captain Billy Tyne and his men find themselves on a fishing boat in the middle of a horrific convergence of storms when Hurricane Grace collides with a Canadian low pressure center and a cold front off the New England coast. The story for Captain Tyne and his crew does not end well. The ship is overtaken by the storm and sinks off the coast of Massachusetts with the loss of all aboard. In observing American culture at the beginning of the 21st century, some would say that a perfect storm, a convergence of trends and patterns in the lives of young people in America, is forming and that this storm will not end well. There is a sense that there is a very real danger implicit in the cultural shift we are now undergoing.

There is no doubt that a tremendous cultural transition is underway. This is not news to anyone who seriously considers cultural trends. In the mid 1950s, Romano Guardini, who was professor of philosophy and theology at the University of Munich, wrote in his important book, *The End of the Modern World*;

Today the modern world is essentially over. The chains of cause and effect that it established will of course continue to hold. Historical epochs are not neatly severed like the steps of a laboratory experiment. While one era prevails its successor is already forming, and its predecessor continues to exert influence for a long time.¹

The real question, and one highly disputed by observers, is whether the changes occurring around us are positive or negative. In this section, we will examine the forces

¹ Romano Guardini, *The End of the Modern World*, 2d ed. (Wilmington, Delaware: ISI Books, 2001), 118.

which are at work in this emerging culture and to draw some conclusions about the dangers and opportunities which these forces imply, especially for those who work on the university campus.

The first force at work in the western world today has most often been described through the use of the term “postmodernism,” which, as Leonard Sweet, Brian McLaren and Jerry Haselmayer describe it in their book *A is for Abductive*, is; “A broad, diverse and often paradoxical emerging culture defined as having passed through modernity and being ready to move on to something better.”² Sweet, McLaren and Haselmayer go on to say that there is no accurate definition of postmodernism since we have not completely “emerged” and have no real idea where this transformation will eventually lead us. Dan Kimball goes even a step further in deflecting a pointed definition of postmodernism:

Since postmodernism is still in the process of developing, we can’t fully define the word postmodernism yet. We don’t know when exactly postmodernism began or how long it will be around. We don’t know where it will be taking us, or how much further it will shape the culture. Some people are even suggesting that we are moving into a post-postmodern phase in which, now that postmodernism has deconstructed all it needs to, we are actually building on postmodernism’s foundation.³

Indeed, in exploring the question of postmodernism, one finds a hesitation to define this shift too definitively. Most, like Albert Borgmann, define postmodernism as an end to modernism. Borgmann says, “An epoch approaches its end when its fundamental conviction begins to weaken and no longer inspires enthusiasm among its advocates. That is true of each of the three parts of the modern project: realism,

² Leonard Sweet, Brian D. McLaren, and Jerry Haselmayer, *A Is for Abductive: The Language of the Emerging Church* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 2003), 239.

³ Dan Kimball, *The Emerging Church: Vintage Christianity for New Generations* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 2003), 47.

universalism, and individualism.”⁴ Still others like Albert Mohler dismiss postmodernism altogether, describing postmodernism as a “mood which sets itself apart from the certainties of the modern age.”⁵

Stanley Grenz, in his 1996 *A Primer on Postmodernism*, takes a middle-of-the-road view of postmodernism and the ability for postmodernism and Christianity to coexist peacefully. While admitting that, as believers, we cannot accept the dismissal by postmodernism of any meta-narrative, Grenz calls on Christians to see that Christianity and the Enlightenment project are mutually exclusive. He sees much common ground where a truly biblical theology can be built.⁶

A reading of Grenz, who stands with one foot on either side of the discussion is extremely helpful to those seeking answers about the true nature of postmodernism. The key, as Grenz points out, is to understand that postmodernism rejects the idea that it is possible for any of us to have a truly objective viewpoint. Rather, we all come with our own history and background through which all things are interpreted. As Grenz says, “We have moved from a *objectivist* to a *constructionalist* outlook.”⁷ Postmodernity posits that all reality is a construct and it is impossible for us to move outside of our own constructs. Therefore it is impossible for us to see objectively. In this way, postmodernism is not a rejection of an objective reality, but rather of the ability of any

⁴ Albert Borgmann, *Crossing the Postmodern Divide* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 48.

⁵ Dr. Albert Mohler, *Truth-Telling Is Stranger Than It Used to Be, Part 1* [online] available from <http://www.crosswalk.com/news/weblogs/mohler/?cal=go&adate=3%2F1%2F2005>, accessed 24 March 2005.

⁶ Stanley J. Grenz, *A Primer on Postmodernism* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1996), 165.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 40.

individual to truly recognize and interpret accurately this reality. In following this line of thought to its obvious conclusion, many postmodern philosophers, including Anderson and Lyotard, reject any kind of metanarrative. It is this rejection which Grenz says carries us too far; that our faith demands that we stand firm on the issue of an ultimate story and truth in Christ.⁸

It is, perhaps, helpful to note those places where Grenz feels Christianity and postmodernism share common ground. Grenz admonishes the church for being drawn too far into modern culture, disallowing for the mystery of the gospel. It is time, claims Grenz, that we reject Enlightenment Epistemology. Grenz is not alone in this critique. As Guardini states:

Modern man cuts himself off not only from the community and from tradition, but also from his religious connections. He is indifferent both to the specific, once-authoritative Christian Credo, and to religious ideas in general. Things, forces, processes have become “worldly” – the word stripped of its former religious richness and given a new sense which implies “rationally understandable and controllable.” This means that both man as a whole as well as important individual aspects of human life – the defenselessness of childhood, the special nature of woman, the simultaneous physical weakness and rich experience of the aged – all lose their metaphysical worth. Birth is not considered merely the appearance of a new unit of the species *homo sapiens*; marriage but an alliance of a man and a woman with certain personal and legal consequences; death the end of a total process called life.⁹

In this way, perhaps more than any other, postmodernism may bring us back to a biblical understanding of God and His work in the world. It is a reminder that the ways in which truth are known cannot rest entirely upon human rational thought alone, there must be room for God to break into history in ways in which the human mind cannot comprehend. We may also welcome the idea that knowledge is neutral and objective. As

⁸ Grenz, 163.

⁹ Guardini, 166-167.

Grenz states; "...in contrast to the modern ideal of the dispassionate observer, we affirm the postmodern discovery that no observer can stand outside the historical process. Nor can we gain universal, culturally neutral knowledge as unconditioned specialists."¹⁰

Grenz further rejects the "goodness of knowledge" as an enlightenment concept. Not all knowledge is in itself good. Without a corresponding change of our nature, knowledge is often a very dangerous thing, as we have discovered repeatedly during the modern age.

It is clear that postmodernism stands as an attempt on the part of many to be free of the dependence upon rationalism and modern philosophies, rejecting much of what modernism held to be sacred and true.¹¹ It is difficult to imagine where the transformation taking place in western culture and specifically in the United States will end. The popular postmodernism which dominates the university campus today bears little resemblance to the philosophies of early postmodern thinkers such as Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida. The postmodernism of the university campus is rather the inherited postmodern culture. It is something which students simply "feel" and the way they perceive life, rather than a philosophy which they have formally adopted. It is as we examine this culture in which the typical college student is immersed that we begin to see patterns emerging. Perhaps the easiest way to understand these patterns is to compare it with the previous culture, that of the modern world.

Rheinhold Scharnowski, coordinator, DAWN European network, has written a brief but helpful comparison between the modern and postmodern cultures. In the article, Scharnowski, who, like Grenz, sees both good and bad in the cultural shift, focuses his criticism of postmodernism on one point which he feels is the most important; the loss of

¹⁰ Grenz, 166.

¹¹ Sweet, McLaren, and Haselmayer, 241-242.

“objective truth” as a point of reference or even a point worth seeking. Whereas in the modern world there was a confidence that it was possible to know the truth in an objective way, this is rejected in the postmodern world. All truth is subjective, local, personal and specific to the person interpreting this truth. This one idea has many layers which are worth exploring. One such idea is the idea that language itself is not as objective and clear as once held. That is, the postmodern mind rejects the idea that language is transparent and rational, rather both the speaker and the hearer both play a significant role in the way in which those words carry meaning and that meaning is, indeed, changed by those persons. There is a rejection of the idea that exact communication of ideas or “truths” is possible.

This in turn means that any meta-narratives held to be applicable to all persons (such as the claims of the gospel) are rejected as oversimplified and as lacking the complexity needed to deal with “real life”. In general, in the postmodern world, there is a rejection that anything can provide a coherent “answer” to the questions of life, whether it be science, upon which so much of the modern world relied, or the claims of any religion which would be exclusive in its claims.¹² Still, Scharnowski finds 10 “bridges” for evangelism in the postmodern world. These bridges would include the search for spirituality, the need for community as well as tolerance and unconventionality. His essay ends with his hope that churches reaching the postmodern world will resemble a garden in which differing expressions of the church will take root and grow.

It is easy to understand why many would see postmodernism as the mortal enemy of Christianity. Those who hold to this view of postmodernity see this as a struggle to the

¹² Rheinhold Scharnowski, *Postmoderne und Evangelium - Versuch einer Annäherung*, (Steffisburg, Switzerland: 2001, unpublished manuscript, 2001), 4.

death, a struggle in which Christians cannot be “postmodern” for to be postmodern is to reject the very foundations of our faith. As Stanley Hauerwas says, “If the analysis of postmodernism I have provided is close to being right, it is not a question of choice. Rather Christians are faced – along with our non-Christian sisters and brother – with the challenge of surviving postmodernism.”¹³

So what is postmodernism to those who see it as intrinsically evil? Hauerwas quotes Nicholas Boyle as saying, “Postmodernism is the pessimism of an obsolescent class – the salaried official intelligentsia – whose fate is closely bound up with that of the declining nation state.”¹⁴ Hauerwas then goes on to clarify that he is no friend of postmodernism, declaring, “... I am not convinced that postmodernism, either as an intellectual position or as a cultural style, is post anything.”¹⁵ Postmodernism, according to Hauerwas is simply the result of the attempt by the Christian community to define “truth” in terms of propositions rather than in the living out of our faith in community. In other words, postmodernism is not only a child of modernism, it is a child of the modern church, which chose to use enlightenment terms in order to justify its existence.¹⁶ The natural result of this approach has been to undermine all authority, including the authority of the church. It is a philosophy which very naturally gravitates to the individual and the gratification of the individual, that is “individualism” as the driving force.¹⁷

¹³ Stanley Hauerwas, *A Better Hope: Resources for a Church Confronting Capitalism, Democracy, and Postmodernity* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Brazos Press, 2000), 42.

¹⁴ Ibid., 35.

¹⁵ Ibid., 37.

¹⁶ Ibid., 38.

¹⁷ Ibid., 40.

This is a theme which Andy Crouch picks up on in his section of *The Church in the Emerging Culture*. Crouch compares postmodernism to the Mall of America as a celebration of individualism, ultra-consumerism and the ability to make personalized choices about every aspect of life.¹⁸ Crouch goes on to say that Brian McLaren and others who see seeds of hope in postmodernism have missed the point, implying that postmodernism is nothing more than a hyper form of modernism without any true character of its own.¹⁹ Crouch certainly echoes the sentiment of Hauerwas who says, “It is hard to imagine an intellectual alternative better suited for the elites of global capitalism than postmodernity.”²⁰

Robert Webber, the author of the “Ancient-Future” series of books has a similarly negative view of postmodernism, describing the breakdown of truth in postmodernism as “privatism,” which he describes as saying, “I have my truth, you have your truth; let’s not bother each other with conflicting views. Please don’t bother me with your truth, even if you think you have reason to believe it.”²¹

In fact, Webber goes on to paint a typically (for many evangelicals) negative view of postmodern thought, stating that it is a “post-everything” world in which we live. He cites several examples of what he sees as an increasingly self-focused world:

- increased technology, especially the internet system;
- the complexity of knowledge brought about by the information age and the accessibility of knowledge through computer retrieval systems;

¹⁸ Leonard I. Sweet, ed., *The Church in Emerging Culture: Five Perspectives* (El Cajon, California: Youth Specialties, 2003), 68.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 71.

²⁰ Hauerwas, 40.

²¹ Robert Webber, *Ancient-Future Evangelism: Making Your Church a Faith-Forming Community* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Books, 2003), 124.

- the globalization of the world and the communication systems which provide us with instant knowledge of people and events;
- the war on terrorism and the accompanying vulnerability and fear of the future;
- the deterioration of our cities and the hopelessness resulting from the lack of meaningful work;
- the prevalence of drugs and the power it has on the young;
- the breakdown of the family and the moral permissiveness that is everywhere.²²

In truth, neither a full-scaled acceptance of the precepts of postmodernity, nor their vilification will serve the Christian community as the church itself is influenced and seeks to influence the emerging culture. As Leonard Sweet says in *Postmodern Pilgrims*, “Christians should not embrace a postmodern worldview; we must not adapt to postmodernity.... But we do need to incarnate the timeless in the timely. Postmoderns do need to probe the living-out of our faith in light of the classical Christian tradition.”²³ Sweet goes on to challenge the church to reach out in EPIC ways, meeting postmoderns where they are and calling them to the ancient faith which we have received in the Gospel.²⁴

Yet the force exerted by postmodernity on the emerging culture, especially that culture as it is seen on the university campus today, is not the only force at work. As is always the case, there are a multitude of factors and influences which make every situation and every person unique. While there is certainly value in exploring the influences which shape culture, there is also the real danger of oversimplification. We must also take care to not allow our expectations to prevent us from seeing what may

²² Webber, *Ancient-Future Evangelism: Making Your Church a Faith-Forming Community*, 125.

²³ Leonard I. Sweet, *Post-Modern Pilgrims: First Century Passion for the 21st Century World* (Nashville, Tennessee: Broadman & Holman, 2000), xvii.

²⁴ EPIC is an acrostic which Sweet uses to encourage the church to be Experiential, Participatory, Image-driven and Connected in their outreach to postmoderns. See Sweet, *Post-Modern Pilgrims: First Century Passion for the 21st Century World*, xxi.

initially seem contradictory (indeed, if postmodernism has taught us anything it is how to hold seemingly contradictory thoughts simultaneously). For that reason, while it is true that the influences of postmodernism mentioned by Hauerwas, Webber and Scharnowski²⁵ are indeed present as one walks upon the university campus, one finds that the overall tone of campus life is much different than expected, given the gloomy tone of many of the descriptions.

This is where the second force comes into play on the university campus. Not only are these students postmoderns, but they are also Millennials.²⁶ That is, they are a part of the generation born between 1982 and 2002. Naturally, as with the danger of oversimplifying the influences of postmodernism, there is a very real danger of categorizing people according to generational studies. As George Gates warns us, "These neat and tidy attempts to identify people by arbitrary generational names are, well, nuts."²⁷ Yet, to not at least acknowledge the trends that are seen within a particular generation as a whole, even while granting the weaknesses of such research, is to run the risk of misunderstanding the very people to whom we are called to minister. When it comes to university students, as this generation hits the university campus it leaves us wondering what happened to the influence of postmodernism, or least what we have come to understand as postmodernism.

²⁵ Stanley Hauerwas, Robert Webber and Reinhold Scharnowski are by no means lone voices in the critique of postmodernism. And while many would see positives in the recognition that the pursuit of propositional truth as it has been practiced by the modern church has had a negative impact, something which must be reversed if the church is to speak into the postmodern world, very few of the voices see the immensity of the contradictions which exist within the postmodern world itself.

²⁶ Neil Howe and William Strauss, *Millennials Rising: The Next Great Generation* (New York: Vintage Books, 2000), 6.

²⁷ George Gates, "Xer's, Y's, and Boomers," *Pulp & Paper*, April 2003, Vol. 77, no. 4, 27.

In contrast with what we thought we knew about young people and especially postmoderns, it seems that Millennials are determined to take us back to the days of Leave it to Beaver or at the very least, Happy Days. Could it be that the radical self-interest and self-absorption identified largely with Gen-X could have dissipated almost as soon as it began?²⁸ As Neill Howe and William Strauss explain in their work *Millennials Go to College*:

Are they pessimists? No, they're optimists.
 Are they rule-breakers? No, they're rule-followers.
 Are they self-absorbed? No. From school uniforms to team learning and team grading they are gravitating to group activity.
 Are they distrustful? No. They accept authority.
 Are they neglected? No. They're the most watched over generation in history.
 Are they stupid? No. In the 1990s, aptitude test scores have risen within every racial and ethnic group, especially in elementary schools.
 Are they another "lost" generation? No. The better word is found.²⁹

Who is this generation and why is it that many of us would never describe this generation in terms like the ones listed above? In short, they are the "Echo Boomers" (although most detest that term). They are the offspring of the Boomers and, to a lesser degree, Gen X. They are the most wanted generation in the history of the United States. They have been protected and nurtured, cared for and given every opportunity. But instead of creating a generation of spoiled brats, this generation is coming together as a truly remarkable generation, a fact which most adults fail to recognize. In fact, only 16% of Americans agree that people under the age of 30 share their moral values.³⁰ Howe and Strauss tell us; "As a group, Millennials are unlike any other youth generation in living

²⁸ Howe and Strauss, *Millennials Rising: The Next Great Generation*, 1.

²⁹ Neil Howe and William Strauss, *Millennials Go to College: Strategies for a New Generation on Campus : Recruiting and Admissions, Campus Life, and the Classroom* (Washington, D.C.: American Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers, 2003), 9-10.

³⁰ Ibid., 7.

memory. They are more numerous, more affluent, better educated and more ethnically diverse.”³¹ George Barna agrees, going on to add that Millennials (or Mosaics as he terms them) are upbeat, motivated, open to religious influences, less emotionally sensitive and vitally connected to other people.³²

So what of the description of postmodernity described by Webber? Many of the influences Webber mentioned, such as internet usage, have certainly had their impact, but it is not necessarily the impact which was expected. In spite of almost being hard-wired to their computers and carrying on entire relationships over Instant Messaging, most young people are not cave dwellers who reject “real” relationships in favor of “virtual” ones. For most teens and university students, it has expanded the world of available relationships, allowing these world citizens to be in relationship with people from other countries and walks of life. Instead of gloom and despair, most young people, 9 out of 10 in fact, would describe themselves as happy.³³

But what of the more negative aspects of Webber’s evaluation, such as drug abuse and violence? The truth is that the worst drug abusers are those who are 35-45, not teens or collegiate students. With the exception of cigarette use, the use of all kinds of drugs, including alcohol has decreased significantly since the 70s. And school violence? After Columbine, the assumption seemed to be that schools were places where killings could take place at any moment. In point of fact, school violence is down tremendously in the

³¹ Howe and Strauss, *Millennials Rising: The Next Great Generation*, 4.

³² George Barna, *Real Teens* (Ventura, California: Regal Books, 2001), 23.

³³ *Ibid.*, 46.

past decade.³⁴ What's more, teen suicide rates began a very unexpected turnaround in the mid 90s, and are now on the decline for the first time since the second world war.³⁵

In fact, when asked to identify the major problems in society, the top 7 answers from students in grades 7-12 in 1998 were as follows:

1. Selfishness, not thinking of the rights of others
2. People who don't respect the law and authorities
3. Wrongdoing by politicians
4. Lack of parental discipline
5. Courts that care too much about criminals' rights
6. Too much emphasis on money and materialism
7. Lack of morality / ethics in society.³⁶

So, why is it that youth culture always appears to us to be vulgar, oversexed and materialistic? There are a couple of possible answers to that question. The first would be that we are looking to the marketing to teens and not to the teens themselves. Most teens say that marketing to teens, which is produced by Boomers and Gen X, is way over the top and inappropriate. Another possibility is that we are simply not looking at the generation of students and teens which now populate our schools and colleges, but rather are still focused on Gen X, a very different generation than the Millennials. It seems that generational changes take place at a pace which is almost breathtaking, leaving most of us in a quandary over whether or not we are dealing with Generation X, Generation Y or Z. But the most likely answer is one given by George Gates who continues his statement quoted earlier:

These neat and tidy attempts to identify people by arbitrary generational names are, well, nuts. To label someone born in one year completely different from one

³⁴ Howe and Strauss, *Millennials Rising: The Next Great Generation*, 202-209.

³⁵ Howe and Strauss, *Millennials Go to College: Strategies for a New Generation on Campus: Recruiting and Admissions, Campus Life, and the Classroom*, 8.

³⁶ Howe and Strauss, *Millennials Rising: The Next Great Generation*, 181.

born perchance the next – independent of gene pool, upbringing, education or cultural influence – demonstrates our continual urge to simplify, classify, and divide.³⁷

Rabey says, “If anything, people now pretty much reject the idea that any finite set of characteristics can define an entire generation. Instead, many observers say that Generations X, Y, and those that will come after them are made up of a vast number of smaller, identity-driven subcultures.”³⁸ Indeed, any analysis of generations cannot and should not be an exercise in putting anyone into a box, nor should exceptions force us to throw out all we know about generational research, but should, instead, be a reminder of both the complexity of human beings as well as the growing tribalization of our culture. Exceptions themselves can be very helpful in understanding a generation. For instance, Gen-Xer Pamela Paul, author of *The Starter Marriage and the Future of Matrimony*, is downright hostile in her article about the moral fabric of Millennials. The article begins, “Call them Generation Goody Two Shoes.” Paul then proceeds to debunk the myth of the high moral standards of Millennials. She points out, correctly, that while 77% of Millennials consider it immoral to throw trash out of the window of a vehicle, only 8% consider it immoral to transgress the speed limit in that same car. Paul makes several such points in her article, finding fault in several other areas, including Millennials’ spiritual lives when she says; “But when it comes to other saintly behaviors, Gen Y, once again, doesn’t always practice what it preaches. While 86 percent say they believe in God, only 48 percent regularly attend religious services.”³⁹ Certainly, Paul helps us to

³⁷ Gates 27.

³⁸ Steve Rabey, *In Search of Authentic Faith: How Emerging Generations Are Transforming the Church* (Colorado Springs, Colorado: Waterbrook Press, 2001), 51.

³⁹ Pamela Paul, “Millennium Morals,” *American Demographics*, August 2001, Vol. 23, no. 8, 17-19.

pinpoint places where clarification might be sought, but her style of doing so does not help us to understand the bigger picture, but is rather, in a somewhat petty fashion, focused on tearing down the positive picture of Millennials.

In reacting so strongly to what she considers to be an unfairly positive portrayal of Millennials (and most likely, by extension, the unfairly negative portrayal of her own generation), Paul points out some important facts. It seems that many areas of life, but particularly in areas related to both religious experience and moral issues, what Millennials say does not necessarily translate into concrete action. For instance, Christian Smith points out in his very helpful book, *Soul Searching*, that youth share conflicting information when talking about these areas of their lives. For instance, teens expressed very positive opinions about their congregations and the adults in those congregations. In fact, teens were more likely to have a negative opinion about the peers than adults within a faith community.⁴⁰ Overall teens said that congregations made them think about important issues in life and were warm, welcoming places. American young people are among the most religious in the entire world. Recent surveys have shown that 95% of American youth believe in God and fully 86% believe that Jesus Christ is the son of God. That is astronomical compared to only 30% of youth in Belgium (and other western countries) who believe in God, for instance.⁴¹ Yet, at the same time, only 30% of teens would say that they are totally committed to the Christian faith.⁴² In some ways, teens are surprisingly conventional in their belief systems. Most simply follow the path

⁴⁰ Christian Smith and Melinda Lundquist Denton, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 60-65.

⁴¹ Jeffrey Jensen Arnett, *Adolescence and Emerging Adulthood: A Cultural Approach*, (Upper Saddle River, New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 2001), 153.

⁴² Barna, *Real Teens*, 121.

of least resistance, following the footsteps of their parent's convictions. So, while only 29% say that they believe only one religion is true, very few American teenagers ever express any interest in any religion beyond the one in which they have grown up. There is obviously something much more important going on. As Smith says;

The first tip-off to the largely invisible and backgrounded nature of religion in the lives of most U.S. teenagers is what they talk about in general, wide-open discussions as being most important, central and interesting in their lives. We talked with the teens we interviewed about what they get enthusiastic or excited about, what pressing issues they are dealing with, and what forces and experiences and routines seem to them most important and central in their lives. Most teenagers talk about friends, school, sports, television, music, movies, romantic interests, family relationships, dealing with issues of drugs and alcohol, various organized activities with which they are involved, and specific fun or formative events they have experienced. What rarely arises in such conversations are teens' religious identities, beliefs, experiences, or practices. Religion just does not naturally seem to appear much on most teenagers' open-ended lists of what really matters.⁴³

Overall, the evidence is confusing and conflicting. What we do know is that once teenagers leave high school they will very likely be lost to the church. Almost 70% of teens say that they are (at best) only "somewhat likely" to attend church after graduation from high school (the true figure of attendance after high school is actually lower).⁴⁴ We also know that very few young people actually put the teachings of their faith into practice, especially where that impacts their decisions on morality. When asked about moral truth, 81% indicate that this is a personal choice, rather than based on some set of absolute truths. Unfortunately, this statistic accurately reflects the way in which most teens and many college students live their lives.⁴⁵ The last straw for Christian Smith is

⁴³ Smith and Denton, 130.

⁴⁴ Barna, 136.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 92-93.

the fact that, “the vast majority of teenagers are “incredibly inarticulate” about their faith.”⁴⁶ This leads Smith to conclude that religion in the lives of young people in America today is either unimportant to most teens (regardless of what they may claim) or that we as faith communities are doing an extremely bad job in translating that faith into real life applications.

One final factor in the puzzle of ministry to collegiates in the 21st century is that we are living in what Chap Clark has termed the “Age of Delayed Adulthood.”⁴⁷ Researchers are finding that adolescence starts earlier, but lasts longer in the western world. Adolescence is defined as being the “period of the life course between the time puberty begins and the time adult status is approached, when young people are preparing to take on the roles and responsibilities of adulthood in their culture.”⁴⁸ At the end of the 19th century when the term was coined, adolescence was a brief period of time beginning at around age 14 and ending soon afterwards as young people were thrust into the requirements and expectations of adulthood relatively early. Today, many researchers would set the onset of adolescence at around age 10 and ending at age 18.⁴⁹ The ending age set by many researchers is, however, tied not to the actual entry of young adults into the adult world per say, but rather the arbitrary fact that high school ends for most students at age 18. However, researchers such as Jeffrey Jensen Arnett and others

⁴⁶ Smith and Denton, 131.

⁴⁷ Chap Clark, *Youth Ministry in an Age of Delayed Adulthood*, [online], available from http://www.youthspecialties.com/articles/topics/adolescent_development/delayed_adulthood.php, accessed 1 August 2005.

⁴⁸ Arnett, 5.

⁴⁹ The age in which adolescence begins varies from country to country and culture to culture. The nature of adolescence is that it is determined not only by physical factors such as the median age of menarche in young women, but also by the demands and expectations of society.

recognized that this in no way means that most teens are ready for adult status or responsibility in society. Arnett has come to call the period which follows adolescence, but is not quite adulthood, “emerging adulthood.”⁵⁰ As Arnett points out, not every culture has a period of emerging adulthood and it is tied to the sociological factors inherent in American society today. Or as Chap Clark says, “...when a culture lacks rites of passage designed to prepare and train young people for adulthood (like ours) and then removes almost every definable ritual signpost from childhood to adulthood (like ours) it’s very difficult to agree on when adolescence ends and adulthood begins.”⁵¹ The result is that Clark says that college ministry today is likely to more resemble ministry to high school youth in the 1970s than college ministry. The waves of college students crashing upon the shores of the university campus today are often ill-equipped for the rigors or responsibilities of adulthood. This helps explain why it is often difficult for them to embrace leadership structures and responsibilities which earlier generations of students so readily expected. It also helps those who work in that context explain their frustration when students don’t seem to know what they want of life or a ministry. For many of these students, collegiate ministry is not a step into adulthood, but rather a continuation of youth ministry which they have experienced in their church. When the ministry does not match this expectation, there is a disconnect with that ministry.

So, what does this mean? Is it possible to somehow reconcile the streams of postmodernism and of millennial identity as they come together on the university campus? What does it mean to those doing ministry when we learn that college students are more likely to be adolescents in their mentality than adults? In some ways, we are

⁵⁰ Arnett, 14.

⁵¹ Clark, *Youth Ministry in an Age of Delayed Adulthood*.

served by the postmodern way of thinking which is comfortable with complexity and paradox. For those who work with students, conflicting facts and perceptions are a way of life. The student who on the one hand wishes to be a part of a team ministry is, on the other hand, willing to leave the team in a lurch if studies need additional attention. The student who is extremely conservative on their view of abortion may well have no problem with homosexuality. It is, as Stanley Grenz describes it, a “bricolage”, a deliberate juxtaposition of incompatible or heterogeneous elements.⁵²

Obviously, this has a tremendous import for those who seek to minister on the university campus. This is a generation truly hungry for spiritual things. One discovers students who seem willing to stand up for their faith, even to the point of dying if need be. They have been inspired by preachers such as John Piper who challenge them to be willing to answer the call of God, even if that means great loss or even death. And they have responded. In 2004 the call went out from Texas Baptist Student Ministry for 500 students to be involved in student missions in some form that year. By May of that year, almost 450 had responded, an incredible increase of almost 100% over the previous year and the largest number appointed to serve as student missionaries in one year. In fact, although student missions increased significantly over the past several years, the increase in the past six years (which corresponds almost perfectly to the timing of the first Millennials on campus) has been amazing, involving almost three times as many students in 2004 as in 1998.

Yet at the same time, student lifestyles and perspectives often reflect a more “me-centered” understanding of life than one might expect from students who are willing to

⁵² Grenz, 37. “Bricolage” is usually associated with styles of clothing where pieces of clothing are chosen because of the jarring effect of putting them together. I would venture that some of this kind of thinking is evident in the juxtaposition of conflicting ideas and philosophies.

give and commit so much. Brenda Sanders, Consultant for the Student Missions program in Texas Baptist Student Ministry, reports that students are more egocentric than ever. At times they reach a mission field only to find themselves ill-equipped for the challenges and self-sacrifice which they are called upon to give, regardless of what they might say in a moment of inspiration. Their willingness to go which often comes from the freedom inherent in a collegiate situation is not matched by a maturity which equips them to understand the true consequences of that decision.

On a more positive note, students involved in leadership in BSM have a commitment to live the gospel among their peers. A recent survey undertaken as a part of this project yielded interesting results and comments from students. As one student put it, "The purpose of the BSM, as I understand it, is to proclaim the name of Jesus Christ on college campuses, to make Him known..."

Or as another student says;

Personally, I have grown to appreciate the main goal of the BSM, not only has it brought me closer to christ (sic), but I have accepted him as my personal savior. I can also share with my Family, co-workers and friends how it feels to be in a close relationship with God....⁵³

There truly is a desire on the part of college students to share with their friends, to make an impact in their world, regardless of the sacrifice. It is a wonderful time to be in student ministry! There is a window of opportunity with this generation which calls for us to be diligent and to minister in increased and increasingly creative ways. At the same time, we must understand all of the dynamics at work in the lives of students. The situation today calls for a more hands on and mentoring style of ministry which helps

⁵³ Nick Howard, *Survey of Student Involved in Leadership in BSM*, (Houston, Texas: unpublished raw data, 2003).

individual students work through the issues inherent in being “late adolescents.”⁵⁴ It will call for us to be both patient and challenging as we deal with the inconsistencies and lifestyle issues as we walk with students as they move from adolescence into adulthood. Clearly, it will call upon those of us who work with collegiates to change some of the ways in which we work as well as our expectations for students.

Sadly, responses from churches and from denominational bodies to the opportunities to minister to millennial college students can be described as lukewarm at best. Students and student ministry are rarely on the radar of the local church, too often discounted as “unprofitable” fields in which to labor. It is rare for staff to be assigned to this area and very little of the typical church budget assists in targeting this age group. After all, students do not usually contribute in significant fashion to the church budget and, at least in typical college towns, leave at the end of four years of study. Yet, in light of the overwhelming evidence that students today are ready and willing to seek after God, I believe it is critical that the church reassess the priority of student ministry, coming to understand the ministry in the broader category of missions. Indeed, I believe that if we fail to answer God’s call to minister to the millions of college and university students in the United States today, the challenges of facing the 21st century may prove to be too much for many churches and denominations as they will be ill equipped to deal with the cultural forces at work in America today.

⁵⁴Clark, *Youth Ministry in an Age of Delayed Adulthood*. Clark uses this term to describe those who in previous decades would have been considered to have moved out of adolescence.

PART 2: The Challenges Facing the Church in the 21st Century

Chapter Five

Postmodernism Makes Its Mark

Chapter Six

Specific Challenges Facing Southern Baptists

Chapter Five

Postmodernism Makes its Mark

The church has always been influenced by culture. While it is impossible in this context to detail the interaction between church and culture over the last two thousand years, it is clear that culture has always played some role in the shaping of the church and church life. The question is not *if* the church will be influenced, but rather how the church will respond to culture and its influence. An intentional and measured response may well facilitate the mission of the church in proclaiming the Kingdom, while a reactionary response, which may avoid the pitfalls of being too closely aligned with culture, may also leave the church ill-equipped to speak into the hearts and lives of those we seek to reach. An intentional response to culture does not imply acquiescing to the culture around us in order to effectively communicate the gospel. Rather, a deliberate, careful response calls upon the church to understand the culture around us well enough to see the places where Gospel and culture intersect and then to live out the Gospel incarnationally.

Of course the challenge is that the target is constantly moving. Culture changes constantly and the church must tenaciously reevaluate what it means to live incarnationally in the current culture. Change of any sort is rarely an easy process. Change, especially cultural change, is often a disconcerting or even frightening process. Certainly, the changes brought about by what has become known as the emerging culture, or postmodernism, over the past decade have been disconcerting and frightening for

many.¹ Some within the church see a wholesale sellout to relativism and loss of any moral compass in the emerging culture. Other believers feel significant loss in the face of changing worship styles, in shifts in denominational loyalty or in the church itself. They are ill at ease with changes in congregational makeup or methodologies. Some long for “the good old days”, most often meaning the days in which they understood the rules and how the game was to be played. There is a profound sense of loss by those who feel that the church has gone the way of the culture at large and, in the process, abandoned aspects of church life held dear by them. Yet the truth is that the game *has* changed. In fact, there is an entirely new playing field, with new rules and different ways of identifying success. The question is, how will the church respond?

As might be imagined, the responses by churches and church leaders have been varied and have changed as quickly as the culture itself. The great majority of church leaders operate out of a two-sided conviction. The first aspect of this conviction is the understanding that followers of Christ have a missionary calling; that is, the Body of Christ is to be incarnational in ministering to and evangelizing the “lost.” Yet the flip side of this conviction is that the Body of Christ is called to be incarnational in the sense of living out a higher calling and living according to a higher moral standard. This dual

¹ I recognize that postmodernism as a cultural movement began many years ago and is not simply a phenomenon of the closing years of the 20th century and early years of the 21st century. Yet, while the intellectual seeds of the changes which would bring us out of the modern age were planted many years ago, it is only within the last decade that many of the precepts and worldview associated with postmodernism have made their way into everyday language, thought, practice and perceptions of the average person (especially if that person is 30 years old or younger). In this way, I believe that postmodernism as a cultural influence has certainly come into its own in the past decade. I also recognize that postmodernism is, for the most part, a western phenomenon, uniquely tied to the history and culture which those of us in the western world have in common. In this point, I must ask for forbearance on the part of the reader when I speak as though I am giving the complete picture, when in point of fact the fastest growing segments of Christianity are among our brothers and sisters outside the western world. For those who would like to read more about the growth of global Christianity may I recommend Philip Jenkins, *The Next Christendom; the Coming of Global Christianity* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2002).

aspect of our calling in this world has caused believers through the ages to struggle with the tension of being “in the world, yet not of it.”²

In light of the ongoing nature of this struggle, it should not surprise us that a shift in culture such as the one which is taking place around us would spark a variety of responses from those who seek to live out the dual nature of Christian response to culture. On the one hand, there are those who have responded quickly, indeed eagerly, to the paradigm shift which has taken place in our culture, sensing that there are unique opportunities for the gospel to be proclaimed in a relevant way. They rush to the forefront of ministry within the postmodern age, seeking to minister to those who seem less open to traditional methodologies of sharing the Gospel. Believers who have taken this approach have often faced stiff resistance, not so much from the world, but from within the church itself. Responding to that resistance, some of those in what has come to be known as the “emerging church movement” have themselves been vitriolic in their criticism of those who have taken a more conservative or traditional path to ministry.³

Chris Seay, a strong proponent of contextualized ministry within postmodern culture, shares a story about the early days of his ministry in Waco, Texas. Seay, along with his friend David Crowder, had just started University Baptist Church, which grew from 0 to 600 in an amazing six weeks. As Seay relates it, the church was not gaining

² In Jesus’ prayer for His Disciples (and by extension, for us) in John 17, Jesus prays that His Disciples would not be taken out of the world, for it is through their presence and ministry that the world will come to know Christ for who He really is, yet that they would not be “of the world. To be “of the world” is to operate out of the world’s values and to seek to establish kingdoms through the use of worldly power, something which Jesus understood to be contrary to the nature of His Kingdom.

³ It is somewhat difficult to work with such terms. In using the “emerging church movement” I am not referring to those who have identified with a particular network, such as “Emergent”, but rather to those who have taken this approach of welcoming many of the changes which characterize postmodernism as conducive to the sharing of the gospel. When I use this term, I mean those who have, by and large, abandoned many of the practices identified with the traditional church. At the same time, many of these groups have incorporated practices of the early church into their worship, leading many, including Robert Webber, to speak of worship in many emergent congregations as Ancient-Future worship.

members from other churches, but by reaching students and others which local churches were not reaching. Seay noted that approximately a month later, a local pastor wrote, “a scathing article in his church newsletter defaming the church and me.”⁴ Seay believed that the pastor must simply not have understood the ministry and decided to call him to see if he could clarify the situation. Seay related the content of the call: “The same man who stood behind a pulpit to preach God’s Word the day before now uttered vile and arrogant words through the phone line, ‘Son, we are in a different class. You don’t amount to s!*t and you never will. Maybe you will make me eat my words, but I doubt it.’”⁵

At the far opposite end of the spectrum are the traditionalists, some of whom refuse to believe that the changes in the culture are real or significant. Often men and women of strong conviction, these are Christians for whom any attempt to engage culture is a retreat from the calling of God to be holy and set apart. They feel that the tremendous upheaval of society is simply another indication of the lost state of mankind. Those who engage the culture often find themselves the target of the wrath of this group. Yet it would be unwise for those who find themselves on the receiving end of this criticism to reject the concerns of this group out of hand. One of the most important lessons which each side of this debate should learn is to listen to the concerns of the other side, since those concerns are most often rooted in a commitment to Christ, and a desire to be consistent and true to His calling in our lives.

In the larger picture, neither the extremes of the emerging church nor the traditionalists define the largest contingent of churches or Christ followers. Many

⁴ Chris Seay, "A Casualty in My Own War," *Leadership*, Vol. XXVI, (Spring 2005), 13.

⁵ Ibid.

believers, regardless of their level of leadership and involvement in a local congregation, have yet to fully understand the complexity and scope of the current cultural shift, but they remain open to contextualized ministry. For this large group of churches and church leaders, the jury is still out. They are willing to learn and test the waters, but they are strongly driven to remain faithful to what they perceive to be the truth of the gospel. It will be the decisions and ministry of this group which will determine how effective the church of tomorrow will be in touching the lives of postmoderns.

For many church and denominational leaders in the western world, the changes in culture have occurred at such a staggering rate of speed and in such a new direction, that it renders much of the shift incomprehensible. There is an awareness that something new is on the horizon, but what will be needed to meet the new challenges lies beyond the ability of many to conceptualize or to implement. Perhaps, given the complexity of the changes taking place, the surprising thing is not that it is so difficult for so many to comprehend, but that there are those who do! Leonard Sweet refers to these individuals as, “Leaders... called into existence by circumstances.”⁶ These leaders are challenging churches and others to engage the postmodern culture and change the very fabric of church and denominational life. Naturally, the challenge to change does not occur without conflict. Reggie McNeal introduces his book, *The Present Future*, with a story of a friend who encouraged him to avoid confrontation on this issue, “Don’t do it! he said... It won’t make any difference. The church is not interested in the truth.”⁷

⁶ Leonard I. Sweet, *Summoned to Lead* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 2004), 12.

⁷ Reggie McNeal, *The Present Future: Six Tough Questions for the Church*, (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2003), xviii.

It is ironic that McNeal's friend would phrase his warning in such a way. For the fight often centers on the question of what is the truth and who is the real enemy. For the traditionalists, postmodernism itself is this enemy. They would argue that postmodernism is an empty promise, not worthy of the attention of the church or, even worse, incompatible with the message of the gospel. Charles Colson tells us, "It would be the supreme irony – and a terrible tragedy – if we found ourselves slipping into postmodernity just when the broader culture has figured out it's a dead end."⁸ Albert Mohler, the president of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, notes that, "Little imagination is needed to see that this radical relativism is a direct challenge to the Christian gospel."⁹

In this struggle, churches and denominations are themselves a microcosm of the larger clash between proponents of the emerging church movement and traditionalists. Those on both sides lash out at the perceived error of the other side. These fights often take their victims from within the church itself. The struggle within Southern Baptist life is illustrative of this trend. In the early 1970s, elements within the Southern Baptist Convention became alarmed at the acceptance of what they perceived to be liberal theological tools such as historical criticism. Nancy Ammerman says, "As Southern Baptists had moved increasingly into the mainstream of American religious culture, Southern Baptist scholars began to appropriate the methods and ideas of the larger culture."¹⁰ This invasion of modern methods of interpretation of scripture and,

⁸ Charles Colson, "The Postmodern Crackup," *Christianity Today*, (December 2003).

⁹ Dr. Albert Mohler, *Truth-Telling Is Stranger Than It Used to Be, Part 1*, [online] available from <http://www.crosswalk.com/news/weblogs/mohler/?cal=go&adate=3%2F1%2F2005>, accessed 1 March 2005.

increasingly, postmodern ideas was simply too much for many of the more conservative members of the convention's churches. In the years which have followed, the so-called "battle for the Bible" within Southern Baptist life has claimed victims on both sides of the battle. Depending on the viewpoint of the person involved, the battle was waged either to preserve a high view of scripture within the churches of the Southern Baptist Convention or to protect historical Baptist principles. In point of fact, it seems to this author that the battle was more of a response to the changes taking place in culture than questions of scriptural interpretation or, for that matter, historical Baptist principles. As it became increasingly clear that the tides of cultural change were strong and were influencing the church, those in leadership within the denomination were confronted with a choice. Would the role of the denomination be one of protection or intentional response? Those who took a more traditionalist stance were identified as either conservatives or fundamentalists.¹¹ For those who took up this banner, the battle was waged because the Bible needed protecting against the forces of culture which threatened to overly influence the church. On the other side were those who came to be known as moderates, although theologically they were often as conservative as their fundamentalist counterparts. For moderates, the battle was fought over the question of historic Baptist principles. What role could and should the denomination play in the affairs of the local church? To this group, protection was not a part of the function of the denomination. Rather, the denomination was to guide an intentional response to the missionary calling

¹⁰ Nancy Tatom Ammerman, *Baptist Battles: Social Change and Religious Conflict in the Southern Baptist Convention* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1990), 63.

¹¹ Once again, definitions are problematic, since by most forms of measurement, Baptists of all stripes are theological conservatives. However, since titles are helpful, I have used the term conservatives to identify those who have taken a more traditionalist, protectionist stance and moderates to identify those on the side of a more traditional Baptist approach which would allow for greater variance on theology and practice within the local church.

of the church, allowing for some level of diversity in theology as well as great variance in approach on the part of its member congregations.

In the end, the traditionalist elements within the denomination won the battle, and, perhaps, lost the war. During the decades-long battle within the convention, conversions and baptism numbers within the Southern Baptist Convention reached their lowest point in years, and many Baptist churches struggled to confront the issues of the postmodern culture in a constructive fashion.

In many other churches and denominations, the reality of the need for significant change is hidden by the almost frantic rush to improve sagging numbers by doing the same thing we have done in generations past, just doing it better. Resources and personnel are poured into propping up programs which no longer address the real needs of churches and individuals. Nowhere has this tendency been seen more clearly than in denominational structures in the United States. Denominations are in crisis mode and this crisis is not likely to be short-lived. Picking up on Will Herberg's *Protestant-Catholic-Jew*, Robert Wuthnow argues in *The Restructuring of American Religion* that the 1950s were a time in which Americans identified themselves by one of three clear religious categories: Catholic, Protestant, or Jewish. But Wuthnow carries the line further, stating that within Protestantism a further categorization was necessary and widely used. It was clear to everyone that there were major differences between Methodists and Baptists, between Baptists and Presbyterians, and so on. Not only were these differences clear, they were very important to members of the groups involved. In many ways, religion in America was defined by denominationalism from the days of the Second Great Awakening until the 1970s. To think of American Christianity without the

influence and presence of denominations would be unthinkable. Yet the situation has changed drastically today. In 1955, only 4% of adults had left the denomination of their childhood. By 1985, that number had climbed to over 30%.¹² Less than 20 years later, 75% of *denominational* church members (emphasis mine) do not think of themselves in terms of their denominational identity.¹³ In fact, a Beliefnet / Newsweek survey published in the September 5, 2005 *Newsweek* indicates that as many as 20% of Americans have left the faith, not denomination, of their childhood.¹⁴ Clearly denominations are in the midst of an identity crisis. In fact, some would go so far as to declare that the age of denominationalism is over.¹⁵

Yet in their book *Soul Searching*, Christian Smith and Melinda Lundquist Denton appear to have evidence for a change in these trends. Smith and Denton show that almost three quarters of adolescents today identify themselves as Christian. Indeed, a very high number of those teens identify themselves with the denominational preference of their parents.¹⁶ It would seem the fear that teenagers are either flocking to paganism or abandoning the faith altogether are greatly exaggerated (in point of fact, only .3% identify themselves as either Wiccan or pagan and 2.8% of teens would claim to belong

¹² Robert Wuthnow, *The Restructuring of American Religion: Society and Faith since World War II* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1988), 51.

¹³ Scott Thumma, *What God Makes Free Is Free Indeed: Nondenominational Church Identity and Its Networks of Support*, [online] available from http://hrr.hartsem.edu/bookshelf/thumma_article5.html, accessed 12 June, 2005.

¹⁴ Jerry Adler, "In Search of the Spiritual," *Newsweek*, 5 September 2005.

¹⁵ Claude E. Payne and Hamilton Beazley, *Reclaiming the Great Commission: A Practical Model for Transforming Denominations and Congregations* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2000), 28.

¹⁶ Within conservative protestant denominations 86% of the teenagers identified with the denominational preference of their parents. That number drops to 68% of those from mainline traditions. Christian Smith and Melinda Lundquist Denton, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 36.

to more than one faith).¹⁷ Or are they? The further one examines the work of Smith and Denton, the less joyful one is likely to be. While $\frac{3}{4}$ of the teens surveyed consider themselves Christians, less than one third believe that only one religion is true. As Smith says, the majority of teens are, “dispositionally open to a multiplicity of truths, willing eclectically and selectively to match traditionally distinct religious beliefs and practices, and suspicious of commitment to a single religious congregation. They tend to eschew religious proselytizing as paternalistic and coercive.”¹⁸

In fact, only 8% of the teens surveyed would be considered highly religious; that is they “...believe in God, attend religious services weekly or more often, for whom faith is extremely important in their lives, who regularly participate in religious youth groups and who pray and read the Bible regularly.” The fact that large numbers identify themselves with the religion of their parents and the general lack of dissention on spiritual matters may not be so encouraging after all. While Smith interprets his data in a predominantly positive fashion, it would seem this is accomplished only by ignoring the implications of what teenagers are saying. Smith and Denton note that the majority hold to very open views of other religions, and interpret the low rate of teens converting to these other faiths to be an indication of the strength of their commitment to their faith. He argues that teens are “exceedingly conventional” in their religious identity, yet admits that they are also “incredibly inarticulate” about their faith.¹⁹ Not only that, Smith and

¹⁷ Smith and Lundquist Denton, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers*, 31-36.

¹⁸ Ibid., 73.

¹⁹ Ibid., 110-130.

Denton admit that the faith component of the lives of almost all the teenagers interviewed has very little to do with the way in which these teenagers live their lives.²⁰

In fact, the statistics may not indicate a high level of commitment to a particular denominational preference or even to Christianity, but rather a low tolerance for conflict. In keeping with postmodern trends, this generation seems adept at holding what appear to be conflicting opinions. For instance, George Barna says that while 62% of teens believe that the Bible is totally accurate in its teachings, less than 10% of teenagers believe in absolute truth.²¹ Barna would identify 34% of teens as born again.²² Thom Rainer on the other hand, estimates that number to be much smaller, claiming that only 4% of this generation have made a genuine commitment to Christ.²³ So what is going on? How is this conflicting information to be understood? Perhaps the following comments by George Barna would be helpful. Although somewhat lengthy, Barna's thoughts illustrate the challenge inherent in interpreting the data concerning the faith of today's young people.

"Current Attendance Is Deceiving

Perhaps the most deceptive factor is the high level of church-based involvement among today's teenagers. This study shows that teens continue to be more broadly involved in church-based activities than are adults. In a typical week, nearly six out of ten attend worship services; one out of three attend Sunday school; one out

²⁰ Ibid., 155. The entire discussion in Chapter Four should be a wake up call to those who work with young people. Yet Smith and Denton seem to ignore their own experience in talking with teenagers in favor of the more succinct statistical evidence. Today's teenagers may be a great many things, but succinct is not one of them.

²¹ This percentage ranges from 4% for those who are not identified as born again to a high of 9% for those who are. See George Barna, *Teenagers*, 2005, [online] available from <http://www.barna.org/FlexPage.aspx?Page=Topic&TopicID=37>, accessed 28 December 2005

²² Ibid.

²³ Thom S. Rainer, *The Bridger Generation: America's Second Largest Generation, What They Believe, How to Reach Them* (Nashville, Tennessee: Broadman & Holman, 1997), 169.

of three attend a youth group; and three out of ten participate in a small group, other than a Sunday school class or youth group meeting. In total, more than seven out of ten teens are engaged in some church-related effort in a typical week. That far exceeds the participation level among adults – and even among teenagers' parents!

But before these levels of involvement result in celebration, be warned about teens' plans for the future. When asked to estimate the likelihood that they will continue to participate in church life once they are living on their own, levels dip precipitously, to only about one out of every three teens. Placed in context, that stands as the lowest level of expected participation among teens recorded by Barna Research in more than a decade. If the projections pan out, this would signal a substantial decline in church attendance occurring before the close of this new decade.

What's Going On?

These statistics were collected as part of a larger study of teenagers, described in a new report by researcher George Barna, entitled "Third Millennium Teens." Among the conclusions of the report is that teenagers are a study in contradictions. One of those is their simultaneous desire to be portrayed as religious people while they invest little of themselves in true spiritual pursuit. The research discovered that religious participation by teens is often motivated by relational opportunities rather than by the promise of spiritual development. The possibility of making and retaining friendships outstrips their commitment to deepening their faith. The relative lack of interest in maintaining church ties in the future reflects their experience with churches to date. Specifically, they do not perceive churches to be particularly helpful."²⁴

If indeed Barna is correct, then both churches and denominations may find little respite from decreasing denominational loyalty. Donald E. Miller lays the blame for these trends squarely at the feet of the Boomer generation who have in turn strongly influenced the younger generation. After all, he states, "brand" loyalty has very little meaning to most boomers."²⁵ Kerby Anderson agrees. Anderson, National Director of Probe Ministries International, wrote;

²⁴ George Barna, *Teenagers Embrace Religion, but Are Not Excited About Christianity*, 2005, [online], available from <http://www.barna.org/FlexPage.aspx?Page=BarnaUpdate&BarnaUpdateID=45>, accessed 28 December 2005.

“Traditionally boomers have been samplers with little brand loyalty. They don't feel bound to the denomination of their youth and search for experiences (both spiritual and otherwise) that meet their needs. It is not uncommon for families to attend different churches each week (or on the same day) to meet their perceived spiritual needs. They aren't bashful about attending a particular church to take advantage of a special seminar or program and then picking up and moving to another church when those programs seem inviting.”²⁶

Miller continues his list of complaints concerning the legacy of the Boomer generation; “tradition is more often a negative than a positive word;” “boomers want to be involved in running and managing their own organization rather than entrusting decisions to someone at the top...” and finally, “boomers tend to be local in their interests and fail to see the value of remote denominational organizations.”²⁷ While this may be true, indeed most likely is an accurate assessment of the impact of the boomer generation, it pales in comparison to the influence which postmodern Christians will have upon the church scene in America. The rate and ease in which members of churches change church and denominational affiliation can only be described as fluid. One simple example can be seen in a survey question given to 1100 Presbyterian members nationwide in 1989. In the survey, only 30% of those surveyed agreed with the statement; “While they may have disagreements from time to time, Christians should

²⁵ For those who do market research, the trend towards weaker brand loyalty is well documented. David Wolfe of “Ageless Marketing has said, “*Weaker brand loyalty is more evidence of today's older PCG's influence on younger consumers. Despite consumer power unrivaled by any preceding generation, Gen Y'ers are not as driven by the same kind of brand label consciousness as Generation X'ers were at the same point in time. Gen Y'ers seem more like people in midlife to whom brand labels often lose something of their cache.*” David Wolfe, *The Aging Boomer Origins of Gen Y Attitudes and Behavior*, 2005, [online], available from http://agelessmarketing.typepad.com/ageless_marketing/2004/09/the_aging_boome.html, accessed 28 December 2005.

²⁶ Kerby Anderson, *Baby Boomerangs*, 2002, [online], available from <http://www.leaderu.com/orgs/probe/docs/boomer.html>, accessed 28 December 2005.

²⁷ Donald E. Miller, *Reinventing American Protestantism: Christianity in the New Millennium* (Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 1997), 17.

remain loyal to one denomination throughout their adult lives.”²⁸ While that number may be surprising to some, it is nothing compared to the response to a very similar question which this author posed to leaders within Baptist Student Ministry around the state of Texas. In that survey, only one student out of more than 200 who responded to the questionnaire indicated that a denominational loyalty should be a factor in the choice of churches.²⁹

But it is not just the lack of denominational loyalty which concerns those in positions of leadership in denominations. The role of seminaries in training future leaders for the denomination has changed drastically as well. As Waldkoenig states:

“At the beginning of the 21st century, more seminaries are training for denominations other than their own than ever before, according to the Association of Theological Schools. Only Lutheran and Episcopal schools remain predominantly homogeneous.”³⁰

Wuthnow affirms this trend, stating that over half of Presbyterian pastors are trained in seminaries of other denomination or non-denominational seminaries. This trend is exacerbated by the fact that many denominations and churches have become extremely lax in seeing the necessity of affirming denominational distinctives as necessary for employment.³¹

In fact, as Lyle Schaller says:

²⁸ Robert Wuthnow, *Christianity in the Twenty-First Century: Reflections on the Challenges Ahead* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 40.

²⁹ Nick Howard, *Survey of Student Involved in Leadership in BSM*, (Houston, Texas: unpublished raw data, 2003).

³⁰ Gilson A C Waldkoenig, "Denominations in the New Century," *Seminary Ridge Review*, (Autumn 2002) Vol. 5, no. 1: 54.

³¹ Wuthnow, *The Restructuring of American Religion: Society and Faith since World War II*, 92.

“...today the differences within a denominational family are often greater than the differences between the two denominations. One result is the Southern Baptist minister is invited to serve as the new pastor of what becomes a rapidly growing United Methodist congregation in Texas or a Presbyterian minister becomes the pastor of a United Church of Christ congregation in the Midwest or a Lutheran pastor in Indiana organizes a new independent church in Illinois or a minister from an independent megachurch becomes the new senior pastor of a denominationally affiliated congregation on the West Coast.”³²

In his book, *Discontinuity and Hope*, Schaller goes on to identify several points of discontinuity with the past, in the wider secular context, but especially within the church. These points of discontinuity range from the drastic change in the nature of women’s ministry (from being centered on world missions and the transferal of denominational identity to being centered on the personal and spiritual journeys of women in all its diversity) to a move from neighborhood churches to regional churches. In particular, this second discontinuity has had a significant impact on church life. The advent of the megachurch is only possible through the regionalization of church life. Whereas, in the 1950s, 30% of a church’s membership might come from a three to four mile radius of the church, the advent of the highway system and the push to the suburbs brought about the birth of the regional church, in which, according to Schaller, as little as 1% of the church’s membership might live within the immediate neighborhood of the church.³³ This trend has blurred the whole issue of church health and church growth in America. While the regional church, or mega-church, model may draw large numbers into its fold; given the fact that this regional church draws from a large region, perhaps ten to twenty miles, the percentage of the population involved in that church, regardless of its size may

³² Lyle E. Schaller, *A Mainline Turnaround: Strategies for Congregations and Denominations* (Nashville, Tennessee: Abingdon Press, 2005), 92.

³³ Lyle E. Schaller, *Discontinuity & Hope: Radical Change and the Path to the Future* (Nashville, Tennessee: Abingdon Press, 1999), 51-59.

be relatively small.³⁴ These mega-churches offer programs which smaller neighborhood churches simply cannot offer. In the consumer oriented society in which we live, mega-churches are the Wal-Marts of church life, pulling members from the more traditional neighborhood church. Whether or not the overall impact of the mega-church upon society is more significant than the aggregate impact of those congregations whose members have transferred to the mega-church is hotly debated. It is interesting to note that the denominational alignment of a mega-church tends to be extremely loose and of little significance to the church. Scott Thumma, who has done significant study into the mega-church phenomenon, says that most mega-churches are functionally nondenominational. As Thumma says, “For the majority of megachurches, denominational affiliation is an insignificant matter. The church itself (its size, pastor, programs, and reputation) attracts adherents, not its denominational ties.”³⁵ Ironically, these are often the very churches and pastors extolled by denominational leaders for their highly visible ministry. The net result is that the denomination has lost the support of the smaller, more denominationally aligned churches, as well as the identity which came from the proximity of these churches to the neighborhoods in which they did ministry. These points of discontinuity, as Schaller identifies them, led him to put denominations on the “Endangered Species List”:

“Unless they are able to re-earn a reputation for their capability to resource congregations effectively, hundreds of denominational boards, departments, commissions and agencies will disappear. Some will survive on a fee-for-service financial basis, but most will encounter serious problems.”³⁶

³⁴ Ibid., 61.

³⁵ Scott Thumma, *Exploring the Megachurch Phenomena: Their Characteristics and Cultural Context*, [online], available from http://hrr.hartsem.edu/bookshelf/thumma_article2.html, accessed 28 December 2005.

Robert Henderson believes this shift will mean that the focus will come back to the local church and away from a central denominational headquarters. The important thing will be what happens locally, not what is dictated by the denomination. There will be new and creative ways in which churches network together in order to accomplish mutual goals. These networks may very well cross former denominational lines as churches seek to fulfill kingdom first and foremost, rather than retain allegiance to a particular denomination.³⁷ This certainly seems to be the case when one examines such networks as the Willow Creek Association, which claims more than 10,500 member churches from 90 denominations and 35 countries. Member churches pay \$249 a year for the privilege of belonging to the WCA, which brings with it the ability to attend conferences and buy materials at discounted rates, as well as receive a monthly magazine and audio tape.³⁸ Purpose Driven, a network of churches using the Purpose Driven Church model claims that over 300,000 churches in 22 languages of all different denominational stripes have been trained in the Purpose Driven model.³⁹ Neither of these networks would claim to supplant the ministry or connection which churches have within their denominational entities. In fact, the Purpose Driven Network originated with Saddleback Church, and its pastor, Rick Warren. Saddleback is a Southern Baptist church and Warren has often been recognized within the convention for his model of

³⁶ Schaller, *Discontinuity & Hope: Radical Change and the Path to the Future*, 69.

³⁷ Robert T. Henderson, *Blueprint 21: Presbyterians in the Post-Denominational Era* (Franklin, Tennessee: Providence House Publishers, 2000), 11.

³⁸ Jim Mellado, *Willow Creek Association: Who We Are*, 2005, [online], available from http://www.willowcreek.com/wca_info/, accessed 29 April 2005.

³⁹ Doug Slaybaugh, *Purpose Driven: Who We Are*, 2005, [online], available from <http://www.purposedriven.com/en-US/AboutUs/WhoWeAre/Welcome.htm>, accessed 29 April 2005.

church life. Yet for many churches, these kinds of networks are clearly more important than the connection to the denomination. In fact, the self-identifying characteristic of these churches is often its tie to the network. None of this is meant to imply that denominations will simply disappear, but rather that it is possible that they will become “increasingly marginalized, archaic, ineffective and ignored.”⁴⁰

All of this might lead the reader to the conclusion that postmodern society is not a very welcoming place to those with an interest in spiritual issues. Some have concluded that postmodernism is simply secularism and consumerism at its very height. This is the viewpoint of Andy Crouch, who calls the mega-church the epitome of the postmodern church with its “Mall of America” feel and consumer driven approach.⁴¹ Not too long ago, the fear was that the rapid secularization of the campus would eventually lead to a totally secularized world in which spiritual matters played a very small, if any, role. As far back as the mid 1960s, observers of the university campus spoke of the emergence of the “fourth man”, the man who was post-religious and post-moral and, in all likelihood, agnostic.⁴² In an essay which could have just as easily been written recently, rather than 40 years ago, Richard Broholm declares,

“To describe the student of the mid-twentieth century as also being postmoral is not to suggest that he does not have ethical and moral convictions, but rather to point up the fact that his ethics and morals are privatized: Each man to his own code. All is relative he believes; what is seen as good for one individual may not

⁴⁰ Henderson, 79.

⁴¹ Leonard I. Sweet, ed., *The Church in Emerging Culture: Five Perspectives* (El Cajon, California: Youth Specialties, 2003), 73.

⁴² The “fourth man” is a title used by Father Romano Guardini in his penetrating book, *End of the Modern Age*. Guardini says that the new era which was emerging (this book was written shortly after World War II) was as different from the modern age as the modern age was from the middle ages. In many ways, Guardini was prophetic in much of his perspective on the emerging culture.

at all be good for another. Today's student is reluctant to be caught 'with his absolutes showing.'"⁴³

Surprisingly, while many aspects of the postmodern age do indeed conflict with traditional Christian viewpoints, this should not be taken to mean that postmodern man has lost his interest in the spiritual. In fact, a recent survey of more than 100,000 college freshmen found that most (four out of five) were not only interested in spiritual things, but were also looking for meaning in life. These freshmen had "high expectations that their colleges would help them develop spiritually."⁴⁴ As might be expected, these freshmen did not anticipate that church membership or traditional Christianity would help them in their spiritual search, looking rather to an amalgamation of beliefs forged from many different religions, as well as their own ideas.⁴⁵ This trend brings with it a great many challenges, but also huge opportunities. The real question is whether the church is prepared for the challenge. In addition, the church is facing increased pressure from believers who understand themselves to be "postmodern Christians", influenced by the surrounding culture, but more importantly, deliberately choosing to interpret their faith through different cultural lenses than those of previous generations. These believers would certainly not feel that being "postmodern" was synonymous with being non-Christian, even though many who reject postmodernism completely would make this stereotype.⁴⁶

⁴³ George L. Earnshaw, *The Campus Ministry* (Valley Forge, Pennsylvania: Judson Press, 1964), 259.

⁴⁴ *Surveys: Young Adults Searching Spiritually*, 2005, [online], available from <http://www.cnn.com/2005/EDUCATION/04/13/young.adults.religion.ap/index.html>, accessed 1 May 2005.

⁴⁵ *Ibid. Surveys: Young Adults Searching Spiritually*.

⁴⁶ Brian McLaren, *An Open Letter to Chuck Colson*, 2003, [online], available from <http://emergentvillage.com/>, accessed 1. May 2005.

Indeed, many Christians today, both clergy and non-clergy alike, reject much of the way in which church has operated in the modern age. Obviously, this is not the same as having rejected faith, but rather a rejection of the way in which the church subjected itself to the rules of modernity with its emphasis on reason and science as the test in “proving” faith.⁴⁷ Carl Raschke has harsh words for those who imposed the requirement that faith be rational and provable via evidence which the scientific mind might find tangible enough to believe. In his book, *The Next Reformation*, Raschke argues that, “The philosophical quest for unfailing presuppositions is not Christian, it is *outright paganism* (emphasis his)”.⁴⁸

As has already been stated, not everyone feels comfortable with this shift. Peter Kreeft, in his book *Ecumenical Jihad*, makes the case that western cultural is drifting away from a moral center and that this drift will cause the downfall of western civilization. He calls for all denominations and, indeed, religions to come together in a struggle to fight for moral absolutes. Kreeft feels that postmodernism is nothing which Christians could possibly welcome and, in fact, is responsible for the destruction of western society. He states:

“Modern man is - by his own admission – in process, changing..... I think modern man is becoming reptilian. Three distinctive features of reptiles are: (1) they devour their young; (2) they are cold-blooded; and (3) they conform their bodily temperature to their environment. Three features of modern secularists are: (1) they kill their unborn children; (2) they judge the warm-blooded to be “fanatics” (for 98.6 seems like a high fever to the cold-blooded); and (3) they have nothing but their ever-changing society to conform to; they are social relativists with no transcendent absolutes.”⁴⁹

⁴⁷ Robert Webber, *The Younger Evangelicals: Facing the Challenges of the New World* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Books, 2002), 56.

⁴⁸ Carl A. Raschke, *The Next Reformation: Why Evangelicals Must Embrace Postmodernity* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2004), 113.

Others, like Andy Crouch, simply refuse to believe that modernity has ended. He sees evidence of modernity all around him and comes to the conclusion that, “It’s simply not true that our culture has somehow left modernity behind, even in the way you can leave downtown Orlando behind but still have miles to go within its limits.”⁵⁰ Instead, Crouch and others see a move to hypermodernity, marked by pluralism, a loss of morality, and consumerism in its extreme forms. Postmodernity then is not truly “post” anything, it is, rather, a development within modernity. It is, “the way that modernity... spends its cash.”⁵¹

But while these voices can still be heard, there is an increasing conviction that, for better or worse, we have crossed into a new epoch of western civilization, that epoch most often identified as postmodern. As Albert Borgmann puts it: “An epoch approaches its end when its foundational conviction begins to weaken and no longer inspires enthusiasm among its advocates.”⁵² Borgmann goes on to say that modernity fits this definition in all three of its primary defining elements; realism, universalism, and individualism. It is this shift away from the foundationalism which these three categories represent which indicates to most observers that the shift has already taken place and is irrevocable. Whether we like it or agree with it, we are increasingly living in a postmodern world.

⁴⁹ Peter Kreeft, *Ecumenical Jihad: Ecumenism and the Culture War* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1996), 57.

⁵⁰ Sweet, ed, *The Church in Emerging Culture: Five Perspectives*, 66.

⁵¹ Ibid., 71.

⁵² Albert Borgmann, *Crossing the Postmodern Divide* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 48.

What will be the results of this shift, especially for denominations? Although we now see through a glass darkly, certain things are becoming clear. The first change is being felt on the seminary campus. Missing are the throngs of young “preacher boys” who desire to become pastors of local churches. Instead, many recent college graduates are bypassing the seminary route altogether to find alternate ways of being involved in missions and ministry. The official recognition and sanction of the denomination is simply no longer a major factor in their decision, rather the primary focus is the opportunity to be involved in ministry. Barbara Wheeler, president of Auburn Theological Seminary and director of Auburn's Center for the Study of Theological Education, noted in an article written in 2001 for “Christian Century” that the majority of seminary students today did not come up through the “ranks” as was the case for earlier generations of seminary students. Rather, those students who do make their way into seminary degree programs are increasingly second career students, moving to attain a seminary education only after years of involvement in congregational life. More than half have changed denominations before coming to seminary and therefore know little of denominational practices and history.⁵³ Lyle Schaller agrees, and adds that many of these second career students are no longer the highly motivated, successful businessmen and women who have felt God’s calling in their lives, but rather those who are seeking direction. He quotes the president of one seminary who declared;

“Thirty years ago our second-career students were drawn largely from men who gave up promising careers to enter the ministry. Today most of our second-career students – and we have a lot more of them than we had thirty years ago – are either women who have failed in marriage or men who have failed in business.”⁵⁴

⁵³ Barbara G. Wheeler, “Fit for Ministry?” *Christian Century*, April 11, 2001, 17.

⁵⁴ Lyle E. Schaller, *21 Bridges to the 21st Century: Ministry for the Third Millennium* (Nashville, Tennessee: Abingdon Press, 1994), 121.

Implicit in these changes is the recognition that youth and college ministries which in years past funneled students into the seminaries are no longer having that kind of impact.⁵⁵ As Schaller explains it, Sunday Schools, youth and college ministries, as well as local pastors served as kinds of “farm clubs” for denominational seminaries. These entities would encounter the committed student and challenge them to explore seminary as a possibility for vocational calling. In these instances, “seminary” almost always meant the denominationally affiliated seminary. Today, these “farm schools” simply do not function in the same way. Of the few young people who see seminary as an option, the possibilities have increased dramatically. Now the denominational seminary is not competing simply with other denominational schools, but rather with a wide variety of non- and trans-denominational seminaries, local Bible schools (often headed by the gifted pastors who earlier encouraged their students to attend the denominational seminary), and a host of other training institutions and organizations.⁵⁶

Not only that, but of the younger students who do attend seminary, less than 30% plan on being involved in congregational ministry.⁵⁷ Clearly, for younger evangelical Christians, seminary as an appropriate way to prepare for ministry holds little attraction. In fact, ministry itself, at least the traditional pastoral, congregationally based ministries, are not likely to draw the interest and passion of younger Christians seeking to fulfill God’s call on their lives. They are more likely to be attracted to the freedom and challenge of some type of missions ministry or church plant, which they perceive to be

⁵⁵ Wheeler, 17.

⁵⁶ Schaller, *21 Bridges to the 21st Century*, 124.

⁵⁷ Wheeler, 17.

less likely to pull them into the fray of denominational infighting or politics. Although some evangelical Christian denominations, Baptists included, have yet to feel the crunch of clergy shortages that many mainline denominations have suffered, it is only a matter of time before every denomination must come to terms with decreasing numbers of available pastoral candidates.

The situation becomes even more ominous for denominations when the logical consequences of these changes are considered. Consider the fact that many of those who do attend seminary come from backgrounds which are different from the denomination in which they seek ordination. Add to the equation the fact that many church members also come from a denominational background other than the church which they currently attend, and it is easy to understand why denominational loyalty is strained.⁵⁸ Since many of these seminary graduates are also more likely to be older, second-career pastors and leaders, they will often approach the ministry with a more modern understanding of Christianity, and may well find it difficult to understand postmodernity. It is also questionable that they will be leaders who will be effective in calling the church to minister effectively in a postmodern society.

Second, there is a strong movement afoot to celebrate those churches, especially new church starts, which downplay their denominational identity. For example, Chris Seay, now Pastor of Ecclesia, a new baptistic church start in the Montrose section of Houston, recently shared that he understood Ecclesia to be “multi-denominational.”⁵⁹ By

⁵⁸ Schaller, *Discontinuity & Hope: Radical Change and the Path to the Future*, 20.

⁵⁹ I use the term “baptistic” intentionally in this context. Although Ecclesia is a Baptist church plant and supported by the Baptist General Convention of Texas, it would not be entirely accurate to call the church a Baptist church. As Chris says, the church is multi-denominational, working across denominational lines. This makes an accurate identification difficult. In this case, it must suffice that the

way of explanation, Seay stated that Ecclesia was open to ways to work together with different denominations in differing ways, while retaining their baptistic identity.⁶⁰ Another church plant, this one in Portland, Oregon, is supported by the Southern Baptist North American Mission Board, yet it would be impossible for anyone looking through the church's publicity, church materials, or from visiting the worship services to know that this is indeed a Baptist church. In fact, church leaders make clear to the congregation that the connection to a "group which supports the church plant" is a marriage of convenience, to be severed should the denomination become too obtrusive.

On the surface, one might think that a loosening of the purse strings for creative church plants and for groups which seek to be salt and light in a culture totally unconcerned, if not antithetical, to denominationalism would be a sign of progress. Rather, it is more likely a sign of desperation and a lack of understanding. While there is tremendous cause for celebration in churches finding ways of reaching into the culture and being the light of the gospel in that setting, it is foolishness on the part of the denomination to think that in supporting these kinds of church plants and ministries that they have done something which will either insure their future (i.e., since we helped get them started we can rest assured of their continued support), or somehow position them for the future. Quite the contrary, although these churches are often very thankful for the support and encouragement of denominational entities, they see themselves as kingdom churches first and foremost, that is, they feel that faithfulness to the denomination should always take a back seat to faithfulness to the Kingdom of God. This means this type of

church is "baptistic." In the future, denominations will be faced with the choice of cooperating with such churches or requiring absolute loyalty, something few in the emerging churches will be willing to do.

⁶⁰ Chris Seay shared these thoughts as a part of a panel of church planters discussing the Emerging Church movement at the Union Baptist Association Quarterly meeting on 6 April 2004.

church will often make decisions about cooperation and networking with other churches and believers based upon how they feel such alliances will further the Kingdom, rather than upon questions of denominational alignment. These churches might well align themselves with churches of other denominations for community projects which are of importance to the church. They may belong to networks, such as the Willow Creek Network or Purpose Driven, which support their ideas about church health or evangelism. These churches will not be dependent upon denominational press for material selection, but will seek out the material which they feel best expresses the teaching of the church, regardless of the publisher. Unless denominational bodies can change the current perception, so that they are seen first and foremost as concerned about the Kingdom of God, rather than simply supporting and propagating the denomination, they will find little support from the churches of the kind being planted and celebrated.

Michael Frost and Alan Hirsch make the very clear assertion in *The Shaping of Things to Come* that Christendom as a western institution is dead, a thing of the past.⁶¹ By this is meant that Christianity no longer holds the “honored place” in western society that it once held, that Christianity no longer informs western culture as it once did and that the rules of social and interpersonal interaction are no longer marked by a dependence upon Christian ethics and social mores. While that contention, as well as the question of whether Christendom’s passing should be seen as positive or negative, is hotly debated in Christian circles in the west, it is clear that we may no longer assume that the form of Christianity best known in modernity will continue to be effective. The domination of denominations upon Christianity in the west seems to be highly in

⁶¹ Michael Frost and Alan Hirsch, *The Shaping of Things to Come: Innovation and Mission for the 21st-Century Church* (Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers, 2003), 8.

question. Unless they prove to be capable of asserting new leadership in the broader kingdom perspective, it is unlikely that denominational bodies will gain a hearing within their own churches, much less within the greater Christian community or the world as a whole. Denominational bodies, and by extension, their ministries, run the risk of becoming marginalized and irrelevant, or, perhaps, even ceasing to exist as Christianity in the west finds new ways of expressing itself and its allegiance to God and His Kingdom.

Chapter Six

The Changing Face of Southern Baptists

In 2000 there were approximately 281 million people living in the United States. The largest religious body in the country is the Roman Catholic Church, with approximately 62 million members. The second largest is the Southern Baptist Convention, with approximately 16 million members.¹

There is nothing magical about being large. Although size offers rather unique opportunities and resources, it also means that small problems may be more easily buried, until they are large problems, in which case, when they come to light, are truly difficult to manage.

Baptists certainly did not start out large. In fact, early Baptists were simply a splinter group off the somewhat larger Separatist Movement within the Church of England. One of the early leaders of Baptists was John Smyth, a teacher at Cambridge. Smyth, along with another early Baptist leader, Thomas Helwys, felt that the Puritan church was not moving quickly enough in pushing for reforms within the state Anglican Church of England. Because of this, they joined with others who “separated” themselves from fellowship with the Church of England. While in this fellowship of Separatists, Smyth and Helwys were introduced to three beliefs which have helped shaped Baptist life for the past four hundred years. The first conviction was that the Bible and not creeds or traditions should be the final word on issues of faith. Secondly, they were convinced that the church should be composed exclusively of believers. It was the implementation of this belief which would eventually lead Smyth and Helwys to form the first Baptist

¹ Fisher Humphreys, *The Way We Were: How Southern Baptist Theology Has Changed and What It Means to Us All* (Macon, Georgia: Smyth & Helwys Publishers, 2002), 1.

church, based on the baptism of believers, rather than on recognition of infant baptism. Finally, there was a strong commitment that the church should be governed by the local body of believers, rather than by a church hierarchy.²

Eventually Smyth and Helwys fled to the Netherlands to escape persecution in England. In 1609 in Amsterdam, Smyth performed “a radical and scandalous act” by baptizing himself by pouring water over his own head. He then baptized Helwys and the remaining members of this new congregation, thus instituting the first Baptist church of which we have record. This early group of Baptists was Arminian in their theology and thus became known as “General Baptists” (based on a belief in a general atonement). In 1611, Helwys led a group of these early Baptists back to England and by 1650 over 40 Baptist churches had been planted on English soil. Even small groups encounter controversy, however, and, in true Baptist fashion, by 1638 a second group of Baptists had emerged; this group identified as “Particular Baptists” because they followed more closely the teachings of John Calvin. These Particular Baptists differentiated themselves from General Baptists not only in their theology, but also in their practice of baptism. While General Baptists believed in believer’s baptism, the mode was less important. But for Particular Baptists, the mode was almost as important as the act itself and since the New Testament word for baptism (βαπτίζω) implied immersion in water, there could be no other “correct” mode.³

Baptists in England continued to suffer persecution and when word came of religious freedom in the New World, it was attractive to those who shared the same

² Walter B. Shurden, *Turning Points in Baptist History*, 2001, [online], available from <http://www.baptisthistory.org/turningpoints.htm>, accessed 6 May 2005.

³ *Ibid.*, *Turning Points in Baptist History*.

convictions of early Baptists. Interestingly, it was in this context of freedom that early Baptists took their first steps towards cooperation, voluntarily sacrificing something of their autonomy for the cause of Christ. The first Baptist Association was formed in 1707 in Philadelphia and related to churches all across the new colonies. An interesting side note is that the earliest Black Baptist Church was formed in 1773 in Silver Bluff, South Carolina. The pastor of the church was George Lisle, a freed slave. Later, Lisle would leave for Jamaica as a missionary, becoming the first known Baptist missionary.⁴

While the New World offered the hope of freedom from persecution which they had experienced on the continent, that hope often met with the reality of continued harassment as Baptists continued to organize and to struggle for religious freedom in the colonies. One result of the continued struggle with religious liberty was that Baptists were often among those who pushed forward the frontiers of the fledgling nation, looking always for those places where they could worship in peace. Generally, there was a fear of organization, fearing that Baptist churches might go the way of the state churches of Europe which were so well known in those days. For these reasons not only were Baptist churches slow to organize but the basic unit of organization was first and foremost the local church, which was strongly independent of any type of association or denominational body. It was primarily for the cause of missions that Baptist churches organized at all, organizing first in “Associations” (such as the Philadelphia Association) primarily as a way of cooperating together to plant churches.

This interest in missionary causes was brought a step further in 1812 when Adoniram Judson and Luther Rice, who were serving as missionaries of the

⁴ E. Eugene Greer, Jr., ed., *Baptists: History, Distinctives, Relationships* (Dallas: Baptist General Convention of Texas Church Services Division, 1996), 2-6.

Congregationalists, became convinced of Baptist views. These missionaries then returned to America in order to convince Baptists of the need to support the cause of missions. So it was that in 1814, Luther Rice led Baptists to form the first national Baptist body, the General Missionary Convention for the Baptist Denomination in the United States (also called the Triennial Convention because of the fact that it met once every three years).⁵ This body was formed for the sole purpose of promoting missions, but eventually became involved in other aspects of church life. This change in the mission of the convention led some to fear that the end result would be a more centralized denominationalism than Baptists preferred. The concern was so pronounced that in 1826, the denomination dropped all ministries from the convention with the exception of missions efforts. Other groups were left to promote themselves in the churches, rather than through a centralized organization.

Though there were many struggles (and continued divisions) along the way as Baptists sought to find their identity, it was the issue of slavery which finally drove a wedge between Baptists in the north and the south. As much of the north became more sensitive to the slavery issue, those in the south, including those in the churches, defended the right to own slaves. Finally, on May 8, 1845, some 293 leaders from southern states gathered at the First Baptist Church of Augusta, Georgia and came to the conclusion that it would be best for the work of Baptists if the southern states were to separate themselves from their Baptist brothers in the northern states. So it was that the Southern Baptist Convention was born.⁶ From the outset, the SBC looked much more

⁵ E. Eugene Greer, ed., 8.

⁶ Robert A. Baker, *Southern Baptist Beginnings*, 1979, [online], available from <http://www.baptisthistory.org/sbaptistbeginnings.htm>, accessed 6 May 2005.

like the early Triennial Convention, in which many aspects of the church were organized through a cooperative effort of the convention churches, rather than through societies which would raise their support independently. Missions work, both foreign and domestic, was included, but also seminaries, ministry to women, and the publication of Christian materials were all a part of the new organization.⁷

From the time in which Smyth and Helwys moved away from the already separatist Puritans, Baptists have often parted ways with those with whom they have disagreed. At times these divisions have been linked to theological issues and trends, at other times it was question of missiology, and, sadly, at times simply personal disagreements between leaders. Regardless, the result of this tendency to split and separate has resulted in a large number of groups (David Barrett estimates that number to be 321 worldwide) which use the name Baptist and yet are separate denominational entities.⁸ Together these 321 Baptist bodies comprise a membership of more than 43 million members in over 162,000 churches in more than 200 countries worldwide, making Baptists the largest segment of Protestant Christianity.⁹

Walter Shurden says that Baptists have always been diverse and “express themselves in such a variety of ways that many who claim the Baptist name will not claim others who claim the very same name!”¹⁰ In many ways, Baptists are similar to other conservative Protestant denominations. As with other denominations, Baptists hold

⁷ E. Eugene Greer, ed., 13.

⁸ Eric Svendsen, *30,000 Protestant Denominations?*, 2002, [online], available from <http://www.ntrmin.org/30000denominations.htm>, accessed 7 May 2005.

⁹ *Baptists*, 2005, [online], available from http://encarta.msn.com/encyclopedia_761559750/Baptists.html#endads, accessed 7 May 2005.

¹⁰ Shurden, *Turning Points in Baptist History*.

to a strong commitment to the biblical witness. As Bert Dominy has said, “Baptists have often been called ‘a people of the Book.’ This is because that the authority for what they believe and practice should be the Bible.”¹¹ Further, Baptists are Trinitarian Christians who hold to the deity of Jesus Christ and of His saving work on the cross. As Dominy states, “The appropriation of salvation by human beings is through repentance and faith.”¹² It is, however, at the point of their understanding of the church in which Baptists have a somewhat unique perspective within Protestant Christianity.

From the outset, Baptists have believed that the New Testament teaching was that the church consisted of believers only. Continuing the legacy of Smyth and Helwys, Baptists generally reject the baptism of infants as no real baptism at all. Believer’s baptism by immersion is the doorway through which membership of the church was opened.¹³ Not only was the church to be made up of believers, but the body of Christ was a body of priests, that is, Baptists have emphasized what they call the priesthood of each believer. As Dominy points out, this priesthood brings with it both privilege and responsibility. We have the privilege of going directly to God without the need of any person who stands as an intermediary. We have the right to interpret scripture, even to the point of rejecting an “authorized” interpretation of any church or denominational body and we have the privilege of a unique calling and gifting for ministry. It is at this point that the responsibilities become clear. Each believer is gifted for service and carries the responsibility of being “priests to others”, that is being called to witness and serve in the Father’s name. At the same time, as His priests we are called to make sacrifices; not

¹¹ E. Eugene Greer, ed., 28.

¹² Ibid., 32.

¹³ Shurden, *Turning Points in Baptist History*.

the sacrifices of old, but the sacrifice of worship, the sacrifice of stewardship, and the sacrifice of service.¹⁴

Perhaps this helps us understand why Baptists have emphasized the local congregation over any regional or national judiciary. It is at the local level that these laity/priests are involved. Decisions made by denominational or judiciary bodies are not binding upon the local church since it is from the local church that the denomination springs and not the reverse. It is also a clue as to why Baptists have chosen a congregational form of government for their churches, allowing each baptized member to vote on the direction of the church.¹⁵ It also helps us understand why the potential for division and separation has been so strong. As D.L. Lowrie has pointed out;

“Baptist polity has not prevented them from creating strong denominational entities to which the churches have given much loyalty. Rather, the churches have chosen to create the denominational entities in order to assist local churches in their attempts to carry out the Great Commission. The churches pre-date the denomination and thus the denomination serves the churches rather than the churches serving the denomination.”¹⁶

In those situations in which the churches no longer feel the denomination represents or adequately resources the purpose of the local church, there has been a split, resulting in the numerous expressions of Baptist life. It is then, at this point, in which a tension grows for those who work within the context of the denomination.

At the same time, it should not surprise us that entities and institutions formed by denominational bodies seeking to serve the needs of the churches nonetheless develop a certain independence and “will to live.” These institutions often understand themselves

¹⁴ E. Eugene Greer, ed., 32-33.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid., 57.

not only as ministries of the congregations, but also as serving the function of preserving denominational identity and doing the ministry of the church in the world. As denominationalism continues to play a diminishing role in the life of the local church the question will be whether these institutions will continue to exist, at least as they have in the past.

Two such institutions; denominational universities / schools and denominational student ministry have played significant roles in the shaping of the denomination, yet face a somewhat uncertain future. These institutions serve as illustrations of the significant changes taking place at every level of Southern Baptist denominational life. While, as we have seen, denominational student ministry is a relatively new institution, denominational schools have long played a significant role. As with most denominations, Baptists initially began their schools of higher education to train Baptist ministers. The first Baptist school in America, the College of Rhode Island, was founded in 1764.¹⁷ Over the next hundred years, a large number of educational institutions were founded across the south. These schools not only served to train young Baptist leaders, but were a source of connection for other Baptist institutions and programs. Most denominational leaders came from within these institutions.¹⁸ In terms of enrollment and financial support, these universities grew tremendously between the years 1960 and 1990, when their student populations grow from 72,000 to over 230,000. Their endowments and real property expanded accordingly, going from \$349,055,000 to \$3,611,557,000.¹⁹ Yet in some ways,

¹⁷ Richard T. Hughes and William B. Adrian, eds., *Models for Christian Higher Education: Strategies for Survival and Success in the Twenty-First Century* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: W.B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1997), 371.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 381.

especially in the past two decades, this growth has also been accompanied by a marked loss of denominational identity. As Bill Leonard says, “Such regional and ecclesiastical intactness is fast disappearing at every level of denominational life.”²⁰ While some universities have chosen to retain their denominational ties, many have weakened or severed their relationships with denominational bodies, even those schools which retain a Baptist character.

The cause of this shift is certainly multifaceted and full of nuance, much of which we simply cannot address in this context.²¹ Without a doubt, much of the reason for this change has to do with denominational politics, which have been especially difficult over the past couple of decades. “Baptists are an unruly lot,” notes Bill Leonard.²² Anyone watching Baptist life over the past 25 years would certainly have to agree as Southern Baptists have dealt with what has simply become known in Baptist circles as “the Controversy.”²³ As the “conservative resurgence,” as some have chosen to call it, gathered momentum in the 1980s and 90s, it was obvious to informed observers that the goal was to control the institutions and thereby, the future of the denomination.²⁴ Because of Baptist polity, in which there is no hierarchy but rather multiple layers of

¹⁹ James Tunstead Burtchaell, *The Dying of the Light: The Disengagement of Colleges and Universities from Their Christian Churches* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1998), 391.

²⁰ Hughes and Adrian, eds., 381.

²¹ For anyone wishing to explore changes within the Southern Baptist Convention, especially in relation to the “Controversy”, I recommend a reading of Nancy Ammerman’s *Baptist Battles: Social Change and Religious Conflict in the Southern Baptist Convention* as well as her excellent treatment of Southern Baptist life in *Southern Baptists Observed: Multiple Perspectives on a Changing Denomination*.

²² Hughes and Adrian, eds., 367.

²³ Nancy Tatom Ammerman, ed., *Southern Baptists Observed: Multiple Perspectives on a Changing Denomination*, (Knoxville, Tennessee: University of Tennessee Press, 1993), 1.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 57.

cooperation, the move to control national boards and agencies influenced the seminaries and their teaching, but did not hold sway over the governing boards of the colleges and universities. That needed to be accomplished from within the state conventions.²⁵ As the boards and regents of Baptist colleges across the south saw state convention after state convention come under the influence of the ultra conservatives (those opposed to them would identify them as fundamentalists), there was a swift move on the part of many schools to independently elect their own boards, with little input from the state conventions.

The result has been that many schools now have only a nominal association with denominational bodies. Increasingly students do not choose Baptist schools because of their denominational relationship, but rather because of their reputation, either academically or spiritually.²⁶ In other cases, allegiances vary by the alignment of a particular school with one or the other denominational body. In this case, pastors may recommend schools based not upon the reputation of the school, but rather on the political alignment which the school has chosen. This is certainly the case in Texas. Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary is located in Fort Worth, Texas and for many years was the flagship seminary in Southern Baptist life. In the past decade, universities funded through the Baptist General Convention of Texas have initiated seminary programs of their own, to the point that students wishing to attend a Baptist seminary in Texas now have at least four choices, each with their own emphasis and political

²⁵ Ammerman, ed., *Southern Baptists Observed: Multiple Perspectives on a Changing Denomination*, 223.

²⁶ Students may be drawn to a particular university because of its reputation as a place with a clear Christian commitment and standards, yet this is not necessarily equated with its identity as a Baptist school. This translates as increasing numbers of students from non-Baptist backgrounds attending Baptist schools.

“minefield” which must be navigated by potential students. As one student nearing graduation at a state university recently expressed it, “I have already been told by my pastor that if I want a job in most Baptist churches I better choose Southwestern (Baptist Theological Seminary), but that if I want to look at a non-Baptist church, then I might want to look at Truett (Baptist Seminary, located at Baylor University), because non-Baptist churches won’t consider a Southwestern grad.” This student went on to express his frustration and to note, “You know, I am not interested in the least in politics. I just want to serve the Lord. I am thinking seriously about just going to some non-Baptist seminary and forgetting about Baptist churches.”²⁷ This student’s feelings are heard increasingly as students search for the next step in ministry. For most students the politicization of denominational life is extremely distasteful and encounters with church leaders who challenge them to “pick a side” simply reinforces the perceptions they already have about denominational life in general.

The question which arises, especially for those outside of Baptist life, concerns the root cause of the controversy and the division among Southern Baptists. Again, the causes are numerous and much too complex for a complete discussion in this context. Yet the changes which have directly or indirectly been brought about by the controversy make it too important to leave unaddressed. Undeniably, there is a theological element to the controversy. In the 1960s and 70s there was an increasing number of Baptist theologians who were open to using new tools for understanding the scriptures. These were not “wild-eyed liberals” who would deny the virgin birth or the resurrection of Christ, but rather conservative scholars who were, nonetheless, open to new ways of

²⁷ Personal conversation with a student during the fall 2005 FOCUS Conference, 2 September 2005.

thinking about the biblical narrative, especially the book of Genesis. When, in 1961, Ralph Elliott, a professor of Old Testament at Midwestern Theological Seminary, published a book on the book of Genesis in which he openly stated that naming the author or dating the book was impossible due to the fact that it had such a long oral tradition before it was committed to writing, Southern Baptists were up in arms.²⁸ This was just the kind of liberalism that the more conservative pastors and lay people in the convention feared. Eventually, Elliott was fired from his job at Midwestern for refusing to withdraw the book from publication. Conservatives had won their first victory. But, as Nancy Ammerman states, "... in other ways, they felt defeated. In a direct confrontation with heresy, the Convention had taken a backdoor route toward resolution."²⁹

And so it was that the theological line-drawing began, with ultra-conservatives on one side and moderate-conservatives on the other. But although there were certainly theological issues dividing the differing camps, those differences were often difficult for the outsider to decipher. One such issue was and continues to be the issue of inerrancy. Over the past thirty years, the word inerrancy has become synonymous with orthodoxy in Southern Baptist circles. Only those who were determined to run counter to the ultra-conservative direction of the convention chose not to use the term to describe their understanding of the inspiration of scripture. But this should not be taken to mean that there was unilateral agreement on what the word actually means. In fact, there are widely divergent opinions within Southern Baptist life when it comes to the issue of inerrancy.

²⁸ Nancy Tatom Ammerman, *Baptist Battles: Social Change and Religious Conflict in the Southern Baptist Convention* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1990), 64.

²⁹ Ibid.

Although 40% of the Baptist pastors surveyed by Ammerman affirmed a literal interpretation of scripture, almost the same number left room for non-literal interpretations.³⁰ Ironically, although the word inerrancy has been used by many as a litmus test of orthodoxy, ultra-conservatives themselves understand how broadly the word is used. In fact, in the crafting of the newest Baptist statement of faith, the *Baptist Faith and Message* (2001), the word inerrancy was not used. One must suppose that the reason for this blatant omission is the lack of a satisfactory definition.

In many ways, I believe that the strong reaction of the ultra-conservatives is simply another way of dealing with the encroachment of postmodern thought into the life of the church. There is a very natural fear and reaction to the “threat” of an increasingly pluralistic and relativistic culture, especially where that has been seen to be “invading” Baptist life. When those who were strongly rooted in the modern world saw the creeping tendrils of postmodernism allowed or even taught on Baptist schools, there was wide agreement that it must be stopped. It should not be underestimated how strongly tied the ultra-conservative movement is tied to the tenets of modernism. As W.A. Criswell, a key figure in the ultra-conservative camp, stated in a sermon at the Pastor’s Conference in 1988, to allow for the possibility of scientific error in scripture is to not believe the Bible at all.

“My brother, if the Bible is not also scientifically accurate, it is not, at least to me, the Word of God. I have a very plain reason for that. The Lord God who made this world and all the scientific marvels which we are now discovering in it – that same Lord God knew all these things from the beginning.... Now if the Bible is the Word of God, and if God inspired it, then it cannot contain any scientific mistakes because God knew every truth and fact of science from the beginning.”³¹

³⁰ Ammerman, *Baptist Battles: Social Change and Religious Conflict in the Southern Baptist Convention*, 75.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 83-84.

This is a statement that is not only incomprehensible to someone in our postmodern world (including many who would identify themselves as believers), it is repulsive. The absolutism and certainty which often marks the modern way of understanding Christianity is the “Christianity” so often portrayed in secular media as dangerous, out of touch and bigoted. At the same time, those who claim the name of Christ, but whose search to follow Him with integrity have lead them to reject some of the trappings of “modern” faith, have found fellowship outside of Southern Baptist life easier than within. As we saw earlier in the quote from Chris Seay, some have found that the denomination can be a cold and often cruel place to explore faith and culture, at least if one does so with a critical eye towards the traditional, more modern way of understanding that faith.

There is no doubt that the Southern Baptist Convention is a much different denomination than when it was formed over 100 years ago. There is also no doubt that the SBC of today is far different than the convention of the 1970s. While it would be unfair to blame the controversy on some of the negative trends seen in Southern Baptist life today, these trends are no less real. In a report published by the North American Mission Board in November 1998 disturbing trends become clear. While the number of large churches (those over 2000 members) grew by 62% between 1980 and 1997, this number corresponds to a loss of churches numbering between 100 and 299 in congregants. This author suspects that this is simply a matter of sheep swapping between congregations, with the mega church drawing large numbers of people from a regional base. Unfortunately, the baptism rate per 100 resident members for these mega-churches lags behind the churches which they are replacing. Indeed, since 1980, baptisms have

continued to drop, with the largest number recorded being 412,000 in 1997, still behind the 1980 number of 430,000.³² Even more troubling is who is being baptized. As Paul R. House, the editor *The Southern Baptist Journal of Theology*, as pointed out:

...statistics compiled by the North American Mission Board of the Southern Baptist Convention reveal that as many as half of all the adults baptized in Southern Baptist churches are rebaptisms of persons already baptized by Southern Baptist pastors... Another forty percent of adults baptized are Christians from other denominations that have never been immersed... ten percent, then, of all adults baptized by Southern Baptist churches are “making first-time professions of faith.”³³

In fact, the overall number of people in our churches continues to drop. Resident membership (the number of people Baptist churches can actually find) dropped between the years of 1995 and 2000, while in 1998 the SBC experienced its first drop in actual membership in 70 years, dropping by 162,158.³⁴ Further, each Sunday less than 5 million people worship in Baptist churches across the country (46% of membership).³⁵ According to George Barna, the percentage of Americans who claimed membership in a Baptist church dropped from 10% in 1995 to only 6% by 2001.³⁶

After decades of strife and decreasing loyalty on the part of members, many churches are now deciding that being known as a Southern Baptist church is no longer to their advantage. As one pastor expressed this viewpoint, “I’m not ashamed to be a

³² Phillip P. Jones, *Analysis of Southern Baptist Churches by Size of Church* (Atlanta, Georgia: North American Mission Board, 1998), 11.

³³ Paul R. House, "Baptism, Assurance, and the Decline of Conservative Churches," *Southern Journal of Theology* 2, no. 1 (1998): 3.

³⁴ Cary McMullen, *Any Way Your Count It, Fewer Southern Baptists*, 1999, [online], available from http://www.adherents.com/largecom/baptist_fewerSBC.html, accessed 25 October 2005.

³⁵ Jones.

³⁶ George Gallup, *Gallup Polling Data on Southern Baptists*, 2001, [online], available from http://www.adherents.com/largecom/baptist_fewerSBC.html, accessed 25 October 2005.

Baptist, but a brand name can be a hindrance. Some people mistakenly associate the Baptist name with an angry, judgmental kind of fundamentalism.”³⁷

This trend of moving away from the Baptist name is only a small part of the bigger picture, a trend towards a broader, less controversial identity. Many churches, especially those pastured by younger pastors, would rather identify themselves more with the community and less with the denomination. Today names such as “Grace Community Church” or “Fellowship of Forest Creek” may well belong to the Baptist church of yesteryear. The implications of this trend in and of itself are significant. No identification automatically means fewer ties to traditional resources and avenues of ministry. Membership numbers increasingly reflect a higher percentage of people coming from non-Baptist backgrounds, in and of itself a positive trend, but a trend which reinforces an independent spirit and a lack of knowledge and understanding about denominational ministries.

It is clear that Southern Baptists, and indeed all denominational bodies, face an uncertain future. What will be the result of these changes? Where will the trends lead and in what ways should denominations and denominational ministries face these uncertain days? These questions will be dealt with in our last section.

³⁷ Susan Montoya, *Baptist Strategy: Change Church Name in Order to Attract More Members*, 1999, [online], available from http://www.adherents.com/largecom/baptist_namechangeSBC.html, accessed 25 October 2005.

PART 3: Where Do We Go From Here?

Chapter Seven

Denominational Trends and Baptist Student Ministry

Chapter Eight

The Baptist Conundrum

Chapter Nine

Models for the Future

Chapter Seven

Denominational Trends and Baptist Student Ministry

It should not surprise us that students are consistently those who have called their churches and denomination to change and renewal. In Baptist Student Ministry, students have often challenged the status quo, both locally and on a broader basis. Nancy Ammerman points out that this is not a new development. In tracing the roots of the controversy within the Southern Baptist Convention, Ammerman says;

“Other younger Baptists of the 1960s and 1970s continued to be nurtured in the commitments to progressive changes within the denomination. They made Baptist Student Union their home or found an outlet for their energies in the programs of the Home Mission Board. The BSU, a campus-based ministry of the Sunday School Board, provided the influx of baby-boom college students with a place to air their doubts and work out a faith that made sense of the intellectual and social world in which they lived. BSU students in the 1960s challenged all of the assumptions under which they had been raised, and materials and leadership from Nashville offered resources for their journey.”¹

If there has been a change in recent years in the way in which Baptist students involved in Baptist Student Ministry have dealt with dissatisfaction with their church or denomination, it is perhaps in the fact that they are no longer willing to fight for change. Rather, the approach today seems to be one of avoidance. On the part of many students, any hint of controversy or fighting is cause enough to search for a new church. There is little stomach or willingness to get into the middle of a battle, whether that battle is over worship styles or the political leanings of a church, most students would rather switch than fight.

¹ Nancy Tatom Ammerman, *Baptist Battles: Social Change and Religious Conflict in the Southern Baptist Convention* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1990), 66.

The lessons of one church are instructive. Although the church is located in an excellent location for ministry to the local college, the collegiate ministry has floundered over the years.² Time after time the church has sought to coax students into their midst, yet visiting students never seem to remain, choosing rather to visit once or twice and then move on. Although it could be argued that worship styles or the skills of the Bible teachers might be the problem, this author believes the problem is a different one. This particular church has chosen to wear the denominational battle on its collective sleeve, being rather bold in pronouncing its particular persuasion. In my opinion, this has been a significant barrier to reaching students.

Obviously, university students are not the only ones to shy away from conflict of any kind, including denominational conflict. Many churches have been quick to conclude that if they wish to keep their membership, it is best to avoid denominational politics and infighting. Still other churches react by emphasizing their denominational identity and boldly expressing their political alignment. Increasingly it seems that there is little which binds us together. Indeed all around us, the fabric which has, at the very least, made Baptists identifiable if not unified, is unraveling. From both within and without, Baptists, and churches of all denominations, are dealing with issues which threaten their identity in the postmodern world. Although we have identified these issues throughout our discussion, it might be helpful to once again highlight at least three and how they are impacting the life of the denomination to which Baptist Student Ministry relates.

² The name of the church is being withheld because of the subjective nature of the statements, which constitute opinion, rather than well documented facts.

As was discussed in the previous chapter, one of the reactions to postmodernism has been to tighten the reigns of the denomination. The conservative resurgence which has been underway since 1979 has brought about many changes, but one of the most significant is the sacrifice of historical Baptist principles for the sake of doctrinal integrity. Ironically, it is the priesthood of the believer and its byproduct, the local body of believers as the central figure of the Christian stage which has been sacrificed at the altar of doctrinal integrity. Increasingly, churches which do not tow the line theologically are being asked to leave the fellowship of the denomination (a sharp contrast from the idea that the denomination flows from the churches, rather than the other way around). In Missouri, churches which do not completely align themselves with the SBC but choose to align themselves with the newly formed Baptist General Convention of Missouri find that the SBC will no longer take their Cooperative Program contributions, nor will they be recognized as Southern Baptist churches. Such an approach not only isolates churches, it also is a radical change in understanding of what it means to be Baptist. In his 2002 book, *The Way We Were*, Fisher Humphreys comes to the conclusion that traditional Southern Baptist culture has been lost in at least four ways. Humphreys says that, "The new majority tradition will no longer include the priesthood of all believers as it did in the past." "Second, the new majority tradition will no longer include congregational decision-making under Christ's Lordship by democratic means." "Third, the new majority tradition will no longer include a vigorous commitment to the separation of church and state." "Fourth, the new majority tradition will no longer include a resistance to prescriptive creeds."³ If Humphries is correct, then the official leadership

³ Fisher Humphreys, *The Way We Were: How Southern Baptist Theology Has Changed and What It Means to Us All* (Macon, Georgia: Smyth & Helwys Pub., 2002), 140-141.

of the Southern Baptist Convention is certainly leading Baptists down a path far from traditional Baptist doctrines and polity.

On the other end of the spectrum, some have reacted to this perceived isolationism and narrow focus by asking Baptists to consider starting from scratch and taking a second look at what it means to be Baptist. One such group is headed by James McClendon, who has written a document under the title; *Re-Envisioning Baptist Identity: A Manifesto for Baptist Communities in North America*.⁴ One can hear the plea for understanding in the introduction to the *Manifesto* when McClendon writes,

“For too long Baptist theology has railed against Catholics, Anglicans, Campbellites, and Methodists, not to mention liberals, fundamentalists, pedobaptists, holy rollers, or whoever are identified as the current “bad guys” in other churches or theological camps. But Baptist theology ought not to be against the church. Baptist theology needs to be for the church and the gospel in a hostile world.”⁵

While McClendon’s impassioned plea is understandable, and in many ways desirable, there are elements of the *Manifesto* which are also distant from historic Baptist principles.⁶ In their desire to harness personal freedom to a stricter form of communal discipleship, the framers of the *Manifesto* go so far as to reject soul competency and individual interpretation of scripture. As the framers of the manifesto say;

“Two mistaken paths imperil this precious freedom in contemporary Baptist life. Down one path go those who would shackle God’s freedom to a narrow biblical interpretation and a coercive hierarchy of authority. Down the other path walk those who would sever freedom from our membership in the body of Christ and

⁴ James William McClendon, *Revisioning Baptist Identity: A Manifesto for Baptist Communities in North America*, [online], available from <http://home.sprintmail.com/~masthewitt/baptists/manifesto.html>, accessed 9 October 2004.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ This is understandable in light of McClendon’s call to a “re-envisioning” of what it means to be Baptist.

the community's legitimate authority, confusing the gift of God with notions of autonomy or libertarian theories."

"We affirm Bible study in reading communities, rather than relying on private interpretation or supposed "scientific" objectivity."

"We affirm following Jesus as a call to shared discipleship rather than invoking a theory of soul competency."⁷

It seems clear the signers of the *Manifesto* have been influenced by Stanley Hauerwas and Anabaptist theologians, and the ideas propagated by the group are a far cry from traditional Baptist understanding. As Walter Shurden put it so succinctly, "Are you serious or are you just pulling our Baptist legs?"⁸

In spite of the apparent strength of the movement towards either end of the theological spectrum, it is likely that neither the call to theological conformity nor the plea for a re-envisioning of what it means to be Baptist will prove to be the rallying point behind which a majority of Baptists will find a renewed sense of what it means to be Baptist, bringing restored vigor to the denomination. Rather, it is very likely that there will continue to be a growing theological diversity of Baptist churches and a growing loss of denominational identity as one by one our churches are filled with members from a broad range of theological backgrounds. Increasingly, churches refuse to even identify themselves as Baptist and, indeed, do what they can to obscure their Baptist heritage. In the end, it will again be the churches which make the denomination and not the other way around.

⁷ McClendon, *Revisioning Baptist Identity: A Manifesto for Baptist Communities in North America*.

⁸ Walter B. Shurden, *The Baptist Identity and the Baptist Manifesto*, 1998, [online], available from <http://www.mercer.edu/baptiststudies/addresses/Baptist%20Manifesto.htm>, accessed 9 October 2004.

As one looks to the campus, it is clear that this shift has already taken place and the implications are becoming clear. No longer do we live in a church world in which denominational identity is seen as necessary or defining in any positive sense. In interviews with groups of students around the state of Texas, all of whom were involved in leadership in Baptist Student Ministry, I found a profound lack of awareness on the part of the students about the denomination which provides the ministry of which they are a part. Most students could identify very few denominational bodies by their widely used initials (it seems that in Baptist life, most institutions are known by their initials rather than their name). The most widely known institution was the Baptist General Convention of Texas (BGCT), which was recognized by less than half the students, although these initials are present on almost all material produced by the BSM state office. From there the results get worse with not one single student able to identify CP as the Cooperative Program, the program by which cooperative ministries have been funded. Indeed, most students had no knowledge whatsoever of the Cooperative Program.⁹

Several questions must be raised by the results of this survey. What becomes of those institutions which were in many ways created to propagate denominational identity when denominational identity is no longer valued? In the case of Christian universities, it appears clear that those schools which identify themselves with a Christian, perhaps even Baptist heritage will continue to exist (at least for the foreseeable future), but, as was discussed in the previous chapter, it is far from clear what the relationship will be to any denominational body.

⁹ Nick Howard, *Survey of Student Involved in Leadership in BSM*, (Houston, Texas: unpublished raw data, 2003).

One fairly recent development has been the formation on many Baptist universities of their own seminary programs while several of the six seminaries owned and operated by the Southern Baptist Convention now offer undergraduate degrees. The partnership of working together for the sake of the denomination has been lost to competing ideologies and understandings of the mission of the school and the desired “product.” Whereas 25 years ago it was understood that Baptist colleges were a feeder program for Baptist seminaries, now many seek to retain those students in their own programs. One example of such a school is the George W. Truett Seminary located on the campus of Baylor University. In their mission statement, Truett says:

“George W. Truett Theological Seminary will equip ministers with shepherding and leadership skills which are consistent with historic Baptist commitments to a truly congregational life as reflected in church polity, the freedom of conscience, the priesthood of believers, and the spiritual giftedness of all members.”¹⁰

In their emphasis on *historic* Baptist principles (emphasis mine), seminary officials seem to desire to delineate themselves from the national Baptist seminaries they perhaps feel have left such principles behind.

Baptist Student Ministry has long been seen and understood as the compliment to the Baptist schools. Able to operate on both Baptist and non-Baptist campuses, BSM has been the ministry arm of the local church on campus. The strong evangelistic element was balanced by strong leadership development and discipleship. Whereas Baptist colleges were *tasked* with the development of leaders for the denomination, evangelism and leadership development was simply a part of the DNA for BSM, resulting in the fact that many (including this author) not only came to know Christ through the ministry of BSM, but also came to understand principles of Christian leadership and ministry through

¹⁰ *George W. Truett Seminary Web Site*, 2003, [online], available from <http://www.baylor.edu/truett/index.php?id=595>, accessed 18 December 2003.

personal involvement in BSM. Many of the current leaders in Baptist circles entered Baptist life through the doorway of BSM. Indeed, BSM has many friends on both sides of the current controversy. Although BSM is a ministry of the state convention, (for instance, in Texas BSM is a ministry of the Baptist General Convention of Texas and its churches), BSM has sought to stay above the fray, cooperating with churches on both sides of the political fence. Missions and evangelism are areas around which all Baptists seem willing and able to rally. Nonetheless, BSM has experienced its share of struggles with the changing world in which we live and minister.

Although the controversy has raged in the Southern Baptist Convention for the past 25 years, it has only been in the past few years that Baptist Student Ministry in Texas has felt a significant impact because of that controversy. With the formation in 1998 of Southern Baptists of Texas, a rival convention to the older Baptist General Convention of Texas, the controversy which had simmered on several fronts was fanned into flame. Churches left the BGCT in numbers too large to ignore and resources followed. Between the years of 1999 and 2002 giving to the BGCT dropped significantly and therefore the annual budget of Baptist Student Ministry experienced a corresponding decrease. This reduction precipitated a thorough evaluation of all that we were doing and how it was being done. Several positions were either eliminated or downsized. New programs designed to encourage higher levels of participation from local Baptist churches and associations were instituted. Simultaneously, the vision and mission of the organization were refined, bringing about a greater sense of purpose.

These changes have left BSM a much more focused and intentional organization. From the local director to the local associational director, expectations and relationships

are clearly defined. The development of a *Cooperative Covenant* with each association to which BSM relates clearly defines those expectations and relationships. At the same time, a stronger emphasis on training and mentoring is now a part of the development of directors. In the past two years, a Worker's Manual has been published internally, describing eight skill areas which each director is expected to master. This is reinforced by regular visits and mentoring of new workers by the state staff.

But Baptist Student Ministry has not only dealt with internal changes at a denominational level, the local ministry context changed drastically as well. If the church felt the impact of the cultural changes over the past decade, those who minister on local university campuses were confronted with those changes earlier and with more clarity. Gone were the days when effective evangelism meant taking tracts and visiting in the dorms. The apologetics which were taught well into the 90s became increasingly ineffective, as students simply ceased to care about "logical" arguments for faith.¹¹

Collegiate leadership expert Tim Elmore has listed 17 "Spiritual Trends and Changing Values" which he sees on the university campus today. The trends Elmore mentions directly affect the work of BSM Directors. As mentioned above, Elmore would identify the fact that there has been a shift "From reasonable Christianity to mystical spiritualism." He also mentions the transition "from ministry performance to interactive / relational ministry." No longer is ministry about the type of program offered, but about the people who are doing ministry and their ability to relate to students as individuals. This of course, has a significant impact on how reporting is done. The gauge of a significant ministry cannot be measured simply by how many people are attending an event, but by the types of interpersonal interaction taking place. For those who have long

¹¹ Curtis Chang, "The Postmodern Challenge," *The Ivy Jungle Report*, Vol. 8, (Winter 2000) 18.

been involved in this ministry, this shift is not as easy as one might initially think. Ministers of all stripes have been trained to identify success with numbers and numbers with programs. As ministry with students has become increasingly relationship oriented, it has become increasingly difficult for those involved in the ministry to identify success. Is the best evaluative tool to question the number of significant conversations taking place? Are there ways in which numbers of students involved in the program do indicate a level of effectiveness in ministry or must we totally re-evaluate all of our measures of success and evaluation? The paradox of accountability in measuring things which fundamentally cannot be measured often leaves both local director and state staff struggling with questions of how to evaluate the work being done. In particular for those who have been involved in ministry to students for many years, the shift from programmatic ministry to relational ministry is a tremendous shift, one which not every worker will be able to navigate.

But it is not just the evaluation which has changed. The training and mentoring of student workers, who are often themselves more interested in significant relationships with ministry partners, rather than ministry performance, has also changed drastically from just a few short years ago.

Elmore continues in a way which further emphasizes this shift, "From one-way to diversity; from event orientation to strategy orientation, and from structured (academic) discipleship to relational mentoring."¹²

To the casual reader, these changes may sound insignificant, but the implications are tremendous. Any one of these developments would be cause for tremendous

¹² Tim Elmore, *Spiritual Trends and Changing Values in College*, 2005, [online], available from http://www.growingleaders.com/students_article_jan05.php accessed 16 May 2005.

reevaluation of ministry, but together they represent a seismic shift in student ministry. Gone are the week long revival meetings, gone are materials which took students from “new birth” to maturity in a series of 12 week lessons. Gone are the programs which were hallmarks of a BSM ministry, programs which were consistent from year to year. Indeed, gone is the style of leadership development which relied on students to take responsibility over a particular program area and leadership meetings which consisted primarily of reports from each of the individual areas.

Obviously this list is somewhat overstated, yet there is much truth to the fact that very little which was a “given” for campus ministry ten years ago is something which may be taken for granted today. Is it any wonder that those who were involved in student ministry before 1990 have often scratched their heads in wonder over the magnitude of changes taking place on the university campus?

In addition, Elmore identifies two trends which have a direct and significant impact on the ability of BSM to identify and recruit new workers. One is the shift “From denominational loyalty to opportunistic loyalty” and the other is the move “From “tribal” education to “immigrant” education.”¹³

Concerning the shift from denomination to opportunistic loyalty Elmore says;

“While denominations were once something to be proud of and loyal to, now that loyalty must be bought by good pensions and benefits. One professor told me when he was in college, none of the ministerial students dared ask about salaries or money. Today, the first question his students ask is about which church denominations pay the best. People are pragmatists and will be loyal to the best opportunity that comes their way. They will shop for churches or schools like it was a store purchase.”¹⁴

¹³ Elmore, *Spiritual Trends and Changing Values in College*.

¹⁴ Ibid.

His insights concerning the trend from tribal to immigrant education is equally enlightening;

“People no longer learn only from their own fellowship and denomination. Students and staff will seek and find education from experts outside of their own kind, and will modify it to meet their needs. Their sources will vary, and they will travel to learn and grow from the best of teachers. Students may attend a variety of campus ministries in any given week. Courses from many schools may be on the student’s transcript before he/she is finished.”¹⁵

Gone are the days when Baptist students would become involved in BSM simply because “Baptist” was in the name or their pastor had encouraged them to participate. In a drastic change from the past, the trusted adults (such as Sunday School teachers and Pastors) in the lives of middle school and high school students might well come from a non-Baptist background and just as easily encourage those students to be involved in Intervarsity, Campus Crusade for Christ or even another denominational ministry. As for the students themselves, denominational loyalty now has little to do with choosing a place to become involved, rather it is a matter of clearly communicated vision and mission which most often draws students to be involved with a particular campus ministry.

In a survey of BSM student leaders from around the state, 38% come from a non-Baptist background, a far cry from the days not too long ago in which student leadership had to be members of Baptist churches. In addition, the majority of the students surveyed felt that denominations were unimportant. Some 20% of those surveyed indicated that those who pushed for denominational loyalty were simply pushing their own agendas, whereas more than a third of those who responded indicated that the main thing was to look for where God was at work, rather than look for any particular denominational label.

¹⁵ Elmore, *Spiritual Trends and Changing Values in College*.

Only one student (of 211 respondents) indicated that a person should remain loyal to the denomination in which they grew up (with no qualifier other than the fact that they grew up in this denomination).¹⁶

This trend of non-Baptist involvement has several consequences. The most obvious is that the role of BSM as a training and proving ground for future Baptist leaders has decreased. Because denominational loyalty holds such a tenuous sway over students, even those leaders involved with BSM who are involved within a Baptist church during their college years, may well find themselves choosing a church of another or of no denominational affiliation upon completion of their degree. This, combined with the fact that students involved in BSM may well choose a non-Baptist church at some point in their college career, means that BSM leaders past and present often play a significant leadership role in other contexts other than Baptist churches. While this is something to be celebrated as BSM has the opportunity to influence leaders in a much broader kingdom context, it does illustrate the fact that the role of BSM has changed significantly.

Additionally, although significant numbers of students involved in BSM continue to pursue ministry roles, those roles are often not in either Baptist churches or Baptist denominational ministry. Indeed, the attitudes towards ministry roles are changing dramatically. While in earlier generations the expectation of many students was to be trained as a professional minister and move into a denominational church setting or perhaps even into a denominational role, today increasing numbers of students see a shorter term career in ministry as a first stop in their pilgrimage. Often times this will take the shape of a short term missions assignment of one to two years. During this time,

¹⁶ Nick Howard, "Survey of Student Involved in Leadership in BSM, 2003," Unpublished raw data, Houston, Texas.

the student explores his or her gifting further as well as their calling in ministry. At that point, a further decision will often be made. In many cases, if the ministry opportunity can be extended without further education, especially seminary, then that is the first choice. It is not unusual to hear of a student choosing to find a job in a secondary career field which then finances their passion, the missions ministry. At the same time, the numbers of students moving towards a ministry in pastoral roles have dropped significantly. It is unclear whether this trend is a result of a generation of students who are attracted to the challenge of a missions setting or a generation repelled by what they perceive to be a calling which inherently will cause them to be in a place of conflict and political fighting. Often students express a desire to be free of ties which might hinder their creativity or bind them to a particular way of doing church. The perception seems to be that a missions setting not only offers a challenge, but also provides a very free context in which to do ministry.

In many cases, this shift in thinking is first encountered as churches, especially smaller churches, seek a part time staff member, often a youth or music minister. In the past, Baptist Student Ministry has been the pipeline through which young potential ministers tried their wings in churches across the state. Now, when a pastor calls the BSM Director, that director must often admit that they do not have anyone who is looking for that kind of opportunity. Naturally, this is not simply the consequence of non-Baptist involvement in the program, but of a general move away from the types of ministry traditionally associated with Christian service. This change is certainly exacerbated however by the trend towards larger numbers of non-Baptists involved in the local programs.

In his book *Revolution*, George Barna details research which the Barna Group has been involved with over the past several years. The conclusion which Barna draws as a result of this research is that American Christians, most significantly those who are driven to be wholly committed followers of Jesus Christ, are finding ways of expressing and living out their faith in ways which are outside of the local church. Barna claims that the traditional church has done a rather bad job in truly transformational ministry, so that those who seek to live lives centered on the calling of Christ actually find the church discouraging of those efforts. As a result, says Barna, millions of committed believers now find their spiritual home and fellowship outside of the traditional church. Further, he predicts that their number will increase exponentially in the coming decades, so that by 2025 Barna predicts that the traditional church will lose half of its membership to such movements.¹⁷

Regardless of your inclination to trust Barna's research or to agree with his conclusions, his research does raise significant questions. Certainly there appears to be an openness on the part of students to experience Christian community in ways which stretch the boundaries of the traditional church. As Barna says about this generation of believers, "They have significantly altered expectations and lifestyles through their demand that things foster shared experience and be "real," adventuresome and memorable. They have little patience for anything based on traditions, customs, ease or social acceptability."¹⁸ If Barna is even partially correct in his predictions, there are significant for ministries like Baptist Student Ministry which both represent the church on

¹⁷ George Barna, *Revolution* (Wheaton, Illinois: Tyndale House Publishers, 2005), 48-49.

¹⁸ Barna, *Revolution*, 44.

campus and involve a broad range of students in their ministry. This topic will be discussed more thoroughly in the last chapter.

A second consequence of the varied backgrounds of students involved in BSM is that these students very naturally wish to see their churches involved with BSM. This has created a tension for BSM Directors who have understood their role to be the arm of the church (with “church” being understood by all involved to mean *Baptist* church) on campus. We are only just now exploring how to best involve non-Baptist churches in the ministry in ways which maintain the unique Baptist identity, but provide for greater partnership with the greater Christian body.

Of course, this trend is not one which is only affecting Baptist Student Ministry. The lack of denominational loyalty and the fact that people are so likely to change denominations means that many churches have large percentages of their membership who did not grow up Baptist. This has implications for all denominational ministries. In the first place, such members are unlikely to be aware of the historical connection of their church to particular denominational ministries, especially in a denominational system such as Baptist, in which money was often given to denominational ministries without a strong sense of accountability to the local church. Unless the staff of a particular church was diligent in assuring that members knew of the ministries which they were supporting, years might go by without a direct report from a particular ministry. In addition, church members coming from different denominations are unlikely to feel any compulsion to support denominational ministries as those who have grown up within a particular faith tradition. Churches often shop around for where they will buy their Sunday School literature, who they will support in missions and what ministries they will actively

support.¹⁹ Staff members receive training and are increasingly active in organizations and networks outside of Baptist circles. This brings them into contact with ministries involved in ministries very similar to those within the denominational structure. Where the results of the Baptist ministry is in doubt or simply unknown, these staff members may opt to network and participate in the ministry of the organization which is known to them primarily through the relationship built at these kinds of conferences and training events. The result is a congregation which often does not understand or appreciate traditional Baptist ministries and support structures.²⁰ It also begs the question once again concerning the need for denominations and denominational ministries. In Baptist life, there is no compelling reason for a church to choose any denominational ministry over an independent organization. In fact, in our day there is often more pressure to look outside of denominational sources rather than within them. In that case, how should denominational ministries respond? Is there a continuing need and role which they play in the kingdom which can best be met by these organizations or is their continued existence simply the last throws of a system which has lost its relevance in our society? Indeed, might it not be better to simply hasten the death of denominational structures in order that we might “get on with it” and move to structures which better represent the needs of our day? Before looking at a response to these questions, we must first examine one final aspect of Baptist life which has played a significant role in the ability of

¹⁹ My church, West University Baptist Church of Houston, is a good example of this trend. Decisions concerning supported ministries are as likely to be driven by personal contact with staff or church members as denominational affiliation. The church supports several non-Baptist missions efforts because of personal connections with members. We, like many other Baptist churches, have moved to non-Baptist sources for materials for Sunday School and children's programs.

²⁰ For instance, I have been asked by more than one person if Baptist Student Ministry is a part of Campus Crusade for Christ.

denominational ministries in general and Baptist Student Ministry in particular to respond to the changing dynamics of denominational life.

Chapter Eight

The Baptist Conundrum

As was noted in Chapter Six, Baptists came together for the cause of missions.

After the Triennial Convention was dissolved in 1826 because of concerns that it was becoming too powerful and threatened the sovereignty of the local church, the support of missions was the only cause left within the purview of the renovated convention.¹ When, in 1845, the Southern Baptist Convention was formed, it was again the cause of missions at the forefront. Yet in this new convention, many aspects of denominational and church life were once again organized through a cooperative effort of the convention churches. Not just missions, but education, hospitals, orphanages and other ministries all found themselves sponsored by local churches all giving together through the cooperative work of the SBC.²

The solution to the tension between church and denomination was found in the establishment of the Cooperative Program (CP). The Cooperative Program was a truly unique way of funding denominational entities and ministries. Churches were allowed the utmost freedom in how their money was used. Money could be designated for specific projects or ministries and still be considered CP funds. In fact, churches were not required to give any specific amount or percentage. Yet churches did give and gave substantially. Fueled by the desire to work together and impact their world, churches

¹ E. Eugene Greer Jr. ed., *Baptists: History, Distinctives, Relationships* (Dallas: Baptist General Convention of Texas Church Services Division, 1996), 8.

² *Ibid.*, 13.

gave millions of dollars for the cause of missions in all of its forms, both locally and internationally. Churches large and small saw and understood the Cooperative Program to be their investment in the cause of Christ and ministries of all types. Many agencies like the Foreign Mission Board and children's homes knew that the CP was the lifeline with the local church. In time, churches were judged (rightly or wrongly) on their level of support for the Cooperative Program and program funds flowed, if not freely, at least regularly to those involved in denominational ministry. One can almost hear the elation of Susan Ray as she writes,

"The system has been wonderfully simple and efficient. At its peak efficiency, the costs of promoting, handling and accounting for Cooperative Program funds has been less than four percent – far below the costs of other fund-raising systems. This efficiency is made possible by the voluntary cooperation of the various denominational bodies and the wide-spread promotion of the system by pastors and church members, to the point that it is truly regarded as the Baptist way to support missions."³

Yet, as the conservative resurgence began to take hold, giving to CP began to drop. This was not caused by a reaction of moderate leaders against the more fundamentalist leadership, but rather a characteristic of the new leadership itself. Nancy Ammerman notes that, "compared to Moderates, the churches of our fundamentalist respondents were four times as likely (22 percent versus 5 percent), to give less than 5 percent of their budget to CP."⁴ Without realizing it, the new Baptist leaders had hastened a crisis in funding within the denomination. Although the significant social and cultural trends would have surely brought about much the same result, the fact that denominational leaders themselves gave very little to the Cooperative Program did not

³ Ibid., 68-69.

⁴ Nancy Tatom Ammerman, *Baptist Battles: Social Change and Religious Conflict in the Southern Baptist Convention* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1990), 119.

help the ailing system. A report from the SBC Funding Study Committee to the SBC Executive Committee in 2003 makes the following statement:

“Perhaps the most telling statistic for the near future of mission funding for Southern Baptists is the rapid decline in percentage giving through the Cooperative Program. From its inception in 1925, the Cooperative Program was predicated on local churches forwarding a percentage of their undesignated gifts through the Cooperative Program for all Southern Baptist Convention and state Baptist convention causes. In the first two years of the effort, the average gift from the churches settled in at about 11% of income. (The initial proposal by some that churches forward 50% for CP now seems to have been wildly unrealistic). A random check of the data from 1930-1980 shows the churches, after surviving the effects of the Great Depression, maintaining percentage giving to the Cooperative Program in the 11% range. However, in the early 80s, the percentage began to drop steadily. From an average of 10.5% in the 80s, the percentage has plummeted to 7.39% in 2002. As a percentage of undesignated offerings, local churches have decreased their Cooperative Program giving by 30%.”⁵

The situation had reached a crisis point for the denomination when, in 2003, the International Mission Board stopped all appointments of new missionaries due to a shortfall of funding. Positions in the IMB home office in Richmond, VA. were reduced and publication of the missions magazine, *The Commission*, was halted indefinitely. But it was not just the IMB which suffered. All denominational entities, including the North American Mission Board and the six Southern Baptist seminaries all have experienced drastic cuts and shortfalls.⁶

The Funding Study Committee suggested five reasons that giving has been so significantly impacted;

“1. Increased local church expenditures due to rising health insurance costs, expansion of facilities, and increasing sizes of church staffs have squeezed out gifts to missions.

⁵ *Report of the SBC Funding Study Committee to the SBC Executive Committee*, 2003, [online], available from <http://www.baptist2baptist.net/b2barticle.asp?ID=274>, accessed 16 May 2005.

⁶ Ibid.

2. More emphasis on local church mission initiatives has caused a shift in where the mission dollar goes.
3. Churches believe the Convention ministries already have plenty of money, allowing the church to cut back.
4. Political infighting has led to decreased satisfaction with the denomination and, therefore, lessening support.
5. Churches have concerns about the financial efficiency and ministry effectiveness of the Convention ministries when compared to their own hands-on mission projects.”⁷

Although CP funds still provide the lion’s share of ministry resources, it has become increasingly clear that the trends already discussed will continue to undermine the ability of the Cooperative Program to provide for ministry needs. In recent years, almost all institutions have moved to frame a more societal method of providing ministry resources, although this creates a conundrum for all involved. Because of the high regard in which CP and this method of cooperation has been held, most Baptist ministries were forbidden from approaching the local church directly for ministry support. Although there were some loopholes (such as the pastor asking you directly how they might support your ministry), generally speaking these churches were off-limits; off-limits at least to denominational ministries. Ministries not directly related to the denomination however, could approach whomever they desired. Not only *could*, but these ministries *did* approach Baptist congregations and approached them in force. Using contacts within the churches; mission groups, benevolence ministries, campus ministries and others have made their way into the hearts and budgets of Baptist churches. Finally, only as it has become apparent that the traditional methods of funding will no longer be sufficient, has permission come to make slow steps in the direction of directly finding resources. These steps are being taken, yet we find that after so many years of relying upon CP funds to provide for the needs of the ministry, we are ill equipped to deal with the new challenges

⁷ Ibid. *Report of the SBC Funding Study Committee to the SBC Executive Committee.*

in this arena. BSM Directors who were told just a few short years ago not to do direct fundraising are now being instructed on the finer points of solicitation. During recent staff meetings, these directors were told to “tithe” their time with relation to development, spending an average of 10% of their time involved in these kinds of activities. A significant amount of time and effort is being put into the development of alumni databases. These databases will serve as the conduit through which information will flow and through which specific campus needs may be addressed. In addition, local ministries are developing plans for the pursuit of people who are willing to help resource Baptist Student Ministry. In the Houston Area, the second annual “Celebration Brunch” drew 74 supporters, who contributed well over \$10,000 for the local ministry, something which would have been unthinkable five years ago.

At the same time, perhaps the biggest need is for education. Because Baptists supported ministries so well for so many years, often without really knowing what was actually taking place in those ministries, we lost the ability (as well as the desire) to clearly communicate our story. The very thing which was our life blood for so many years has now become a liability. In the years to come, it will be necessary for Baptist Student Ministry, as well as other denominational ministries, to once again make themselves known to their constituents. Although this must take place on a congregational level through connecting with the church and helping inform the church as a whole, if we have learned anything, it is that individuals want to be able to connect with those ministries which awaken within them a passion for ministry. It will be necessary to find those people and to help them to feel a part of the ministry. Not only must we find ways for them to help provide needed resources, but we must help them to

actually participate in the ministry itself. This is a trend which has been seen most clearly by the involvement of individuals in mission trips. As Tim Elmore pointed out in his “Spiritual Trends and Changing Values”, we have moved “from surrogate missions to hands on missions.” No longer is the expectation of this generation that they will give in order that someone else may go. They expect to go themselves. In fact, Elmore says that over 50% of the current world missions force is made up of short –term volunteers.⁸ In Southern Baptist life the statistics are staggering as over 30,000 volunteers spent time doing ministry somewhere on an international mission field.⁹

If it is true that people desire a more “hands-on” kind of approach to missions ministries, this will imply a different kind of approach who wish to enlist their interest and their support. It will be necessary for BSM Directors to find different ways of connecting with church members and encourage their investment in the lives of students, and not just their financial participation. This, in turn, will require an entirely new set of skills on the part of the director.

Not only that, but because we could rely on CP funds to provide the resources needed, we have often eschewed the help of churches of other faith traditions. In this new day, this must also be reconsidered. Just as students involved in BSM from different denominations will very naturally desire that their church recognize and have some level of interaction with the ministry which means so much to them, it behooves those of us in ministry to connect beyond our own denomination. We must explore ways to network and connect with these churches in ways which do not sacrifice the unique heritage and

⁸ Tim Elmore, *Spiritual Trends and Changing Values in College*, 2005, [online], available from http://www.growingleaders.com/students_article_jan05.php accessed 16 May 2005.

⁹ *Fast Facts*, 2005, [online], available from <http://www.imb.org/core/fastfacts.asp>, accessed 16 May 2005.

perspective on ministry which BSM brings to the campus, yet allow for significant interaction and resourcing where appropriate.

Today, BSM is a ministry facing many challenges, including decreasing support through traditional channels, larger numbers of students involved from other faith traditions and ignorance spawned by a lack of well planned communication with those who have a passion for the university campus. Yet there is a renewed sense of purpose and calling on the campus. We believe the unique aspects of BSM; a ministry which brings into harmony evangelism, discipleship and student leadership, a ministry which teaches and emphasizes the importance of the local church and has the denominational affiliation to make that a natural fit, along with the missional intentionality to involve churches beyond the Baptist tradition, a ministry which stands ready to face an exciting future in which the lives of students continue to be transformed.

Chapter Nine

Models for the Future

The Future of Denominationalism

What does the future hold? Specifically, what does the future hold for denominations and denominationalism, that movement in which the western church has grown and which has provided the context for most ministry over the past two hundred plus years? It is clear that we are being swept along by incredibly powerful currents of culture and change. How will the church respond? Perhaps a better question is *how will denominations respond?* Taken as a whole, churches have proven both resilient and creative in addressing the realities in which they find themselves. While some churches continue to live in a reality which no longer exists, (and will in all likelihood cease to be relevant long before they cease to exist), churches which continue to meet the needs of people, provide a vibrant setting for worship and context for the people of God encountering Him may be found ranging from small house churches to mega-churches. And while it is not only possible, but necessary to evaluate the methodologies and general health of these various incarnations of the Body, the adaptability of many churches has been key to finding models of ministry which address the needs of a changing culture. What remains to be seen is whether denominations can make these types of change? Ironically, many churches have adapted to meet the needs of the current culture by ignoring, diminishing or even departing from their denominational heritage. Without rehashing the arguments already presented for a growing postdenomination-

alism, the significance of this statement should be clear: In the broadest terms, denominations are no longer seen as providing a context for culturally relevant ministry. If we take that statement as an accurate representation of our present state, then the question clearly becomes one of how long denominations can continue to exist or, at the very least, to be relevant.¹ In light of all that has been shared in this essay, would it not be better to simply throw in the towel, recognize that the age of the denomination is gone and that it is time to move forward in some new ways?

Well, yes and no. Yes there are certain aspects of denominational life, and perhaps even some denominations themselves, which will not be able to make the change. The changes required are simply too drastic and would require such a rethinking of core values and purpose that some will not be able or willing to do what is necessary. And, if the truth be told, certain aspects of denominationalism as we have known it are not necessarily essential or even helpful to the fulfillment of the *missio Dei* (which is the ultimate question), but overall I would have to say no, the solution is not to dismiss denominations as irredeemable, but rather to help denominations change their focus and future.

I must confess that I believe the age of denominationalism is over. That is, I do not believe that western Christianity in the future will primarily be organized according to current denominational structures and alignment. That is *not* to say that I believe

¹ I am not so naïve to think that everyone would agree with my assessment. In fact, there are those who consider the future of denominations to be quite healthy. Nancy Ammerman, whom I respect greatly, wrote an article in 2000 for *The Christian Century* titled “New Life for Denominationalism” in which she proclaimed that denominational identity was experiencing a revival. While I would not argue with Dr. Ammerman that there are those churches which are seeking to reestablish both their ties to the denomination and the sense within the congregation of being a part of a larger body, I would argue that this is more a function of the leadership, specifically the pastor and not a longing felt by the average member in the pew. Ultimately, I think the loss of denominational identity by younger pastors will lead even these churches lessen the priority of denominational ties.

denominations should simply pack it in and give up. Far from it! In fact, I believe that denominations can and should fulfill a crucial role in the emerging culture. But in order for that to happen, it is my opinion that denominations must come to understand their role in a radically different way. I believe there are several key things which must happen within each denomination in order for this transformation to take place.² In fact, I would identify at least seven elements which will be necessary in order for denominations to not to just survive, but to thrive.

1. *Denominational bodies must be focused.*

No longer will churches look to denominations for every need and every answer.

It no longer makes sense for the denomination to “baptize” or “convert” a particular program in order to make it more acceptable to their constituency.³ It will be necessary for choices to be made about what the denomination should do and what will be accomplished through cooperative networks.

2. *Denominations must understand themselves as being a part of the Body of Christ, gifted for service to that Body.*

Because of their unique history, each denomination has something unique to offer to the Body. For too long we have held that close, allowing access only to those within our clan. It is time for that to change.

3. *Fellowship and common vision rather than theological conformity must be the watchword for denominational bodies.*

² I use the word transformation very intentionally. The word implies a radical change, not simply a shift in strategy or methodology. It is a radical change in who we are and why we exist.

³ As was the case for instance when the Baptist Sunday School Board took “Evangelism Explosion”, made minor changes to it and republished it as CWT (Continuous Witness Training).

If we choose to regulate with whom we fellowship, we will find our fellowship shrinking.

4. *Denominations must be the network.*

Closely related to number three, organizations of the future will be those organizations which enable and facilitate the sharing of ideas and resources.

Denominations should be the “go to” organization for access to information, training and resources. This is not to say they will do the training themselves, but rather be the experts on who are the most important contacts and what are the most important materials and events in every field.

5. *Denominations must raise up leaders who are not afraid to chart the new course.*

The leaders of tomorrow must be willing to challenge long held suppositions and traditional ways of perceiving their role. This is an incredible challenge, since, by doing so, they will likely be risking their own jobs and, at least in the short term, the security of the denominational bodies which they are seeking to change.

6. *Denominational bodies must give away ministries, rather than cling to them.*

Bureaucracies operate out of a need for control. In the future, healthy denominational bodies will be characterized by releasing institutions for ministry, rather than seeking to control them.

7. *Revolutionary denominational bodies of the future will learn to live with paradox and tension.*

There will be a good number of paradoxes which will be hallmarks of denominational bodies which will have a significant impact in the future. They will be simultaneously smaller and larger; for denominational churches and any believer /

church who wishes to participate; lean in their staffing, but broad in their network; necessary but voluntary in their associations.

Let us explore each of these seven concepts in a bit more depth. The first idea is that denominational bodies must become more focused in what it is that they choose to be and do. In the past, churches looked to the denomination for material which was doctrinally acceptable and for assistance in developing programs. As we know, this is no longer the case. Marketplace trends have overtaken the church. Let's take Vacation Bible School for instance. In years past most Vacation Bible School material was published by the denomination and used by the vast majority of churches within that denomination. Today, a quick search of the internet turns up a wide range of publishers, many of whom publish high quality material, at or below the cost of denominationally produced material. The same could be said of Sunday School, leadership training, stewardship materials, building campaigns and any number of other areas of church life in which, increasingly, churches are turning to organizations outside of the denomination for help and expertise.⁴

How should denominational bodies respond to these trends? It is at this point that many denominations seem to mistake the nature of these trends. I do not believe that these trends indicate as much a lack of confidence in denominational servants as much as they express the trend towards specialization and competition in the marketplace. The feeling is that an organization which does everything cannot possibly do everything well. In attempting to be the source of all needs for congregations, the denomination loses the

⁴ An excellent resource for further discussion on the topic of denominational resourcing is by J. David Schmidt, *Choosing to Live; Financing the Future of Religious Body Headquarters* (Milwaukee, Wisconsin: Christian Stewardship Association, 1996). In this helpful book, Schmidt outlines some of the trends which have been mentioned in this dissertation. While the statistic information is enough to frighten any denominational executive, Schmidt does provide several helpful suggestions specifically centered around resource development.

competitive edge in their real focus. I believe it will be crucial for denominations to decide what they want to be known for and where their focus will be. It is striking to me that many denominations began as a movement of God among like minded people who were passionate about a particular area of focus. Over time, these movements crystallized and solidified into organizations, often sacrificing the very passion which brought them into being in the process. Donald E. Miller, a religious sociologist who himself is a member of a mainline denomination, conducted an extremely interesting study which was published under the name *Reinventing American Protestantism*, in which he explores several new paradigm movements which he believes are reshaping the face of American Christianity. As Miller says;

“I believe we are witnessing a second reformation that is transforming the way Christianity will be experienced in the new millennium. The style of Christianity dominated by eighteenth-century hymns, routinized liturgy, and bureaucratized layers of social organization is gradually dying. ...But what makes this reformation radical is that the hope of reforming existing denominational churches has largely been abandoned. Instead, the leaders of these new paradigm churches are starting new movements, unbounded by denominational bureaucracy and the restraint of tradition – except the model of first-century Christianity.”⁵

While I have great hope for the future of denominations, the passion of these new paradigm movements is the passion we must recover as we seek to regain our focus. It is that passion which prevents denominations from becoming mired in the rigidity of a bureaucracy, and frees an organization to exhibit a higher degree of flexibility more characteristic of a movement.

Closely related to this first assertion is the second, which is that denominations must understand themselves as being a part of the Body of Christ, being gifted for service to that Body. Seen together, denominations may well have the opportunity to function as

⁵ Donald E. Miller, *Reinventing American Protestantism: Christianity in the New Millennium* (Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 1997), 11.

the Body of Christ in the world. As a denomination prayerfully seeks its focus, it will find that there are certain areas where each denomination has particular strengths. I believe there will be a “specialization” which must take place, in which denominations understand their historical strengths as places in which the body as a whole could be assisted. Where a denomination is strong in church planting and evangelism, could those resources be made available to the greater Christian body without compromise of the theological understanding of that particular denomination? I believe that is certainly the case. If the door were cracked just a bit more, could not churches cooperate with several different denominational entities in a variety of ways, centered on missions and ministry, rather than on issues of theological conformity? I believe it is possible. We must learn to cooperate based on (as Brian McLaren has called them) “First Order Beliefs”, that core of the gospel, without worrying too much if we agree on the particulars.⁶ For Baptists, this will be challenging. Although there are obviously questions on how to fairly distribute services to churches which may not regularly contribute to the support of the denomination, it is the *availability* of denominational personnel and materials which is at issue.

This is not intended to be a call to old fashioned ecumenism, which all too often was predicated on downplaying denominational differences. This is actually the opposite approach. I am convinced that we can celebrate our differences and the unique role and perspective as crucial to what God would do in our age. There is no need for us to agree on every aspect on our faith to recognize and learn from what each part of the Body has to offer. One of the most significant problems of denominations is the temptation to see

⁶ McLaren made these statements on May 18, 2004 at the Emergent Convention during a seminar titled; “Coaching and Consulting: Guiding Churches and Leaders Through the Postmodern Transition”

themselves as isolated and insulated from the rest of the Body. For some, the emphasis is on “right theology” which all too often means comparing ourselves to others who have a “wrong theology” – at least from our point of view. This emphasis made us feel good about ourselves, but left the Body bereft of the gifts which each had to offer. It is time to see denominations as Kingdom movements, places where the Holy Spirit has been at work in unique ways amongst a particular group of believers, *not* in order to isolate that group, but rather in order to build up the larger Body. Instead of practicing denominationalism as tribal groups (my tribe verses your tribe), it is time that denominations begin to see and celebrate their heritage as a part of the overall mosaic of the Kingdom of God.

My own denomination, Southern Baptists, has much to offer the Body in the areas of church planting and evangelism. While there is still much to learn, our experience in these areas would be of much value. At the same time, we are in great need of learning from those who have been used of God in justice ministries and being stewards of God’s world. As we move further into the 21st century, would that denominations would open their doors to those of other or no denominational background to share in the gifts which God has entrusted to our stewardship. How this would function on a practical basis is yet unclear, but my guess is that such an approach would mirror those of any number of networks which are open to any church which chooses to participate. In many cases, those with membership in the network gain discounts while those outside of the network pay higher rates. While finding a fair and equitable way to share expertise and resources would be challenging, the greater challenge is the change in understanding denominational bodies as servants of the Body as a whole, rather than exclusively that

part of the Body called by a particular brand name. Denominations of the future must be willing to function at several different levels, allowing both those inside and outside of the membership rolls of the denomination to participate. Although most denominations would give lip service to the concept of the universal church of God, we have more often than not been guilty of separating ourselves and differentiating ourselves from the various other expressions of our Christian faith, rather than finding points together. That must change. It is not a loss of identity or mission when we seek ways in which one can participate and work together for the kingdom. Indeed, the highest level of denominational function may well be where the Body comes together as unique expressions of faith for the purpose of fulfilling the mission of God in proclaiming His Kingdom.

This of course leads us to number three: Fellowship and common vision, rather than theological conformity must be the watchword for denominational bodies.

Denominations provide a natural place of fellowship for those involved in ministry. In a world in which relationships are key, there is a natural affinity for churches and church staff that see themselves within a particular heritage stream (for instance baptistic). It is very natural for those within these streams to meet to fellowship together and, out of this fellowship, to begin to dialogue about common issues; issues which may well come as a result of that common heritage. This is not to imply that this is the only dialogue or connections needed, but the Kingdom would be poorer for the loss of this kind of fellowship.

It is important to note the purpose for this kind of fellowship. It is not for doctrinal integrity or any kind of regulatory function that brings people together. The role of the

denomination should not be to enforce conformity, rather it is to find the points of mutual interest and need in the midst of diversity.

Lyle Schaller quotes Craig Dykstra and James Hudnut-Beumler who believe that the bureaucratic model of the denomination has given way to a regulatory agency model. Citing Southern Baptists, among other denominations, Schaller goes on to expound upon this model, which “adopts rules and regulations that must be followed by individuals, congregations and regional judicatories as well as by national agencies.”⁷

Although I suspect Schaller is correct in his assessment of the shift and in locating the Southern Baptist Convention within this framework, I would suggest that this model is a dead end for denominations. As Schaller himself goes on to admit, “A reasonable projection, based on history, is that as the regulatory authority of the denominations increases, the number of churches voting to secede will increase. An alternate scenario is that an increase in the role of the denomination as a regulatory agency will coincide with greater difficulty in reaching adults born after 1945.”⁸ Indeed, this kind of division and withdrawal of churches from the fellowship of the denomination (either officially or defacto through non-participation) has grown tremendously in Southern Baptist ranks.

I believe that there are still possibilities for denominations to have tremendous impact and effective ministry in the 21st century. However, for those who understand conformity of belief and practice as the main purpose of denominational bodies (including a strong element in the Southern Baptist Convention today) the future may indeed be bleak. In this age of the local church, efforts to control and influence will not be fought, they will

⁷ Lyle E. Schaller, *21 Bridges to the 21st Century, Ministry for the Third Millennium* (Nashville, Tennessee: Abingdon Press, 1994), 139.

⁸ Ibid., 141.

simply be ignored. Churches which have been treated as denominational franchises will look for deeper purpose in missions and ministry, find that fellowship and commonality of vision in a variety of places. But for those denominations willing to make fellowship and common vision and passion that which binds them together, there are real opportunities.

Number four is the declaration that denominations must **be** the network. As was documented earlier in this dissertation, networks of churches have in many ways become the denominations of our day. There are some simple reasons for that fact. These networks are low commitment and offer the ability to connect with the highest quality leadership, training and materials, regardless of denominational background. They offer the opportunity to fellowship and connect with people who are passionate about common things, again, regardless of denominational affiliation. More than anything, they offer help without a long term, “demanding” relationship. Without question, it will be these kinds of organizations, organizations which enable and facilitate the sharing of ideas and resources without long term commitment which stand the best chance of impacting churches and individuals in the future. What is it about denominations which prevent us from becoming like these networks? I would submit that it is our unwillingness to do the things outlined in points one through three which greatly hinder our efforts. It should be clear, but yet seems to go inexplicably unnoticed by some, that leadership in churches today desires the opportunity to fellowship in groupings beyond denominational lines. In fact, for most young leaders in particular, fellowship in a closed circle is unattractive and uninspiring. They thrive in a world full of diversity and value the opportunity to hear from many different perspectives.

If denominations of the future wish to draw young leaders, we must become that kind of network; opening the door for conversation, for training and resourcing.

Denominational servants should be experts, not on “how”, but “who.” Their expertise should increasingly be that of knowing who to turn to for specific needs. At times that will mean hosting events which pull together experts from all parts of the Body. At other times it will mean pointing people to events held by other denominations and networks, with the one goal in mind of providing the highest quality experience for the church or individual.

The fifth assertion is that denominations must raise up leaders who are not afraid to chart a new course. The church must have men and women who chart the course of the river of change, rather than just being swept along by it. As Robert Dale states, we need leaders who go from “making things to making sense.”⁹ Leonard Sweet answers his own question when he asks, “Can one person change the course of history? Now more than ever.”¹⁰ So what must that one person do in the world in which we now live? The rules of engagement have changed. The paradigms which we have used to drive our decision making processes are not only outdated, they have simply ceased to be relevant. Not only must men and women of faith make this transition, so too must organizations. Organizations must be ready to change at a moments notice, preserving core values and mission, yet ready to shift and change as needed. We must change from a reactionary stance to a pro-active stance, gazing into the fog of the future and navigating the course without fully being able to see and understand. This will demand an acceptance of a

⁹ Robert D. Dale, *Leadership for a Changing Church: Changing the Shape of the River* (Nashville, Tennessee: Abingdon Press, 1998), 17.

¹⁰ Leonard I. Sweet, *Summoned to Lead* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 2004), 31.

level of ambiguity that was unheard of and unacceptable in previous decades. Certainty is not only fleeting, it is deadly. By the time you are certain of anything, it is certain to have changed.¹¹

It is imperative that denominational leaders be willing to make the difficult choices. It will not be adequate to simply reorganize, but rather to rethink long held suppositions and roles. Beyond the core values of the organization, everything must be open to discussion. This will not be an easy transition for any organization, but will be most difficult for larger denominations to accomplish in a healthy fashion. The most likely result will be at least some level of fragmentation, with churches organizing into smaller versions of the denominational structures of times past. These new denominational structures will very likely organize around the core values of the churches, especially the values of missions and evangelism. They will very likely have very limited staff and will function primarily as networks. This scenario is most likely in larger denominational structures which are either unable or unwilling to jettison areas deemed beyond the core values of the churches they serve. This trend will also be evident in denominational structures in which the judicatories seek to keep tight control over the local church.

In seeking leaders who will help us through the maze of decisions which must be faced in the coming years, it will be vital that both younger and more mature leaders are both given equal voice in that process. Without the wisdom of the more mature leaders, mistakes will be made which could easily be avoided. Without the perspective of the younger leaders, any change will very likely be an exercise in moving the chairs on the deck of the Titanic; perhaps satisfying the need to change without the course change

¹¹ Dale, 25.

which is needed. It is vital that both younger and more mature leaders keep in mind that the most important commodity which any denomination has is its relationships.

The eighth suggestion is that denominational bodies must give away ministries, rather than cling to them. Milfred Minetrea has said that one of the key missional practices of the church is that they measure growth by the capacity to release, not to retain.¹² While I would agree that Milfred has identified an important attribute of the missional church, I would go so far as to say that this is also an attribute of the missional denomination.

Darrell L. Guder traces the development and various stages of denominationalism in his book Missional Church. In this work Guder questions whether any denomination can truly be “missional” in its approach. While not totally excluding that possibility, Guder says that efforts to “prove” the legitimacy of denominations (either specifically or as a way of organizing the church) are ill-conceived. Rather, says Guder, denominations are the current reality and we must seek to “develop a holistic understanding of the church in light of the present reality.”¹³ In continuing the discussion, Guder makes it clear that he considers denominational structures to be secondary to the calling of the church and that the missional church is ultimately responsible for the propagation of the gospel. In giving over that missional calling to the denomination, there is the very real risk that the local church will lose the calling altogether. As Bob Roberts, pastor of Northwood Church for the Communities in Keller, Texas put it, “Too many churches are basically holding stalls for people of a particular religious brand. For too long churches have been

¹² Milfred Minetrea, *Shaped by God's Heart: The Passion and Practices of Missional Churches*, 1st ed. (San Francisco, California: Jossey-Bass, 2004), 111.

¹³ Darrell L. Guder and Lois Barrett, *Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America*, The Gospel and Our Culture Series (Grand Rapids, Michigan: W.B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1998), 69.

more about cultural institutional religion instead of being vital spiritual communities.”¹⁴ I think Guder and Minatrea both help us understand a very important key to the missional denomination. Historically, denominations have been guilty of gathering all things within their control. It is the exact opposite of Minatrea’s exhortation to release rather than to retain and in doing so, denominations have at times robbed the local church of their missional role.

For instance, at a recent conference, Brian McLaren suggested that “de-institutionalizing” denominations was their only hope for survival. In his discussion, McLaren used the metaphor of a tree and a garden. Our historical models have been those of trees. Even where something new was started, it was simply a “branch” on the tree, but fed back into the main trunk of the tree. In the new model, says McLaren, we must learn to understand our role as “gardeners,” releasing ministries to grow and become what God has created them to be without the primary question being the question of how that feeds back into the denomination. The expectation would be, just as in a garden, there would be things which would grow at different paces and would produce different fruit. The criteria would not be the question of nourishing the “tree” but rather the question whether the appropriate fruit was being produced.

There are some significant questions about this particular model. In the past, the institutions have been those things which have brought denominations together. They have served as a rallying point and as an example of what we can do together which we cannot do apart. If, indeed, denominations were to go about de-institutionalizing

¹⁴ Craig Bird, “'Glocal' Congregations Aim to Fit Members' Faith to a T,” *Texas Baptists*, 1 (October 2005), 8.

themselves, would either the denomination or the various ministries which have now been “released” survive?

Perhaps the answer lies in the reason for beginning the institutions in the first place. If, as McLaren asserts, the role of the institution is to feed the denomination, then it would seem that all which would be accomplished would be an ever larger and hungrier denomination. But if we use the metaphor of a nursery, rather than that of a garden, we could perhaps understand institutions as children, with the goal being that of growth, maturity and, ultimately, release while retaining relationship. In many ways, this is an accurate description of many of the trends in recent years, with institutions seeking their independence, while desiring to remain in relationship with their founding denominational bodies. Perhaps in the future, such a process would be built in from the beginning, and rather than being a cause for alarm, would actually be cause for celebration.

In any case, it seems clear to me that we must develop a new approach to denominationalism in which the denomination would look less like a group of institutions in which at least a significant part of the function of the institution is the survival of the denomination, and more like an missional organization which seeks to release ministries and churches to find their place in proclaiming the Kingdom.¹⁵

Finally, revolutionary denominational bodies of the future will learn to live with paradox and tension. If there is anything which characterizes the postmodern culture, it is the ability to live in paradox. That will also be true of denominations which are effective in doing ministry in that culture. Leaders must be able to embrace ideas which at first

¹⁵ McLaren, notes from seminar; “Coaching and Consulting: Guiding Churches and Leaders Through the Postmodern Transition”

glance appear mutually exclusive without feeling the need to reconcile the two ideas.

This will be vital to the future. It is, however, a very biblical idea. In describing what it meant to be His follower, Jesus said it was necessary to die in order to live: “Then he said to them all: “If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will save it.” Luke 9:23-24 NIV

The truth of the matter is that in the western world we no longer have the luxury of traditional denominationalism. David Bosch quotes David Barrett when he says that “in Europe and North America, an average of 53,000 persons are permanently leaving the Christian church from one Sunday to the next.”¹⁶ It is time we recognized the severity of the situation and adopted a mission field mentality in which the differences between us are not cause for the breaking of fellowship, but rather an expression of the mosaic of which we are but one part. The task is simply too overwhelming for one denomination to think they can go it alone.

Of course, the flip side of this discussion is the need for denominations to serve as a kind of clearing house in helping churches connect with those who can help with their needs, even when this is beyond the scope of the denomination itself. We must move beyond control in favor of relationships. As we move further into the new millennium, I believe we will find that relationships are key to the new role we must take in the future. If we are open to it, I believe this is a role that should come very naturally.

¹⁶ David Jacobus Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission*, American Society of Missiology Series ; No. 16 (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1991), 3.

The Future of Baptist Student Ministry

We have explored the ways in which denominations must change in order for them to successfully transition into organizations equipped and positioned for the future. The question is simply, is it worth the effort? Why denominations, when we could all simply be independent and cooperate with one another on those tasks and ministries where there was a shared passion?

I believe there are many good answers to the problem, but most simply and most importantly, given the changes which have already been discussed, a missional denomination enables and facilitates the church in being the church. This is much different than simply facilitating a particular program. Rather, in this understanding of the role of the denomination, churches are encouraged through training, networking and interaction with denominational personnel to find a direct link with what God is doing locally, nationally and worldwide. In addition, churches are assisted in finding their place of service in each of these areas. It is truly in missions that the denomination finds its ultimate *raison d'être* as well as its place as a Kingdom Movement.

This is certainly where Baptist Student Ministry, as well as other denominational ministries find their place in a new way of doing denomination. I believe that we must concentrate on several things as we face the future. First, we must refocus on our missional task. All of our directors and anyone associated with Baptist Student Ministry must be completely focused on the identity of BSM as a missional organization. We must continue to learn what it means to approach the university campus as a mission field. Our directors must be trained as mission strategists; looking for the unmet needs,

untouched groups, unreached people and untapped potential on campus. This may well call for different types of training that we are currently involved with in our directors. It may call for us to look for different kinds of people in the personnel we seek. The person who is called to be a missionary is a different kind of person from the person who is called to be a director of campus programs. It may even behoove us to examine such details as the terminology we use (for instance, does the title *BSM Director* really communicate the task?), the expectations and measure of success for our directors, and the kinds of experiences offered students.

Second, we must learn to be better communicators of our story, both to those with whom we have traditionally partnered, Baptist churches, but also outside of those lines to churches and individuals of other denominations who would see us as a resource for ministry to students. In creative ways we must begin to share what God is doing on campuses around the state. We must be inexhaustible in our communication and relationship building with churches, particularly with Baptist churches, but, as appropriate, also with non-Baptist churches.

Third, we must look to the future and prepare now for the changes in the allocation of resources. This implies not only becoming more effective in our ministry and in where we spend those financial resources provided, it also implies becoming better stewards of human resources. For instance, former students, those whose lives were transformed as God used BSM to shape their spiritual direction will become crucial to the future of BSM. In the future, contact with these alumni will provide a network of relationships providing sources for Christians who will desire to engage students relationally through mentoring relationships, prayer partners who will lift each ministry in prayer and

financial resources for the continuation of the ministry. We must also network with those individuals whom God has given a passion to see the student generation come to know Christ and has given the resources to do so. We must call these people to be stewards of these resources as God calls.

Finally, we must answer the question of what makes Baptist Student Ministry unique and profitable in the plethora of student ministries available on the campus today. This question will allow us to move forward in confidence in engaging students, churches and individuals and in encouraging both participation and support. It should be abundantly clear that the connection, no matter how historic or important, to Baptist churches will not be adequate. There must be a clear sense of purpose and calling. In dealing with churches, it will be important for those who work in denominational student ministry (as well as other ministries) to be clear about the ways in which the ministry will assist the church to fulfill its missional calling. For the church to ignore the campus would be antithetical to the missional call of God to the church. In fact, it is impossible for the missional church to ignore any segment of society. Yet it will be crucial for those of us who are involved in that kind of ministry to engage the church and to challenge the church to see this segment of society. We must become resource people who will assist the church in fulfilling her mission. The other side of the equation is this; denominational ministry provides for a very natural connection for students, learning to express their faith in community. For all those involved in student ministry, there is a danger that those activities and community on campus will become separated from the context of the local church. Although this danger cannot be completely avoided, it is at least minimized

when the student ministry itself is connected to the larger Christian community, urging the student to see the role they have in the body of Christ away from campus.

For students who decide to become involved in a ministry such as Baptist Student Ministry, what can this ministry offer that is not offered 100 times over on the large campuses across our country? I believe there are several things:

1) A focus on the entire campus. Baptist Student Ministry is and will continue to be missional in its focus. There is a passion about being involved in relational ministry to students, regardless of where they are on their spiritual journey which must continue to be at the center of our calling on campus.

2) There will be opportunity for growth. One of the most significant things which BSM can offer is the opportunity to connect with individuals; directors, interns, church members, etc., all of whom are willing to invest in students on a personal level. We can assure students that there are people who are willing to walk with them through those college years, praying and guiding them through important decisions and entrusting important decisions to them about the ministry which takes place on their campus. There will be opportunities to engage their world; through missions, through service and through leadership.

3) There will be a connection to the church. Students of all denominational backgrounds will be encouraged to become active in a local body of believers. Not only that, but the church will come to them. There will be opportunities to work alongside of those from local churches who believe in them and are willing to invest in their lives. These mentors will provide guidance as students learn to identify God's call in their lives and as they are equipped for the purpose to which they have been created. BSM will be a

ministry which deals with the whole person and challenges students to live missional lives, seeing every stage of life in light of God's call. Because of our status as a ministry of and with the church on the college campus, BSM provides a lifetime of experience and connection.

Having said all of this, the very things which position Baptist Student Ministry for effective, transformational ministry on the university campus are also those things which expose us to significant threat. In order to deal effectively with those threats, we must be willing to ask the difficult questions and look beyond established responses. For instance, one of the keys to the success of BSM has been the quality of our workers. Through the years, BSM has been able to hire extremely talented and creative workers from our Baptist seminaries. Yet this practice has had two unwanted results; the first is that this practice (which has been codified into a necessity that BSM Directors have a graduate degree from a Baptist seminary) increasingly prevents us from attracting the brightest and best. While Baptist seminaries continue to have many graduates who are extremely gifted, many university graduates are opting for other routes for both training and ministry experience, leaving BSM at a distinct disadvantage. I believe that two responses will be necessary to deal with this issue effectively. First, I believe that we must find ways to recruit and train our workers, without necessitating a seminary degree. In all likelihood this will involve partnerships with many of the new training programs which have proliferated in recent years.¹⁷

Yet the hiring of professional, seminary trained workers has had another unexpected result. While these workers have proven capable of extremely high quality of work and

¹⁷ One such program is SemiNext, a training program based out of Houston, Texas which combines mentoring with internet classwork, all while the student continues to be involved in local ministry situations. SemiNext may be found online at <http://www.seminext.com/>.

long term success, there is a tendency for professional ministers to look at their ministry as a career. While this in itself is certainly not to be understood negatively, the very nature of campus ministry calls for fresh perspective and flexibility. It is the rare person who can keep the kind of pace and infusion of creativity which student ministry requires over a period of several decades. Rather, in many cases, student ministry will be a season of life for many workers. This is a significant change from years past and will require a new mindset on the part of workers entering this field. It will also require that those of us in supervisory roles help workers transition to new types of work.

Another factor which has been a source of strength in the past, but which now poses significant threats is our identity as a denominational student ministry. For one thing, there is a lasting perception on the part of local churches that BSM can produce students for their church programs. Not only is that assumption contrary to the missional call of the church as it ministers on campus, it is unrealistic in the reality in which we now live. As has already been discussed, students do not make decisions about church membership based on denominational identity, but rather on the basis of what they perceive to be God's work in that church. And, as we have heard from George Barna, Christians will increasingly find their expression of community in places outside of the traditional church. This will only increase the pressure from churches looking to BSM as a source of new members. I do not believe this is something for which there is a "solution". Rather, it will call upon us to be faithful in two specific arenas; challenging students to a strong commitment to the church (in all of its forms) and to the church to be missional in its approach. It is perhaps unreasonable to think we will be completely successful in either respect, but we must be faithful in that calling.

Another unanticipated result of being a denominational student ministry is that BSM is at times not perceived as being “cutting edge.” While I would certainly dispute that fact, I think this perception is due in part by our own dependence upon communication methods which are no longer adequate for our current situation. Too many churches and lay persons are woefully uninformed about the scope of type of ministry being done on our campuses.

It is also at least partially a result of our own polity, in which our scope of ministry is limited to the geographical boundaries of our particular denominational body. This means that while BSM in Texas may be extremely creative and involve a large number of students, it has no influence over the type of student ministry which Baptists do in, say, Georgia. It also limits the ability of anyone to speak of what BSM does or does not do, since those conversations must be limited to a particular state convention’s BSM program, rather than being able to speak in more general terms. I believe the future will be a future in which we develop strategic partnerships and alliances across former borders. It may well be that the time has come for Texas BSM to encourage student ministry in states or even countries in which that is not currently happening.¹⁸

At the same time, it would be unwise to simply dismiss the issue completely as a byproduct of our denominational polity. We must be willing to ask the hard questions and deal with the answers, even when we don’t like them. It would be wise for ministries such as BSM to continue to find ways to evaluate the ministry. Students, churches,

¹⁸ This trend is being seen all across Baptist life. Recently I was in a meeting of the Union Baptist Association, a local association made up of churches in the Houston, Texas area. One of the items of business was to vote upon membership for a church located in Laredo, Texas. The pastor of this church was friends with the pastor of a church in Houston who spoke highly of the work of that association. Rather than joining the association which fit geographically with the location of the church in Laredo, this pastor wanted his church to enjoy the benefits of membership with Union Association. This situation is not unique. Union Association now has member churches from Baton Rouge, Louisiana to Laredo, Texas. Increasingly, churches think of these kinds of associations in terms of the relationships, not location.

pastors, lay persons and those completely outside of the organization all have important feedback to give, if such a process were in place. I believe a thorough evaluation of the organization should take place on a periodic basis.

As an eighteen year old college freshman, I encountered God in a very personal and transformational way. My life has never been the same and for that I am eternally grateful. The tool which God used was Baptist Student Union (the name itself somewhat dates my experience), which met me upon my arrival on campus, was willing to let me explore what it meant to be a follower of Jesus Christ and gave me time to make that decision. BSU opened doors to leadership, to learning and growth which were unique and taught me to think about life in (what I would now call) a very missional way. The first Bible study I led was on campus. The first time I shared my faith was in the dorm and the first person I had the opportunity to lead to faith was a fellow student. I believe in the church going into the world and proclaiming the gospel. I am convinced that the university campus is the most unique mission field on the planet. I am thankful for the privilege I have had over these many years to continue to be involved in the lives of students. Students can change the world. They have done it before and they will do it again. May this generation be that generation. May we be the ones who stand by their sides and encourage them in the name of the One who continues to call His sons and daughters to follow Him with their whole lives.

Appendix 1

BSM Student Leader Survey

Thank you for taking the time to complete this survey. Your answers are very important to us and will have a significant impact on directions we will be taking in student ministry in the future. Your answers are confidential.

If you have any questions or wish to speak to someone about the survey, you may contact Nick Howard at bsmsouth@earthlink.net.

1. On what type of school do you study?

2. At what point are you in your studies?

3. How long have you been involved in BSM?

4. Did you grow up in a Baptist Church? ☐ Yes ☐ No

5. Are you a member of a Baptist Church now?

6. Which statement best describes how you see the differences between denominations?

☐ Important differences exist between denominations and students should decide which denomination most accurately reflects what they feel scripture teaches.

☐ Denominational differences are relatively unimportant. The main thing is that God is at work in the local church.

☐ The name on the church is unimportant and anyone who says otherwise is just interested in maintaining some sort of institution. The main thing is to follow Jesus.

☐ A person should be loyal to the denomination in which they grew up.

☐ There are important differences, sometimes in things you are not even aware of. Since this is true, it is important to stay in the denomination you feel is correct.

7. Which statement best describes what you understand to be the primary focus of BSM?

- ☐ BSM is a place where Baptist students can come for fellowship and growth opportunities.
- ☐ BSM is a place for Christian students, regardless of denominational background, to find fellowship and opportunities for Christian growth.
- ☐ BSM is a place where students, regardless of where they are in their spiritual pilgrimage, can find help, fellowship and opportunities to explore the claims of Jesus Christ on their lives.
- ☐ BSM is a place you can get away from campus and be together with your Christian friends.
- ☐ BSM is an equipping center. Students get equipped to go back to campus and share the gospel.

8. Do you feel the name *Baptist Student Ministry* best reflects the mission of the organization? ☐ Yes ☐ No

9. Why did you answer the previous question as you did?

10. Do you know how BSM is funded?

- ☐ BSM is funded by individual Christians who have a passion to see college ministry take place.
- ☐ BSM is funded by churches and individuals who desire to see college ministry take place.
- ☐ BSM is funded by Baptist churches, both locally and statewide.
- ☐ I have no idea how BSM is funded.
- ☐ I have no idea and don't really care how BSM is funded.

Is there anything you would like to add?

Appendix 2**STUDENT MISSIONS INVOLVEMENT SINCE 1998**

	1998	1999	2000 Goal	2000 Actual	2001 Goal	2001 Actual	2002 Goal	2002 Actual	2003 Goal	2003 Actual	2004 Goal	2004 Actual	2005 Goal
Total # of Student Missionaries	178	214	300	308	376	347	350	288	339	261	400	461	442
Semester	0	1	10	12	16	13	14	17	21	19	25	34	36
USA		1		3	6	6	7	9	11	12	15	20	18
Foreign				9	10	7	7	8	10	7	10	14	18
Summer	170	123	150	116	155	128	111	107	108	115	143	144	132
TX	38	40	50	32	40	24	22	31	28	27	33	35	31
USA	92	36	50	41	60	46	47	38	37	57	60	53	49
Foreign	40	47	50	43	55	58	42	38	43	31	50	56	52
Impact	8	62	100	87	75	70	90	55	58	72	99	103	89
TX		3		19	10	10	13	4	9	5	8	7	7
USA				12	20	23	21	16	21	20	29	36	27
Foreign	8	59		56	45	37	56	35	28	47	62	60	55
Special Impact		28	40	93	130	126	135	109	120	21	103	153	150
TX													
USA												14	15
Foreign		28		93		126		109		21		139	135
Adult Vision Team				7									
USA						10							
Foreign				7									
Chistmas Projects									20	26	20	16	25
USA									5	8			
Foreign									15	18		16	25
Study Abroad									12	8	10	11	10
USA									0	0			
Foreign									7	8		11	10

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