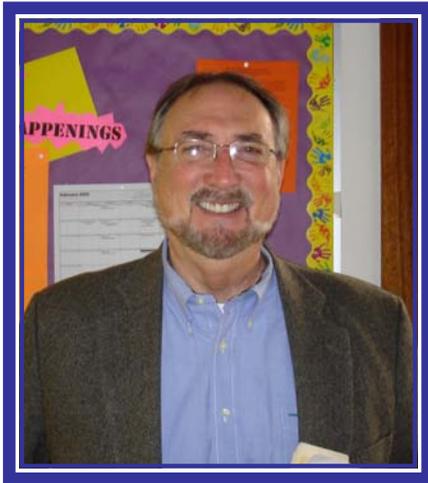


Remaining Faithful to Calvin: Congregations Reach Out to College/University Students

An Interview with Michael N. Miller

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By Tracy Schier



"I always believe campus ministry has to be fueled by three things: creativity, commitment and cash." This observation, from Michael N. Miller, Director of the Lilly Endowment-funded Center for the Church and Higher Education at Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary, illuminates both the hope and the frustration he and others working to promote congregation-based campus ministry have had to face.

Miller goes on, "We have seen, historically, that the churches have tried to do a lot, and have indeed done a lot for higher education, but also that there have been a lot of burnout and failures. Without appropriate allocations of creativity, commitment and monetary support, the job is a very difficult one and yet nobody can say that reaching young people during their college years is anything but an extremely important ministry."

To understand Miller's vantage point in this effort we need to go back to 1993, to the beginnings of a partnership between Austin Seminary and the Synod of the Sun, the Presbyterian judicatory located in Carrollton, TX, near Dallas. Miller, who until this year was on the seminary faculty and is the newly appointed campus minister at Texas State University, has a longstanding commitment to the importance of ministries to students that comes out of the Presbyterian tradition. "Calvin taught us that every church should be a campus church," he explains. "This is part of our Christocentric ideal of service, and the fact that higher education was a priority of Calvin and has remained such within the Reformed tradition."

Of the dozens of schools participating in varying ways with the congregation-based campus ministry program, six are Presbyterian schools located within the synod. These include

Austin College, Trinity University, Schreiner University, University of Tulsa, University of the Ozarks, and Lyons College. A prep school for Latin American students, the Presbyterian Pan American School, is also involved. Miller is quick to point out, however, that even though the program has Presbyterian roots it is not limited by denominational constraints and has been ecumenical from the beginning.

Miller explains that in the early 1990s the whole idea of campus ministry was in turmoil, a direct result of several decades of change within the church. "In the 1940s and 50s," he notes, "The best and the brightest went into campus ministry. But by the 1960s campus ministry was heavily influenced by the student unrest and activism on the campuses. Some aspects of the student movement such as non-violence were in keeping with Christian ideals, while others were not. And yet it happened that there was public perception that campus ministries were fomenting many of the campus disturbances. By the time we get to the 1980s campus ministry had become essentially irrelevant on many campuses and funding was difficult to come by." Miller continues, "My goal with the project was not just to create campus ministries that are congregation-based but also to strengthen relationships with the synod and to heighten the effectiveness of the ecumenical movement."

According to Miller, the Lilly Endowment funding was essential to the project's efforts because there were scant monies available from the churches or the synod. "In the spirit of the times," he goes on, "when there is suspicion of 'big government,' that attitude extends to church governance. Churches have slowed their giving to presbyteries and the presbyteries have pulled back on giving to synods. And so, money has always been a big issue with the congregations if they were to take on work in campus ministry."

When the program began, Miller clarifies that it was well understood that no congregation would actually do "full service" campus ministry. Churches that signed on to work with college and university students were encouraged to be creative and discover certain "niche" needs of students. He says that for any of these efforts to succeed the parishioners had to have an attitude that they were there for the students. He says, "The premise from the start had to be, 'what we can do for the students and not what the students can do for us.'"

Another early-on assumption was that congregation-based campus ministry programs would be largely lay driven because pastors simply have too much on their plates already. Miller says that, with creativity, participating churches could find that there are hundreds of "niches." Some included honoring student leadership, offering marriage enrichment workshops for graduate students, offering bible study groups or groups to help students develop their spirituality, instituting child care to help mothers returning to school, developing film festivals, providing uniforms for under-funded soccer teams, among others. Miller tells the story of the ministry efforts of First Presbyterian Church in Gainesville Texas. Members of that congregation saw that the students at North East Texas Community College had to stand in long registration lines in the August heat so they provided bottled water for the young people. The church became known as the "water church" and thus

began a relationship between congregation members and students. Miller cites the pastor of that church, Rev. John Hare, as being a key mover in the program's success.

Miller offers also the instance of First Presbyterian Church in Galveston. That congregation had a number of members who were on the faculty of the University of Texas Medical School. These doctors saw the opportunity to integrate faith into the practice of medicine and took the initiative to develop a program for med students.

He says, "Any time adults in a congregation work with young people it is rewarding. The adults have opportunity to share their own lives with the lives of the students. They have opportunity to develop relationships and they also can serve as models for students as they are seeking to discern their vocations. They are helping to develop leadership for the next generation."

According to Rev. Alex Thornburg at First Presbyterian Church in Stillwater, Oklahoma, that congregation's campus-ministry program in its first three years "has had a lot of success. The students (from Oklahoma State University) have integrated well with the church. They come to worship and to sing in the choir, and they are involved in a number of programs." Thornburg enumerates some of the programs: bible study at a local coffee shop every week, Compline services, Sunday school classes, a lunch fellowship that takes place near the campus. The students also work with the youth of the congregation. One of their major projects has been serving at a church summer camp, Dwight Mission, where they are camp counselors and lifeguards. Thornburg reports that two of the some 30 to 35 students that are active in the campus-ministry program recently took a group of underprivileged students on a ski trip.

One of the most successful ecumenical congregation-based campus ministry programs, called United Campus ministry, serves students at Texas A&M at College Station. The program is housed in a Lutheran parish and collaborates with two Presbyterian, two United Church of Christ, and one Disciples of Christ congregations. According to Miller, it has been involved with the Lilly-funded program but has existed since the early 1980s. He reports that since 1983 over forty students from the program have attended Presbyterian, UCC, DOC, ELCA and United Methodist seminaries. The two primary goals of the program have been working with local congregations and leadership development.

Underlying the efforts of the Center for the Church and Higher Education are five key elements that need to be stressed in any campus ministry effort. Miller defines them thus: "We wanted to see the development of student Christian communities, and we wanted to assist in leadership development. We also emphasize social responsibility, bible study and evangelization, and finally pastoral care." When these elements are present, Miller explains, authentic relationships begin to happen. And when the congregations delegate students to read or greet the members, inclusivity in worship begins to happen. When students and congregation members have lunches together, when they work to sponsor a film festival or hold discussion groups, or collaborate on a mission project, Miller says that

faith and learning have been integrated into the lives of both the church members and the students.

The Center's most successful efforts at developing congregation-based campus ministries were located in small cities with populations ranging from 75 to 150 thousand and at universities with enrollments between 15 and 30 thousand students. A key ingredient for success was a community with a strong sense of the university's role in it. Also key were congregations numbering some 300 to 400 members and living in relative proximity to the campus. Miller found that big city congregations were not particularly responsive to providing campus ministry programs and that small, regional community colleges have not been especially receptive to such programs either. He notes that a strong component of success was in congregations that had members with a connection to the college or university. In the program's early days, Miller says that he identified some 200 institutions of higher learning within the boundaries of the Synod of the Sun. Forty of those colleges and universities had well established campus ministry programs and the project was able to increase that number by twenty-five. The churches known colloquially as "tall steeples churches", that is, congregations with sufficient membership and resources to allow a pastor to hire staff persons, were also able to be more successful in establishing congregation-based campus ministries than those churches with solo pastors.

Miller is candid about the difficulties of developing congregation-based campus ministries. He notes that mobility is a very real issue within congregations and that the churches are often stretched to identify the appropriate persons willing and able to take on such ministry, even when staff persons are appointed. Then too the particular niche of student need must be identified. "Tenacity is also needed," he says. "It takes anywhere from three to seven years to get a good campus ministry program up and running. When people are moving in and out of a congregation, when money and staff are short, and when churches are trying to figure out how be a church in a culture that is constantly changing, it is definitely a challenge to develop campus ministry."

Miller assesses that the general attitude toward campus ministry is becoming more and more positive these days. But, he notes, many of the people in seminaries today are second career students who are many years removed from their collegiate experience and thus don't have an immediate interest in campus ministry that persons in the old pipeline had—recent college graduates with a fresh experience of campus ministry. With that said, however, Miller can point to his own experience teaching a course in higher education ministry at Austin Seminary, one of few seminaries to offer such a class. He notes that some twenty percent of the seminary's graduates in recent years have taken the elective course.

Recognizing that campus administrations are important to the success of congregation-based campus ministry, the Center gathered college presidents and chaplains as well as church relations staff for yearly meetings. The project also made efforts to expand the concept of congregation-based campus ministry to a wider national audience. During 2003 Miller visited Harvard, Wellesley, MIT and Boston University as well as met with the

leadership planning team of the National Campus Ministry Association at its annual meeting in San Antonio. Contacts were also pursued in Grand Fork, North Dakota, Los Angeles/Pasadena, and New York City. Miller was also instrumental in planning a conference for United Methodist campus ministers held in New Mexico in 2004.

Miller remarks that the widely documented hunger for spirituality on the part of today's young people is indication of the need for good campus ministry programs. "Campus ministry is the place where youth culture and church culture come together." He is not sanguine, however, about the future of congregation-based campus ministry programs. Funding is weak across the denominations for such programming and the Lilly Endowment grant period for the Center is over. He states categorically that the financial problems have "serious long-range implications for the future of the various denominations, and it makes the work that has resulted from our emphasis on developing congregationally-based campus ministry programs more important than ever."

In sum, this is a good news/bad news story. Students in some fifty colleges and universities continue to benefit from the hard work of Mike Miller and the Center for the Church and Higher Education. The bad news is that as regional judicatories cut their budgets, funds for campus ministries are hard to come by. Miller is proud of his work with the congregations and campus ministries and emphasizes that "Campus ministry, in all its many contemporary forms, is absolutely vital to the future of the mainline Protestant denominations. If we fail on campus, we will simply abdicate our influence in shaping the future. Campus ministry has been, and will remain, the place where the church and the future come together."