

ITEM 203
INFORMATION ITEM

Subject: A New Way for a New Day in Higher Education

Background:

In preparation for the 2010 GA report on Renewing the Commitment: A Church-wide Mission Strategy for Ministry in Higher Education by the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) this item will highlight a few of the new realities and trends affecting colleges and universities, their students, and those engaged in collegiate ministries.

According to the Barna Group and other studies, 60% of high school grads drop out of the church and 80% out of the remaining 40% will lose contact with the local church prior to graduating college. Some have estimated that less than 5% of college students are being reached by all existing campus ministries combined!

In addition to learning to live in an increasingly pluralistic society, today's students are also grappling with a new culture of violence, addiction, indulgence and unimaginable stress. It is now estimated that at least one out three high school and college-aged youth experience abuse at some point in their relationships. Eating disorders and self mutilation are on the rise. "Spiritual but not religious" is the mantra heard on campuses throughout the nation.

Old approaches to ministry are no longer sufficient and the faithful youth group leader may not automatically connect to a campus ministry once they enter college. It goes well beyond the usual wrestling with what is relevant among the current generation. Chaplains, campus ministers and others engaged in collegiate ministries are well aware that fashions, musical taste, and slang are always changing, and can actually plan for such change.

But in the last few years, change has been swift, sweeping, and radical. Beginning in the early '00s, students were much less engaged and committed than in the past. Church shopping and fellowship-hopping, always an issue on campuses with multiple Christian options, became epidemic.

This is but one change that chaplains and campus ministers continue to struggle with. They are wrestling with what Alan Roxburgh calls "discontinuous change." As a result, ministries struggle to reach students, and in many cases, to staff their ministries. While some para-church ministries continue to draw large crowds, and may even have experienced growth, even they should be humbled by two realizations.

First, they are ministering to the largest college-going generation of all-time (over 17 million undergraduates in 2006 according to the U.S. Census Bureau). 2009 will mark the largest graduating class ever, and enrollment is expected to increase through 2015. While campus ministries' raw numbers may be up, their per capita numbers, and their staff-to-student ratios, are often way down. In other words, the rising tide of college enrollment across the nation is floating their boat too.

Second, most of those ministries are not breaking much new ground. The Ivy Jungle Network's survey found that the majority of campus ministries only see 1-5 conversions each year. Many well known groups are growing by becoming more efficient at attracting students from the increasingly smaller pockets of "Christendom," and often by siphoning students from other groups. (In other words, students are growing their groups the way they saw their parents grow many of their megachurches).

Research done in preparation for the 2001 report to the GAC, identified approximately 825 PC(USA)-related campus ministries and college chaplaincies and about 2,000 individual congregations that stated they were involved in ministry to students other than their own members. The great majority of these ministries were understaffed and underfunded.

One calculation showed that the financial support for staff of one para-church organization at two large public universities was roughly equivalent to what ten Presbyterian synods had budgeted for campus ministry. Financial support has declined significantly since that calculation was made.

In light of these realities coupled with the current economic climate, how can the Office of Collegiate Ministries:

- help Presbyterian congregations collaborate with Presbyterian chaplains campus ministers to identify first year Presbyterian college students and aid in their transition to college life?
- help congregations reach, teach and keep new immigrants, international students, the “unchurched” and those who do not know Christ?
- support and equip those who are called to serve college students and campus communities?

Like the church and the rest of society, collegiate ministries is at a transition point such as few, if any, previous generations have seen. The scope and speed of the changes we have witnessed over the past decades of the twentieth century are greater, and have greater implications, than at any other time in recorded history. Those who gather to write the report for the 219th General Assembly will have to grapple with this new reality as they seek to find God’s will and way for a new day in collegiate ministries.