

INSTALLATION, UNITED CAMPUS MINISTRY
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SPECIAL SITUATION, UNIVERSAL FACTOR

Acts 17:16ff.

It seems that Paul only planned to treat the city of Athens as a stop-over while waiting for his friends. Once he began to look around, however, it came through to him that he found himself in a rather special situation. The fact that there were idols all around was not remarkable. There were idols everywhere. But in Athens they had something else. They had professors.

Like professors of all times and places those of Athens were continually holding colloquies. As Luke puts it somewhat wryly, "They spent their time in nothing except telling and hearing something new." Paul was new. Therefore, he was invited, indeed, it seems that he was commandeered, to tell and be told. In terms of the missionary body count it was not a very productive exchange. But a lasting impression was made on a few people, including a professor named Dionysius and a woman named Damaris, otherwise unidentified, but whom recent legend holds to have been superintendent of the food vending machines in the student union.

That was the first campus ministry. For most of Christian history since that time some sort of campus ministry has continued. Of all specialized ministries this is certainly one of the most enduring. The forms of ministry have changed through the centuries from universities run and taught entirely by priests, to chaplains presiding over compulsory worship in residential colleges to the free-wheeling individuals who infiltrate the campuses of secular universities. I have served on campus ministry boards in three states in three decades. During that time I have observed marked changes in the philosophy and style of campus ministries. I suspect that we are beginning to enter upon another shift in philosophy and style. But always these ministries have been aimed at representing the church within the special setting of the academic community.

Of course, there has been a change in that community itself. In a sense it is less special than it used to be. In the old days campus ministers saw themselves mainly as helping to meet the needs of undergraduate students, most of whom were a long way from home and fell between the ages of eighteen and twenty-two. Now campus ministers see themselves as relating to the whole campus scene -- students, faculty, administrators, everyone. And the student situation is much more complex. On many campuses the majority of students are local residents. A large share attend school on a part-time or intermittent basis while at other times they hold jobs in the community. They may range in age anywhere from eighteen to eighty-eight. Were Paul to walk into a class at UMD he might still observe Eutychus dozing on the windowsill after having spent the previous evening at Grandma's. But he may take note as well that Dorcas is sitting in the front row with her knitting.

The campus scene remains a special scene. But perhaps it may be said that campuses such as we have in the Duluth-Superior area are much less a separate scene. They are more closely tied into the surrounding community than the ivory towers of old.

This is well to bear in mind. Sometimes in setting up special ministries the church has made the mistake of looking upon them as wholly separate ministries. Just as the town has tended to think of the gown-world as something removed, so the parish church has tended to think of campus ministries as an undertaking aimed at a separate group of people in whom the parish need take no particular interest.

Indeed, the parish church itself has fallen victim to that destructive separatism which is the negative fallout of specialization. For several generations we felt that the most efficient way to do our job was to divide everybody up according to age, sex, marital status, occupation and whatever other categories we could think of. The really successful minister was the one who could boast to his colleagues that he had organized an encounter group composed of spinster stenographers over the age of seventy-five who were single parents with a common interest in skeet-shooting.

Differing people in differing situations do have special needs and interests. Every individual, every congregation, every secular setting is special in its way. Every minister should be sensitive to these particularities. You do not preach in Pilgrim Congregational Church in quite the same way you might preach at Floodwood, or East Harlem, or Beverly Hills. You don't set up quite the same program for students at Saint Scholastica that you might set up for a women's luncheon in the Fellowship Hall. You do need to be sensitive to the speciality of individuals and of groups.

But we do need to beware of allowing these specialities to divide our ministries to the extent that our ministries begin to divide people. I am persuaded that we in the church need to amend our ways and to start bringing people together across these classifications we have set up. The fact that Eutychus and Dorcas are in the same classroom can make that class much more interesting to both of them.

That is true not only because differing sorts of people bring to one another the spice of variety. It is true because under the spice they all share the same humanity. Both Eutychus and Dorcas are likely to say "ouch" when you prick them with a pin, though unfortunately Eutychus and even Dorcas might say a few other things which in a more graceful age they would not have said in one another's company. Both Eutychus and Dorcas feel exhilarated by a bright October day and depressed when they make a mistake and guilty when they do something wrong and happy when they are with someone they love. Both Eutychus and Dorcas are searching for meaning and purpose in their lives. Most basic of all both were created "that they should seek God, in the hope that they might feel after him and find him."

That was the common factor, the universal factor that Paul lifted up when he was paraded up the hill to the Areopagus. Though he was far more cosmopolitan than most people we meet in the Bible, Paul must have found these Epicurean and Stoic philosophers very strange. And to them this ex-pharisee who talked about Jesus and the resurrection must have seemed a great oddity. One suspects that they wanted to keep him that way, something new for their collection, the latest curio for their shelf of mythological Knickknacks. But Paul immediately points to something very old, the oldest thing of all, in fact, that which was there from the foundations, that to which one of their own poets has alluded, that which embraces all our specialties and all our separations, that which all of us are seeking whether we know it or not and which may be found not so much by discussion as by worship, not so much by debate as by faithfulness. Paul proclaims the living God.

This, too, is our ministry. This is our special ministry on every scene, campus or otherwise. Our specialty is precisely that which is most all-embracing. If it be asked what do campus ministers do that the office of student affairs does not explicitly do, this is our answer. It is to remind each special scene of him "in whom we live and move and have our being." It is to do this amid the idols and in the atmosphere of the absence of God. It is to do this confessing that we bring our own idols on to the scene and that for us too God remains a mystery, yet believing with Paul that Jesus Christ has made him known.