

TAKING STOCK

Does Your College Ministry Reach Out to the Needy?

BY KEITH WASSERMAN

DURING THE 10 YEARS that I worked as leader and director with an evangelical campus ministry, our attention was focused on teaching young believers how to enter into worship, understand God's work, develop a disciplined life of prayer and Bible study, and communicate the gospel to this generation. Our goal was to raise up leaders who would "2 Timothy 2:2 it to the world." But today as I reflect upon those years, I am gripped with the awareness that something vital was missing from our ministry.

When Jesus announced what the ministry of the Messiah would look like, he quoted from Isaiah 61, saying: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor" (Luke 4:18-19).

Only now do I realize that the "system" of campus ministry we followed had a fatal flaw: we forgot the poor and oppressed. Is it possible that by focusing so narrowly on individual spiritual growth, we as evangelicals have actually institutionalized neglect of the poor in campus ministry? Can it be that the leadership of our ministries are, by omission, teaching that the needy are not among God's priorities? I'm very much afraid so.

Ask any college student in your fellowship to name the top 10 issues that your ministry taught or emphasized this year. When was the last time your students were

encouraged to participate in a retreat on ministry to the poor and oppressed or to actually get out and get involved in some meaningful way in the community that would bring them into contact with those living on the margins of society?

I recognize that most of us in campus ministry are there because God called us, and because we believe it to be the best way to impact the world. What else could possibly sustain us—surely not the money. I also recognize that we each wrestle with a limited amount of time to teach young believers the "essentials" of the Christian faith. Our heart is to equip students with the fundamental tools of discipleship.

Nevertheless, I want to raise this question: Does the biblical worldview of the average student coming out of our fellowships include an understanding of God's heart for the poor? Can we say with confidence that our students know as much about the consistent biblical themes of the widow, orphan and stranger as they do about how to discover God's will for their lives or God's guidelines for dating relationships? Better yet, are we teaching our students to value spending time with the elderly, being a "big brother" or "big sister" to a kid from a single-parent family or volunteering time at a homeless shelter, as much as we are teaching them about sharing their faith or practicing the disciplines of quiet time and a consistent prayer life? I don't think so.

Today I direct Good Works, Inc., a ministry to the rural poor and homeless in Athens, Ohio. Would it surprise you to learn that our non-Christian volunteers outnumber our Christian volunteers three to one? Why is this? Because, he who makes the definitions wins the arguments. If "being a Christian" is defined only in terms of personal holiness and individual spiritual development—and measured in Bible study, church and fellowship meeting attendance—then it is no wonder that the average student sees little to no value in serving the poor.

In many ways, no one is better equipped to serve the needy than college students. It is often the ardent desire of youth to stretch themselves in

the name of some higher calling, some greater cause. They long to make a difference in the world—to be relevant and feel needed. Rather than directing them inward in a search for personal spiritual growth, why not encourage them to go out into a needy world? By putting their faith into action and serving others as their Savior served, they will find their young faith taking deep root in their hearts.

I write to call the body of Christ on the campuses of our nation towards service and ministry to the poor. I propose that if it is our goal to know Christ and make him known, then Jesus will reveal himself to us as we come into face-to-face contact with "the least of these" in ways we will never meet him in a Bible study, prayer meeting or sermon. A deeper relationship with God waits for us as we "spend ourselves" (Isaiah 58:10) into the lives of those in economic, physical and emotional need. I believe there is a strong connection between "sowing to please the Spirit" and "doing good" (see Galatians 6:7-10). When we serve others with acts of kindness, we experience what both Galatians 6 and John 17:3 call eternal life. Indeed, I suggest that we actually experience and discover a depth in our relationship with Christ Jesus as we encounter him in suffering people who cannot repay us.

Go, therefore, and demonstrate the compassion of Jesus to the poor all around you. Go and rethink how you can involve your students in the lives of the poor and the oppressed, many of whom are physically and emotionally handicapped. Be intentional. Do it as a body. Do it as an act of true spiritual worship *and* as an effort to demonstrate the gospel. Do it not to talk about how many people came but about how many were touched by the love of God.

Better yet, pray that God will bless your faith to such an extent that you, like Jesus, become so approachable by the "outcasts" of your community that you get invited into the homes of the most notorious and well-known sinners in your town. This is a kingdom value—to be accessible by all, and to have a heart and an ear for the needy. Arid it's all about the kingdom, isn't it?