

# *EXPECTATIONS!*

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## *The Task Before Us from the 30,000- Foot Level*

The work of the consolidation has reached some important markers recently. We received the approval of our Change of Control application from the Higher Learning Commission in April and the month of May has seen the flurry of activity to implement the pieces of the new legal entity. During these times of relocation and adjustment, where *new* seems to be the operative word; seeking the familiar is a natural default response.

Personally, I've got to look beyond the current flurry of activity to find a "north star" that can guide the efforts that we have worked long and hard to bring to the light of day. I begin with a reminder of our starting point in the School of Theology and Church Ministries (STCM). The undergraduate studies of the STCM will have three departments offering 8 areas of study. The Bible –Theology Department will offer biblical studies and biblical languages. The Church Ministries Department will offer Church Leadership, Preaching, Youth Ministries and Children's Ministries. The Inter-cultural Studies/Global Missions Department will offer Inter-Cultural Studies and Global Missions. Add to that the offering of four different master's degrees and 4 doctoral degrees at AGTS and this is truly the initial expression of what a comprehensive university with an embedded Seminary can be. When you think about combining the library holdings of CBC and AGTS that are focused on the disciplines represented in the STCM and add the holdings in those disciplines already present in Evangel University; there exists the distinct possibility of holdings more than 200,000 unduplicated volumes most pertinent to our major courses of study in the STCM. Working with me in leadership is Dr. David Bundrick, dean of the School of Theology and Church Ministries and the academic dean at AGTS; and Dr. Donald Johns, associate dean for Undergraduate Studies for the STCM.

Beyond these obvious bits of information about our starting point together, I have attempted to look to the future and gain perspective beyond the numerous details that will be part of our initial journey together. There are two quotes and two Bible texts that have emerged as the "givers of perspective" to allow me a vantage point from 30,000 feet to see the future in the middle of the flurry of necessary activity.

The late British missionary Leslie Newbiggin has regularly provided me with perspective. Newbiggin's greatest insights came after 50 years of missionary service in India. Upon his return home to England he wrote extensively about the stark changes that had occurred in England while he was serving in India. In his book, *The Gospel in a Pluralistic Society*. Newbiggin said, "*How is it possible that the gospel should be credible, that people should come to believe that the power which has the last word in human affairs is represented by a man hanging on a cross? I am suggesting that the only answer to that question, the only hermeneutic of the gospel, is a congregation of men and women who believe it and live by it.*"

The future of the School of Theology and Church Ministries (STCM) must be linked to the fact that real people are asked to flesh out the Gospel as faith communities who give visibility to the gospel of Jesus Christ. Local congregations matter in the communication and living out of the Gospel. The STCM must be attuned to the responsibility we have to our Fellowship and our role in developing leaders and congregations that understand what is at stake as we “believe in the Gospel and live by it.”

Another quote that gives me perspective is from the great New Testament scholar Gordon Fee who describes the Church in his book Paul, the Spirit, and the People of God, “...as the eschatological community, who, formed as a people by Christ’s death and the gift of the Spirit, and thus restored into God’s likeness, becomes God’s new covenant people.”

To be an eschatological community is really being a group of folks with a destiny that is defined by the presence of the Spirit of God. Human discussions about vision and mission are simply human discussions, unless we understand clearly the intent of our Lord to infuse communities of God’s people with His presence so that the Gospel is enfleshed in Word, deed and power. Infusing our students with this sense of destiny; that they are part of God’s “grand redemptive story” is something so vital to the Gospel’s visible influence in the 21st century.

The two Bible texts that give me perspective are found in Exodus 33 and 2 Corinthians 5:20. The Exodus 33 account is part of the crisis experience Moses has surrounding the flurry of activity that includes the giving of the Ten Commandments, the children of Israel’s creation of the Golden Calf and Moses’ deep disappointment at the collapse of leadership; most notably that of his brother Aaron. Most poignant in this dialogue with Jehovah is the realization by Moses that, “if your Presence does not go with us, do not send us up from here. What will distinguish me and your people from all other people on the earth?” (vs.15-16) We must infuse into students the sense that life and death is at stake as they serve God in their respective fields. How we represent the Gospel is no small issue. A sense of destiny is not just a personality trait; it is a spiritual quality that acknowledges Gods’ redemptive mission at the center of all we do.

2 Cor. 5:20 is one of my favorite texts. Paul’s observation in this text is simply that, “we are therefore Christ’s Ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us, be ye reconciled to God.” To me, this simply is a reinforcement of the fact followers of Christ are part of grand story that is bigger than themselves. Congregations and leaders of congregations are critical to whether or not we represent the Gospel in powerful or mediocre ways.

So what does all this have to do with the task ahead of us? Undergraduate studies in the STCM will serve every student in the university. The infusing of a sense of destiny as a member of communities of Christ followers is something I am hopeful this school can do with every increasing effectiveness. We need to realize that the challenges to the Gospel in the 21st century require graduates from every discipline to participate in spheres of influence where Jesus desperately needs to be represented fairly, without the casting of shadows on who He is.

Might I be so bold as to say we need to infuse every student with a sense of the apostolic? I use that word intentionally, because I believe that the apostolic function is to take the Gospel to the places where it is most resisted and least accessible. Some of the greatest resistance to the Gospel and its implications are found in places like Wall Street where greed is all too often the currency. Public policy is planned and implemented in our nation with little accessibility to the Gospel because we have been overwhelmed with the mantra that faith is a private issue and does not belong in the public arena. The crisis in public education grows with children walking the hallways of our schools, whose lives are all too often inflicted with the tragedy of broken families and the quest to alleviate pain. Can we offer a renewed sense of destiny to each student that comes into our classes that their gifts and skills need to be part of the grand redemptive story of the Gospel that roots itself and gains a sense of destiny as part of communities of followers of Jesus where the actual presence of God is experienced?

STCM will also passionately serve students who see their future as focused on becoming a leader and top quality professional whose gifts and skills lead these communities of Christ followers which are the hermeneutic of the Gospel. There could not be a more critical time than now to prepare leaders for the church who do so as thoroughly prepared men and women who serve the critical juncture we find ourselves facing. Our Fellowship is not unique in its graying; mainline Protestants and Catholics face an even more stark future than we do with this aging leadership. While we are making small strides toward replacing the leadership ranks of folks my age with younger leaders, the STCM has got to step up the pace of our efforts to fill this gap. The challenges facing 21st century leadership of the Church must include our best efforts or we could face the onerous possibility of having congregations more educated than the leadership tasked with leading these congregations.

A lot is made of Springfield as being an out of the way place in the buckle of the Bible belt, implying that this is a bubble where the realities of the world are somehow overwhelmed by so many Christians and churches. I moved here 14 years ago from Southern California and that was a certainly a misguided perspective that I had. Truth be told, we do not live in a community where the social realities of 21st century are missing. We live in the state with more methamphetamine arrests than any other state in the Union. The unholy trinity of meth, poverty and domestic violence are rampant. Greene County, where we live, may be the buckle of the Bible Belt, but tragically it is also the county in the state of Missouri where reported domestic violence is at a level of 2 to 1 over any other county in our state. 50% of all children under 5 years old in Springfield live at poverty levels and 25% of all children in our city enter kindergarten without the basic skills to start school. This reality in our state, county and city is but a microcosm of what our churches and their leaders face across our nation. We aren't doing our work in a bubble; we are clearly in the eye of the storm. We can and must empower students in the STCM to be Spirit-empowered leaders who take their place responding to the 21st century realities that challenge the Gospel's impact.

Statistics may vary, but the disintegration of social structures yields broken people who desperately need the Gospel embodied by congregations who believe and live by it. These congregations must be led by leaders who serve with a sense of destiny that they are part of

redemptive saga that requires people regardless of their gifts and skills to be about demonstrating what it means to be empowered by the Spirit to be truly apostolic.

We must serve our Fellowship with the belief that sharp minds and passionate hearts belong together. Our efforts must forge even greater commitments to provide our churches with marketplace leaders and leaders of the Church with a deep sense of destiny that their efforts are necessary for there to be a fair representation of Jesus where the Gospel is most resisted and least accessible.

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*The basis for this article was a presentation Dr. Klaus made to the undergraduate faculty members of the STCM in late May.*