

## Establishing a Faculty Community

*by Thomas Trevethan*

At the foundation of the InterVarsity Faculty Ministry vision is the formation of witnessing communities of faculty within the institutions of higher education. Other aspects of our Vision and Mission are far less likely to be fulfilled in the absence of vibrant, Christian communities of faculty. Individuals acting alone are almost never able to sustain the kinds of involvement we envision. Indeed, it is not good for a person to be alone. Christian community has been the seedbed and foundation of Christian mission since the foundation of the world Christian movement recorded in the pages of Scripture.

If gathering witnessing communities is foundational, it is also hard work. It involves dead ends, missed appointments, false starts, disappointments, opposition, and conflict. Just a cursory reading of the letters of Paul, the New Testaments' premier cross-cultural gatherer of witnessing communities, should disabuse us of the notion that this is easy work. And we would be remiss not to note that gathering witnessing communities of faculty in the contemporary academy is a tougher assignment than most. Indeed, some have suggested that Faculty Ministry should not even attempt this effort, given its rigors. To us, this seems un-Biblical, un-Gospel, unbelieving. Make no mistake, this work is a glorious work, wonderful for the grace it displays, wonderful for the relationships it builds and that we come to enjoy, wonderful for the way it advances the Kingdom of God, wonderful for the way it brings glory to the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, One God! Why would we want to rob faculty of the joy and privilege of life and mission in witnessing communities because we find the challenges daunting and difficult?

Assuming, then, that you have faced the challenges, counted the cost of this ministry, and seen the grace and glory in gathering witnessing communities of faculty, how should we proceed?

### **1. Be clear about the mission and vision of InterVarsity Faculty Ministry.**

Our communities exist to “identify, encourage, and equip Christian faculty to be a redeeming influence among the people, ideas, and structures of the university.” That is, to fulfill the InterVarsity Faculty Ministry Mission. Further, our vision (of the way the mission will be fulfilled) is that Faculty, in partnership with InterVarsity staff, will:

- establish witnessing communities of Christian academics that reflect the diversity of the body of Christ,
- follow God's call in spiritual formation and vocation discipleship,
- balance excellence in life, research, mentoring, and service, for the glory of God,

- practice their disciplines from a profoundly Christian viewpoint.

So, gathering faculty into witnessing communities is both a fulfillment of this vision and the means of accomplishing the rest of that vision. In short, faculty communities are gathered for mission to the university. This includes spiritual support and encouragement for Christian faculty, but it also calls us to be an influence upon the people, ideas, and structures in the world around us in the university. Given this mission, the first two activities of establishing a faculty community are foundational, largely invisible, and continuous. They are prayer and networking.

## **2. Pray with and for faculty.**

Prayer connects us, individually and corporately, to our God in praise, thanksgiving, and petition and to our neighbors in compassion, service, and the search for peace and justice. Above all it affirms our dependence on the Lord for his Kingdom to come, his will to be done in our part of the earth as it is in heaven. One truth of the spiritual life is that committed and gathered prayer is the fuel for Kingdom advance and the sign of rightly focused trust and confidence. It is natural to feel the need to seek the Lord's power and direction when our mission is small and weak. Then we know we need the Lord. But our need is no less great as our efforts are prospered. Prayer, and the trust that is at its heart, is never optional. It is always foundational.

Finding faculty who share the mission and vision and who desire to pray is of inestimable importance. A praying core will draw others into the life of corporate prayer by invitation and example. Identifying that core almost always requires considerable networking among faculty.

## **3. Network, network, network.**

Meeting with faculty for meaningful conversation about the challenges and opportunities in their work, about how their faith relates to their life as a faculty member, about ways they might be involved in campus mission will deepen our understanding of faculty vocation and the university. In the process, as the Lord leads us, we will find spiritual kindred spirits who make great partners in the service of the Kingdom. And we will find opportunities to share the gospel with folk who are strangers to it. Especially on larger, more decentralized campuses networking is continuously needed to widen the circle of faculty who know about opportunities for involvement. After we establish some corporate activities for faculty, we still need to keep meeting folk in a wider circle, rather than focusing exclusively on programs. Most of the work of building faculty ministry on campus will be carried forward through this face to face work of relationship building.

Like prayer, it is foundational and needs to be continuous.

## **4. Identify the most critical resource: Faculty Ministry Catalysts.**

One conclusion we have reached about faculty ministry, a conclusion that has been reinforced again and again, is the faculty will not self-aggregated into communities. What is required is someone, a faculty member or IV staff or other campus ministry leader, who will take initiative to gather faculty. These folk we call Faculty Ministry Catalysts (hereafter FMC). Where there are no FMC's, there will be no FM! If you are reading this paper with a serious interest in taking initiative to gather faculty into witnessing communities, you aspire to be a FMC, and we would encourage you to contact us for support and resources.

As we begin to take initiative, the most critical resource we seek is faculty who will take similar initiative to invite their friends and colleagues. This is particularly important if we are not faculty ourselves. We are outsiders to the university. We need partners who are insiders to fulfill our mission and vision. Until faculty women and men are prepared to invite their peers, we will make only modest progress in our mission. Perhaps it will be significant to mention the two main barriers to raising up faculty initiative-takers. First, many genuinely believing faculty have little sense of calling from the Lord to the university. They do not think of the campus as a significant location for Christian mission. And they think of their faith in largely privatized terms. Often these folk play an important role in the life of their church to the exclusion of involvement on campus in witness and vocational discipleship. Our overtures to faculty ministry will strike some as strange, sometimes hopeless, and even threatening. Others will be intrigued and open to considering our invitation. But with all of these are folk we need to find ways of sharing the breath-taking Biblical vision of the Lordship of Christ. Unless they are convinced about this vision, our invitations will be met tepidly, at best.

The second barrier affects all faculty, namely, time. Most faculty already have a full plate between professional duties and expectations (teaching, scholarship, service, administration, mentoring), family, community involvements, and church. Adding one more thing is almost never welcome. The fact is that faculty will need to make and take time for ministry to and with colleagues. Again, vision comes into play in overcoming this barrier. Guilt will not overcome the demands and inertia of academic life, to say nothing of the potential for disapproval by secularized peers. Unless we are drawn into ministry by a greater vision that begets deep conviction and passion, we will not move forward. Thanks be to the Lord, there are many Christian faculty who are eager to be involved, who come to campus armed with a strong and passionate sense of calling to honor Christ above all in their life as a faculty member. The ways they seek to fulfill this calling are often quite diverse. Talking with faculty about how their faith affects their life as a faculty member is often quite stimulating and even spiritually thrilling, in my experience. Bringing faculty men and women together to share these avenues of service to the Lord Christ begets greater vision for richer engagement with the university.

**5. Partner to form a community: bring together the initiative-takers.**

There is a natural inclination to focus on visible, public activities or meeting as we seek to plant a community of Christian faculty. Events and programs make us feel like we are getting something accomplished. And no doubt it is significant to create visible and public opportunities for ministry to faculty in witness and discipleship. But to move too quickly to this step and to focus all our energy into making events and programs go forward successfully are big mistakes. Taking plenty of time to do #1-#4 above lays an important foundation for forming a community. And continuing to do this foundational work even as you move into the more formalizing work of establishing a community sets an important example about what makes for growing community and multiplication of resources. Keep on seeking clarity about the mission, praying, networking, and seeking initiative-takers (FMC's).

Having identified a core of initiative-taking faculty, invite them to come together to form a faculty community. It is important bring together folk with "deeds-done" in inviting and gathering colleagues. Often we base decisions on the selection of leaders on what we take to be their potential. Usually this emphasizes either the qualities of affable extroverts or folk who occupy positions of influence in the hierarchal order of the university. Now, affable extroverts and distinguished academicians will always play an important role in our mission to the university and their gifts certainly do not disqualify them from leadership positions. But neither do they qualify folk for leadership. One certain qualification is fruitfulness in actually doing the work that is required to build community with faithfulness and humility. If in addition to faithfulness and humility in doing the work of inviting colleagues we also can draw upon gifted senior faculty, so much the better.

Use these early gatherings with initiative-takers to consider the following action plan:

1. Review the Faculty Ministry Mission and Vision statements as the purpose statements for your local fellowship.
2. Review the InterVarsity doctrinal basis and affirm it as a statement of generous Christian orthodoxy. We need a clear understanding of what we mean by "Christian" in the pluralistic world of the academy.
3. Plan a few campus-wide events, which seem to your group to be good places to begin to be a public organization in the university. We have a several good resources for this planning effort. See, for example, "A Baker's Dozen of Ideas for Faculty Ministry", a resource we put together for University of Michigan in launching faculty ministry. This document seeks to address the frequent objection, "That's a good idea, and it might work at some other campus, but it could never work at UM!" So it refers to peer institutions where these ideas have in fact "worked." You could easily make up your own "Baker's Dozen ..." or "Eight Ideas..." suited to your own campus. In addition, we have found a one-day Faculty Symposium to be a very effective way to encourage faculty and raise their vision for faculty ministry.
4. Consider arranging a visit to your group by a FM Catalyst to assist your visioning process. Or attend a Faculty Symposium near your campus with a couple of faculty from your campus. Or visit an event organized by a faculty witnessing community at a nearby campus to build vision.

5. Affiliate your faculty community with InterVarsity Faculty Ministry. We believe that this more formal commitment will strength your community in the long run and afford you direct access to the growing resources of our network of faculty communities from across the country.