

University of Alberta Campus Ministry Report December 2011

For the past few years I've been developing a three-pronged approach to campus ministry at the University of Alberta. Programming is the educational aspect of the ministry. It consists of events such as Bible studies and book and film discussions. Secondly, pastoral care is a major component of the campus ministry. Service to the university makes up the third and final emphasis and includes things like panel discussions, serving on university committees, membership in the U of A Interfaith Chaplains' Association and, the focus of this particular report, teaching opportunities.

Jane is a PhD candidate in the history department. This semester she participated in a graduate seminar on the history of secularism that I have the pleasure of co-teaching. One of my earliest goals in the campus ministry was to find a way to begin teaching in the Religious Studies program at the U of A. When the director of the program asked me to co-teach the course with him I was thrilled and readily agreed. My participation in the course signals an important shift in the Religious Studies program at the U of A. It demonstrates the reality that academics can no longer sustain the old modernist paradigm of keeping confessional commitments separate from academic matters. This is something that Jane resists. Early on in the course she acknowledged that she is an atheist, but not a new atheist like Dawkins or Hitchens. Yet she clearly views religion as something best left behind in the West's continual progress toward a more enlightened future.

After the first class I found myself walking with Jane while I was returning to my office. She disclosed to me that she had been raised Roman Catholic but converted (my word, not hers) to atheism when she was about twelve. I asked her how she felt at the moment of her conversion. She seemed surprised by the question; apparently no one had ever asked her before and so she took some time to reflect on it. In the end all she could say was that she felt a sense of relief that she wouldn't have to attend church on Sundays anymore. With that we went our separate ways and while we had a number of good conversations in the context of the class over the next couple of months, we never had a chance to engage in a more personal conversation until the very end of the class.

The whole class had gone out for dinner to celebrate and I found myself sitting across from Jane. To my surprise and delight she informed me that she had spent most of the last few months considering the question I had asked her and why it was so difficult to articulate an answer. Since becoming an atheist she had never had any lengthy conversations with clergy and said that my presence in the class had given her much to think about. In the end she simply admitted that she was unable to believe, but that if she ever needed a chaplain, she would come to me.

This is exactly the kind of conversation I hoped would flow from such teaching opportunities. Not to mention the brilliant discussions that took place during the course itself. In fact, the course was so fruitful that the director of the program has invited me to co-teach with the Jewish chaplain a course on mysticism and negative theology in the fall!

One of my goals for the Campus Ministry has been to create a number of different doors into the ministry. What I mean is that I want a variety of ways that students, faculty and staff at the U of A may connect with the Campus Ministry. Obviously not everyone is interested in attending a Bible study. Teaching opportunities open doors for people to connect with the Campus Ministry in less traditional ways.

In this report I only focused on one of the three emphases of the Campus Ministry. I could have also told many stories about the programming and pastoral care sides of the ministry. All in all, this has been the best semester since I began my ministry nearly five years ago. There is no question that God is opening new and exciting doors and I look forward to the great things God will do in the coming months.

Peace

Rick VanManen
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University of Alberta