

## Engaging the Whole University for Christ\*

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What would a 21st century vision be for the International Fellowship of Evangelical Students (IFES) if Christ and Christians are *really, actually and to be observably* engaging the **whole** university for Christ?

This is a vision that is currently being discussed, developed, refined and adapted on several continents. It is a vision with a global reach, but every country, every continent and every people must give it a character appropriate to their circumstances.

I begin with two stories, which are still alive and continuing.

A while ago I was in an East Asian country meeting with their leading human rights lawyers. Many of them are Christians. They face extreme persecution from their government, including disappearance, torture and death. I was moved by their courage as they confront their repressive government, which is terrified about the potential impact of Christianity on rule by the current party. I was also impressed by the efforts taken by these brave lawyers to understand what their Christian faith, the Bible and Christian theology have to say about the future of their country – a country where Christians can worship openly and freely express their faith. Simultaneously, these lawyers are trying to think ‘Christianly’ and ‘constitutionally.’ They are imagining their future roles in their country not just as lawyers, but also as Christians. However, they are finding this very difficult.

A couple of weeks before, I met with Christian lawyers from this country when I gave a seminar on “Heroic Lawyers” at an elite law school in the U.S. The seminar was organised by a Christian student organisation. This law school is exactly the kind of place where I would expect the best future lawyers of the U.S. and the world would be able to think Christianly about the law, legal institutions, legal practice and the constitutions of countries. However, I found these brilliant law students timid and weak in their ability to link their Christian faith to entire legal systems or to the constitution of countries or political mobilisation of lawyers. Instead, they had their faith in one pocket and their law in another.

Compare these two stories. In the first story there is a huge *need* for Christian thought to inform and lead a society and a state. In the second story, there is a major *failure* in Christian students to develop the engagement between Christian thought and law, society and politics.

In both cases, in fact, Christian societies in universities have not engaged the great ideas of the university or the great problems of our times in which universities are intimately

involved. Put more strongly, in some important ways IFES and its national movements have failed in their ministry to universities. IFES movements worldwide in the 21st century must do much more with “engaging the university,” in fact, “*engaging the whole university.*”

This may require a very different approach to university Christian ministries – different audiences, different staff and different imaginations. IFES national movements and university groups need to re-invent themselves. If they do not, a vast institution of enormous influence – the universities of each nation – will be lost for Christ.

What does it mean to engage the **whole** university?

*It involves undergraduates AND graduate (postgraduate) students, faculty AND research staff, as well as administrators AND workers. It includes everything that the university does: its research and teaching; training in critical thinking; search for truth; as well as its approach to the most difficult and vexing issues in thought and practice, in academic life and in national life.*

To engage the **whole** university requires the mutual support, the interplay of four models of Christian ministry. We can think of these as four legs of a stool.

- the pietistic
- the evangelistic
- the apologetic
- the dialogic

It is the last of these – the dialogic – where many of us associated with IFES believe that university Christian movements need a new vision.

#### **LEG ONE: The Pietistic**

- **Focus on the inner Christian life, Bible study, prayer and fellowship**
- **An orientation to undergraduates**
- **Lacks engagement with issues of faith and scholarship**

In the pietistic model the principal orientation of IFES groups is towards the inner Christian life where the foundational activities focus on Bible study, prayer and fellowship. This is vital and essential to campus ministry. The thematic emphasis is on living the personal Christian life.

Yet, on its own, we discover that this leg of the stool has severe limitations.

- Ministry is oriented to *students*, not the faculty – and usually undergraduates, not the more mature students.
- Ministry usually does not engage the *minds* of students, the very reason they are at the university.

- Ministry has a limited engagement with the Christian faculty as *scholars*. No systematic effort is undertaken to list:
  1. who are the Christian faculty,
  2. how they might be mobilised on behalf of students, and
  3. how their own gifts and scholarship might be advanced for the kingdom of God in the university.
- Too often, students study *verses*, but they do not learn the great *theological* themes of the Bible.
- Oftentimes there is lack of engagement with the great debates, struggles and research frontiers of the university.

As a social phenomenon, this ministry too often stays away from the center of the university and exists at its margins. It reproduces inside the university what students should receive from the local church.

The development of the inner life is essential as it is one of the four legs of the Christian stool through which we can engage the *whole* university. But it is *not* sufficient – if we are to engage the *whole* university for Christ.

#### **LEG TWO: The Evangelistic**

- **Winning students for Christ**
- **Seeks to reach the whole campus**
- **Personal evangelism**
- **Evangelistic rally**

The evangelistic leg involves proclamation of the gospel of Jesus to the campus. It may be quiet, through personal sharings of faith, or vocal, through large meetings and public events. This is a fulfillment of the Great Commission – go into all the world and preach the gospel – and that includes the university.

Yet this powerful presence on the campus may not touch the heart of what the university does – what it thinks about it, what are its agendas and what it teaches – because the Christians make no connections between following Jesus and the teaching curriculum or the research agendas or the contributions of the university to public debate.

We rightly celebrate those that are *won for Christ*.

Do we mourn all those that are *lost from Christ*? And they are lost often because we have ignored their minds. They may come from a fine Christian family but somehow they lose their faith at university.

*What are we doing for people like that?*

*Why do too many students from Christian families think that Christianity is for Sunday School children, not for scholars?*

*How many bright, smart and intellectually capable students walk away from Christ on our campuses?*

*How many say the Christian faith has nothing to do with what I study, nothing to do with the university, nothing to do with its teaching and research?*

When we speak of 30 people *won for Christ*, do we think about the 30, 60 or 90 people who have been *lost from Christ* when they came to the university?

Spreading the Good News of Jesus is a living, breathing part of our presence on campus. But it is *not* sufficient if we are to engage the **whole** university for Christ.

### **LEG THREE: The Apologetic**

- **Identifies a source of intellectual threat**
- **Finds persons or books with authority on the threat**
- **Mounts a defense against the threat**

The Apologetic leg recognises that the big issues universities debate can threaten Christians and their faith. The apologetic ministry engages the university where the university seems to threaten the faith.

Programming for apologetics typically proceeds something like this:

- identifying a source of intellectual threat.
- finding *either* faculty members, far or near, who have the authority to understand and appraise the ideas, *or* equipping campus ministry staffworkers with books or materials that convey authoritative defenses.
- inviting faculty to mount a defense against the threat, by showing that the threat is misplaced, or the threat is rightly understood but can be rebutted, and so on.

The apologetic ministry has many merits. An effective apologetics on campus can also be a great encouragement to students, both for those whom the particular attack and defense is salient to their scholarship.

A thoughtful apologetics is integral to the faith. However, I have real concerns about it as it:

- has a defensive and reactive orientation.
- rarely, if ever, addresses issues that students or faculty are confronting at the leading edge of their disciplines.

- does not celebrate the wonder of God’s work or the relevance of the biblical revelation to literature and history, to nanotechnology or post-colonialism, ethnomusicology or institutional economics, to comparative religion or optics, to agricultural economics or bio-chemistry.

Apologetics is vital as it is one of the four legs of the Christian stool through which we can engage the whole university. But it is *not* sufficient if IFES and its national movements are to engage the **whole** university for Christ.

#### **LEG FOUR: The Dialogic Model**

##### **“Engaging the Mind through Conversations in the University<sup>1</sup>”**

- **Takes the university seriously on its own terms**
- **Regards the university ministry as a distinctive calling, not a reproduction of the local church on a university campus**
- **Engages the mind and injects faith into all conversations in the university**

A dialogic ministry takes the university seriously on its own terms. It considers a university ministry to be a distinctive ministry in its own right. It does not simply do what the local church does. Rather than *preaching* at the university, it enters into *conversation* with the university.

Dr Daniel Bourdagné, the IFES General Secretary, has put it clearly:

*We should have a discipleship of the mind. The calling for this ministry is in the university, not a primary school. It is the place that engages the mind. That is why engaging the university cannot happen if we do not take seriously the discipleship of the mind. This is our ministry field. This is the place where God has put us.*

We are called, first, to think Christianly about everything that goes on in the university.

We are called, second, to enter into conversations with all others on the campus – undergraduates, graduate students, faculty and staff. These are conversations about the issues the university is thinking about and the curriculum the university is teaching. These are conversations – dialogues – that are infused by faith.

In fact, a dialogic engaging of the university seeks to draw every person on campus into some kind of contact, engagement and exposure to Christians, Christian beliefs, Christian ideas, Christian virtues and Christian actions.

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<sup>1</sup> This label is borrowed from Dr Vinoth Ramachandra, the IFES Secretary for Dialogue and Social Engagement.

There are seven principal features of a Dialogic Model:

- It is *proactive*: it brings Christ to the great issues of major universities and the great issues to Christ.
- It is *expansive*: it nurtures Christian students and engages Christian faculty and staff.
- It is *comprehensive*: it reaches to teaching, to the curriculum, to research, to social and political engagement, to the classroom and all the supporting facets of a university administration. Every corner of the university in action has the light of Christ shone into it.
- It respects the *intellectual* gifts of the students and faculty who inhabit the universities of every nation.
- It is *relevant*, insofar as it takes on the big conversations of the day at the very moment they are being formulated and debated.
- It *listens as well as speaks*, insofar it seeks to carry on respectful conversations with Christians and non-Christians alike.
- It celebrates *intellectual* community that is characteristic of great universities. This might even bring Christians into cooperation with non-religious or other religious groups on campus.

It is obvious that there are fundamental shifts in orientation from the previous models, the other legs of the stool.

- The Christian *mind* is celebrated as enthusiastically as the Christian soul.
- The ministry moves from the *edge* of the campus into its *heartland*.
- The ideas and issues at the frontiers of learning and the leading edges of debate are celebrated for what they reveal of God and His work in the Kingdom.
- The barriers between students and faculty are overcome, in much the same way they are in research laboratories and advanced seminars and major research projects on those campuses and their research institutes.

As Bishop David Oginde<sup>2</sup> has said, “It prepares students (and I would say faculty) for positions of leadership in government, in public service, and the corporate sector . . . It prepares people for leadership in the professions, in the market and media, in every sphere of society.”

### **Examples of Engaging the Whole University**

Across the world, from almost every continent, we have heard wonderful examples of the ways students and faculty have sought to engage the university – in ways far beyond our imaginations. We see and feel the creative work of God’s spirit sweeping over the earth

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<sup>2</sup> Bishop David Oginde is the Presiding Bishop of Christ Is the Answer Ministries (CITAM), Nairobi, Kenya

and new fruit, new flowers blossoming in one place, then drifting across the internet to another university, another country and another continent.

## 1. Undergraduates, Graduate Students and Recent Graduates

In India, the North Delhi Evangelical Graduate Fellowship organised an Intensive Summer Study programme where around 40 recent graduates met every day for six weeks, for five hours a day from 2.30 p.m. to 7.30 p.m. They are expected to read two to five books a week from a mix of readings. Some were Christian books written by theologians and church leaders. Others were absolutely not 'Christian' – but are precisely the kind of things thinking people struggle with in India (and the former British Empire) and issues thinking Christians cannot escape. Some examples are books like *From the Ruins of Empire* by Pankaj Mishra, *Empire* by Niall Ferguson, *The Black Economy in India* by Arun Kumar and *The Ascent of Money: A Financial History of the World* by Niall Ferguson.

The topics covered were superb and of great relevance; examples included cloning, black money laundering, international trade negotiations and climate change. Besides heavy reading, there were writing requirements like writing short summaries and journaling. Through brutal self-examination, they ask questions like “Why does the Christian church not produce effective leaders, statesmen, thinkers . . . of the likes of Amartya Sen, Salman Rushdie, Nehru; and what must the church do about it to produce avant-garde leaders and thinkers in the next 100 years?” There were even simulations of international negotiations, all conducted in the context of deep devotional activities.<sup>3</sup>

## 2. Advanced Graduate Students and Faculty

Universities at their best are about ideas, research and journeys to the frontiers of discovery. That is what faculty and graduate students, especially doctoral students, should be doing.

Here are two exciting examples:

### Stanford University, U.S.

The Graduate Christian Fellowship at Stanford University took it a step further by creating an event called “Student Passion Talks”. Last year, students submitted abstracts for a “Passion Talk”, which is on thinking Christianly about a short presentation (10–15 minutes) in an area of their research. The topics were varied – artificial intelligence, computer science, psychology and neuroscience.

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<sup>3</sup> For further reading, refer to: [www.summerstudy2013.wordpress.com](http://www.summerstudy2013.wordpress.com); <http://issjournals2013.wordpress.com>.

The campus ministry staffworker shared on this event:

*“It’s been a fantastic demonstration – student to student – of how integration of our faith and our research might look. And now that they’ve actually seen it, it’s much easier for those students who have struggled with the concept to envision how they themselves might think and talk about their work and faith.”*

### **University of Queensland, Australia**

Professor Ross McKenzie, a Christian physicist, reported on an event where more than 20 faculty, postdoctoral students, and graduate students met on the topic “Christians Engaging the University”. The disciplines included international relations, biochemistry, chemistry, physics, computer science, and law. Ten different people each talked for five to ten minutes about their research field and ways they thought it may be related to the Christian faith. Some examples are:

- A political scientist discussed a recent paper he wrote about the issue of the “Right to Protect” and how views of it have a long history and are shaped by Christian ethics;
- A chemistry postdoctoral student discussed initiatives he was involved in to help chemistry education and research in the developing world.
- A quantum physicist mentioned randomness and issues about the sovereignty of God.
- A law professor spoke on the foundations of legal theory and ideas going back to Aquinas, and the tension between law and grace is there.

### **3. The Campus as a whole**

#### **Arts Festival for Justice**

Isra Ortiz, the campus ministry staffworker for GEU (*Grupo Evangélico Universitario*, the IFES movement in Guatemala) reported that there is a huge discrepancy between problems faced by Guatemala and the failure of evangelicals to confront these. Christians have too often been silent on violence, corruption, inequality and racism. The goal was to show a different face of Christianity to the University of San Carlos campus. As part of a campus-wide arts festival, a Christian student group came up with the idea of an arts festival focused on justice.<sup>4</sup>

As preparation, they read a book on injustice, visited the city dump where the poor lived and joined a May Day march for justice on 1 May. They also created a Facebook account which generated different posts – a student wrote a play about injustice, another student wrote a theme song, and some others created a photo collage and a painting exhibition. Through all these activities, Jesus was celebrated as the model of justice.

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<sup>4</sup> For further reading, refer to: <http://scriptureengagement.ifesworld.org/2014/06/an-arts-festival-for-justice-communicates-a-word-of-hope/>.



At the end of the day, more than 100 people had been on stage (there were 35–40 presentations), inviting students to reflect on justice through the arts. In total, around 600–700 people attended the Festival!

On the whole this effort challenged the stereotype that Christians do not care about justice. It also demonstrated how the arts can be a medium for the message of Jesus.

#### **4. Staff**

##### **“Project:Gratitude”**

Five undergraduates from Varsity Christian Fellowship at National University of Singapore wanted to mobilise the entire student body to show appreciation for the campus service staff, for example, the canteen and toilet cleaners, bus drivers, and security guards. The intention was to create a culture of gratitude and compassion, that is, to demonstrate the virtues of Jesus. The activities that were carried out included giving a piece of fruit or a cup of coffee to a staff member with a small note of thanks for the work they do. The movement rounded up with a month-long art exhibition that told the stories of these unsung campus heroes.<sup>5</sup> The project received campus-wide attention, including the student newspaper, and left the impression that Christians are kind, thoughtful, compassionate, and care about those many of us think are beneath our dignity.

##### **The Process of Engaging the Whole University**

As I compiled all these wonderful stories, I made an uncomfortable discovery. Many – maybe most – of these wonderful experiments to engage the university come from undergraduates and graduate students.

It reminded me of a learning experience I had too late in life:

In the Center on Law and Globalization, we have a major programme on systematic violence against women in civil conflicts. We wanted to expand our website, build networks of interested people across the world and take advantage of the social media. I supervised a young woman of about 25 years of age who kept coming to me for permission to attempt as well as explore new ideas and directions. I was either slow to respond, didn't respond, had various objections, asked too many questions or had too many reservations. Eventually she got fed up with me and just went ahead to take charge.

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<sup>5</sup> Editor's Note: Prior to this, there were other attempts made to engage the campus. For instance, the Singapore Institute of Management Students' Christian Fellowship organised a three-day event called "Discover Forgiveness" to help increase awareness of forgiveness and love in our relationships. The event touched the lives of many on campus.

She didn't ask my permission for anything – she just gave reports of what she was doing. In other words, she did something first and reported it later!

Very quickly, she got hundreds of people across the world linked together in a network that received our *Violence against Women* e-newsletter. She started a Twitter service and drew us into conversations with other networks worldwide which greatly magnified our impact. She established a Linked-In account – hundreds joined. She created a Facebook page – hundreds more joined. In other words, when I got out of the way, the enterprise took off and thrived. I was the problem. She was the solution.

Look at some of the extraordinary experiments that were mentioned earlier. These ministries thrived when young people, students and local staffworkers, were given the space and room to innovate and to be creative, as well as imaginative.

Young people do not know that something cannot be done.  
They don't know that  
something is impossible.  
They invent.  
They act.

## **Conclusion**

Where does IFES and its national movements go in the 21st century?

- Will our vision treat the university, as a whole, as our mission field?
- Will it bring Christian insight to intellectual struggles over the great problems of the academic disciplines?
- Will we reach faculty as well as students?
- Will we join the battle over the big ideas that alter imaginations and change the world?
- Will we have an impact on every person on the university campus, from the Vice-Chancellor to the toilet cleaner?
- Will we seek to mould the leaders of science and nations with the power of ideas encapsulated in the Christian gospel?

In the last few months I have spent many hours with great heroes of human rights who are also heroes of faith. Time and again they asked *not only* for the sustenance of worship and Bible study but *also* they plead for the tools to think Christianly about law, politics, markets, and science in their country. They see the future fast approaching. They fear they do not have the tools that will be required of them to meet the future.

Imagine if they had been trained to think Christianly when they were in universities where:

- sophisticated conversations range widely and openly among undergraduates and graduates, faculty and graduate students.
- every big issue that comes up in science, arts and letters, agriculture, medicine, law and engineering had been boldly considered as issues of *faith* as well as issues of *scholarship*.
- every issue in society and government and the market was on the agenda.

Imagine if the university itself had been transformed – by the topics on which scholars did research; by the approaches they took to those topics and by the impact of those topics.

Imagine if we multiplied both of these – *thinking Christianly* and *engaging the university* – across the nations of this continent and across the world.

Imagine, indeed, if Christ *truly* engaged the **whole** University!

This is a great and bold and magnificent vision.  
May we be worthy of it.

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