

Why the local church needs to be at the heart of reaching university students and how you can be part of the story.

Miriam Swanson

Fusion Movement

CHURCH & COLLEGE STUDENTS

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Contents

Foreword	vii
Introduction	3
<i>Why Beginning at the Beginning Is Everything</i>	
Chapter One: Why Church and Why Students	9
<i>Laying the Foundation for Fruitful and Effective Student Ministry</i>	
Chapter Two: Why Student Community	23
<i>The First of the Four Building Blocks for Fruitful and Effective Student Ministry</i>	
Chapter Three: Why Student Discipleship	37
<i>The Second of the Four Building Blocks for Fruitful and Effective Student Ministry</i>	
Chapter Four: Why Student Evangelism	51
<i>The Third of Four Building Blocks for Fruitful and Effective Student Ministry</i>	

CONTENTS

Chapter Five: Why Student Leaders	65
<i>The Fourth and Final Building Block for Fruitful and Effective Student Ministry</i>	
Epilogue	79
<i>The Beautiful Vision of Local Church Student Mission</i>	

Foreword

How I wished I had this book in my hands when I set out on the journey of church planting and student mission more than twenty-five years ago in the mid-1990s. I have known and worked alongside Miriam Swanson for half that time and witnessed God raise her up as a leader and spokesperson for this generation. Her communication gift shines through this book as she articulates the message and values of a kingdom movement that is much larger than Fusion and in which she and Fusion are fully invested.

With compelling argument and cultural insight, Miriam gently rouses the local church from her student mission slumber to an awakened, equipped, and alert posture. The student world needs something that only the church can

FOREWORD

give and a wide-awake church that can and must pioneer student awakening.

She sounds the alarm for both students and churches and gradually turns up the volume. I have no doubt God is speaking loud and clear through her words. Students need to leave today's universities with much more than a degree. A qualification is useful and valuable to both students and society; however, it does not come close to the value of knowing one's identity and purpose, and the wisdom to outwork that purpose.

There are other gifts that also must be handed out and received.

Students need to leave with kingdom values, ones that will never grow old and can be applied to neighbors and nations. Students need to leave with a vision that is greater than individual success and personal gain. Students need to leave with a daring and wild hope that stares down their own and society's struggles. Students need to leave with a conviction that they were born for a purpose, crafted, and curated in the heart of God. Students need to leave with their lives centered on Jesus.

FOREWORD

It is through the church that the gifts must be handed out and it is divine purpose that will be awakened in the student world as the church creatively and courageously comes alongside the campus. Miriam not only delves deeper into the why, she also very practically explores the how. She has condensed some of the valuable learning gained through the Fusion Movement that has now served and connected with more than 2,500 local churches of all shapes, styles, and sizes. The time is now, the alarm is sounding, the student world must be adopted by the church and this little orange book is designed to serve this most urgent of missions—that the local church declares hope in Jesus and home in his community for students.

Rich Wilson
Fusion Movement Leader

CHURCH & COLLEGE STUDENTS

Introduction

Why Beginning at the Beginning Is Everything

A young man walks onto campus, backpack slung across his shoulder, phone in hand. It's day one of his university career and he isn't sure where to go first. He's been given a schedule. He has a map. But now as he stands among the concrete buildings and unfamiliar faces, the journey doesn't seem so simple. He could really use a friend.

A young woman closes the door of her new room and flops onto her bed with a sigh. She's been working toward this moment for years. She's been looking forward to it all summer. But now that she's actually left home, school, church, and

CHURCH AND COLLEGE STUDENTS

friends, the freedom feels a little more daunting than she'd expected. She needs a new home.

A second year student clicks "send" and closes his laptop screen. Across the city a bunch of friends reach into their pockets and pull out their buzzing phones. The group message reads, "Today we pray for the students arriving on our doorsteps. Tomorrow we give them the best welcome to our city and the campus that we can. Jesus loves students; let's go and show it! See you in the morning." The local church is ready to share hope and become home for their new student neighbors.

There is something uniquely daunting and exciting about the experience of starting college as a young adult. You might have in mind your own experience of this life transition or have family members or young people in your church going through it right now. You may already be acutely aware of the opportunities and challenges this season presents. You may be convinced of the need for young adults to find friends, community, and support at college, in order to thrive in their lives and their faith.

Alarmingly, choosing to follow Jesus at college and continuing a connection in the local church, even when raised in a Christian home or church youth group, is not

WHY BEGINNING AT THE BEGINNING IS EVERYTHING

a given. Whether you draw upon your personal experience or simply Google the latest research on what happens post-youth-group for young people's faith, it doesn't take long to discover the pressing need for a different story to emerge than we are currently seeing.

Too many students are beginning college without discipleship that prepares them for this life change, and without a connection to the local church. This unprepared and disconnected beginning can have a devastating effect on their entire lives. And that's just the young adults who are transitioning from church youth groups. For the thousands of young people starting college with no experience of faith or awareness of the good news of Jesus, what hope do they have? Who is available to welcome them on the campus? As they search for a place to belong, are there any communities of faith ready to welcome and embrace them?

It can be hard to know what to do in the face of such intimidating data or personal painful experiences, which can make you question whether going to college is a good idea at all for a person's faith or well-being. It can be overwhelming to know where to start with so many young adults yet to be reached.

CHURCH AND COLLEGE STUDENTS

So why does the local church need to be at the heart of reaching university students? The answer to this question has huge implications. The university mission field is a vast and vital one, but the fact that parachurch on-campus ministries, chaplaincies, and some on-campus chapels exist lead many to assume someone else is responsible. Why get involved as a local church too?

The majority of students are not finding faith on campuses and are not inundating our local church communities with new disciples. There is much more yet to be realized when it comes to young adult faith and the university years. So why should local churches get involved in this huge mission to students? Luke 10:2 screams the answer: “The harvest is plentiful, but the workers are few,” and we must contend for a more hopeful and faith-filled story for the next generation than we are currently experiencing.

Imagine local churches having the tools and confidence to love, welcome, and disciple students as they start college life. What would change in this next generation if churches played their part in this story alongside those already at work in the student mission field? We hope these pages cause you to consider the university student mission story

WHY BEGINNING AT THE BEGINNING IS EVERYTHING

in fresh ways and to realize the vital role churches need to play in reaching this generation. We pray this is an idea that gets under your skin, that itches and irritates, that fuels prayer, deepens conviction, and leads you into action.

The university landscape is one that needs continual reaching and as such is the largest unreached people group on the planet. The story of local churches being at the heart of reaching the campus is only just beginning, merely scratching the surface of what is possible, and the need for this story to be written is increasing.

If by the end of these chapters you are not convinced that you are part of God's mission to students, and need to have concrete steps to move this vision forward, we have failed. Please read on as we explore why the story of church and students is one that must be told, beginning at the beginning, foundations first.

1

Why Church and Why Students

Laying the Foundation for Fruitful and Effective Student Ministry

We are hemorrhaging GenZ from churches at unprecedented speed. The studies and statistics are too familiar to us now to be casual about it. Many students and emerging adults are suffering profoundly in every dimension of life. If our church is in driving distance of a campus, we are positioned at the frontline of God's mission.

—David Thomas, senior advisor, New Room

Given the title of this book, it will come as no surprise that the model for student mission that we are advocating for is rooted in the local church. We want to dig down deep and establish firm foundations upon which fruitful and sustainable disciples can be developed. The foundation we are laying for student mission is the teachings of Jesus lived out in the community we call church.

We do not believe reaching the lost and making disciples should go around the local church, but that it should run all the way through the heart of what it means to be the church. We believe the local church is the primary place disciples can be made and nurtured and that this community of faith is vital for every generation to belong to, including university students. This may be easier said than done, but that is the story we want to tell, to invite you into, and where we will begin.

Who is my neighbor?

To begin this church-centric approach to reaching students, let us start by zoning in on the current picture to see just how close to home this story is for you. If you

WHY CHURCH AND WHY STUDENTS

pull up a map online and search the name of your nearest university, you'll see a pin drop in the center of a bird's-eye view of the campus. The campus, whether a scattering of locations across an area, or one clear concentrated city-within-a-city, is in many ways a world of its own. Thousands of young adults live, work, socialize, eat, play, and study in this little patch of land surrounding the pin. They're right there!

Now search for churches nearby on that same map on which you've located the university. Do you see many new pins show up, probably with a cross emblem in them? Zoom out a little if you need to. How many church communities are just a few miles from the campus? How about your local church? How close to the college are your people located?

The thousands of students the campus represents are surrounded by praying communities of Christians—people committed to worshipping Jesus together and becoming more like him for the good of the world. But do any of the students know this? What would change if these communities prayed specifically for students? What if every church prayerfully and proactively decided to be and share good

CHURCH AND COLLEGE STUDENTS

news with their student neighbors? And if you don't see a single church spring up for miles around, perhaps it's time to pray about church planting.

Looking at that map, with the campus, the churches, and all the young people's lives that it represents, it can be surprisingly easy to click out of the browser and pretend you haven't seen the need. It's really common for immediate deterring thoughts to arise like: *Those other churches are probably better placed than us to reach the students. We'll leave it to them.* Perhaps you're thinking, *We don't know anything about university culture, and we don't know where we'd even start.* Or even, *It's best to leave it up to the already established campus ministries to reach students, not us.* And so we as the church often click off the map, and hope that someone else, somewhere else, will reach students. We go on with church life, and pray disembodied prayers that one day, miraculously, young adults will somehow come flooding into our communities in search of Jesus.

Is that fair? No, maybe not. The chances are that you are aware of the opportunity and challenge of having university students nearby. But still, you may have disqualified yourself from being part of the mission to reach them. This is

where we believe a different story is possible. We believe you, your church, your people, are just the kind of community that students need. We believe every student should have the opportunity to find their hope in Jesus and their home in the local church, and that home may indeed look like you and your community.

We believe the local church should be at the heart of making disciples, including the student world. And we believe making disciples of this generation of young adults should be at the heart of the local church. So, in Christ you are more than qualified to be good news for the campus. Students need the family of God and the family of God needs students.

Becoming a church with students

Becoming a local church that welcomes and discipless university students happens in big and small ways, over weeks, months, and years. Although it is tempting to jump straight to the how-tos of starting student work, we are going to stay with the *why* for a little longer. If you and your church don't have prayerful conviction that university

students should be part of your vision for being the church and sharing the gospel in your locality, then no amount of action points are going to get you inspired. The heart for student mission has to come from God, and then the costly work of making student disciples will be a fruitful and joy-filled journey.

Why Jesus is really good news for students

College students are making choices and exploring ideas and experiences beyond the confines of their family home and upbringing. Like all of us, students want to live in freedom and want fullness out of life. They want life to feel purposeful, meaningful, and worthwhile. We know true freedom is found in Jesus and that his power and presence in us is transformative. As students deconstruct and assemble their new lives as young adults, Jesus himself can become the doctor, the gardener, the builder, and the author of who they are becoming. As students find their identity, the good news of Jesus can be the way for their steps, the truth which they can stand upon, and the life they can experience. This life in Christ is life in all its

fullness, it lasts beyond this current reality, and for students it can start right now—if only they knew they were invited.

Why the church is good news for students

Like us, students need places and spaces in which they can belong—people with whom they can feel known, welcomed, and at home. You might think they are socially fulfilled at college with hundreds of peers at the same life stage surrounding them. But the reality is that many students don't find a place of belonging, especially on a busy campus. We know loneliness has been on the rise and now statistics point toward our younger generations being the loneliest of all.¹

To be limited to a homogenous community drawn from a specific generation, institution, culture, and life stage can also feel quite stifling and is certainly not healthy for anyone. We all need friends of different ages, stages, backgrounds, and cultures to help us grow as whole disciples. We

1. See “The BBC Loneliness Experiment” for extensive data on this across nations and cultural contexts from 2020.

CHURCH AND COLLEGE STUDENTS

need one another in order to reflect the multicultural, integrated, intergenerational kingdom of God. Students find it refreshing and energizing to be around non-students. To leave the student dorm occasionally and be welcomed into a real family home is healthy for their well-being. To have friendships outside the intense student bubble, and to have the opportunity to receive input from people who may play a mentor-type role in their lives, is something many young adults crave. You may be surprised at how refreshing it is to be around young adults as well!

The local church is not confined to a certain life stage, but rather a lifeline through every season of our lives. We have a wonderful opportunity to teach and model an ecclesiology that introduces and establishes this firm foundation in students as they enter adulthood.

Why students are good news for the church

Student mission is not a one-way street. The strengthening and life that comes from young adults being full participants in the life of the local church is just as vital as the church's participation in the life of students. We need one another.

WHY CHURCH AND WHY STUDENTS

Students bring energy, cultural insight, ideas, leadership, and friends to the activity of the church. Those who follow Jesus already are often great inviters of their student community into small groups, socials, and Sundays. Many students are an example to the wider church, especially when it comes to evangelism and building community with new people. College can activate other student disciples in powerful new ways as young people embrace their own faith, some maybe for the first time.

If we are willing to create space and give them opportunity, students are some of your best preachers and worship leaders, hospitality hosts, and youth group volunteers. With their flexibility and availability during the week, mid-week social action projects, mentoring meet-ups, and online creative mission can all be innovated and delivered by the same students, who pull all-nighters or wear pajamas to do the shopping. They are remarkable wonders in creation!

However, some will still wonder if investing in students is worth it. After all, these young people might only be in a place for a few years before moving on again for jobs. They aren't often showing up with plenty of money and

CHURCH AND COLLEGE STUDENTS

experience to invest in the church in return for the short time they are around. They can seem disorganized and difficult to rely upon. But the bigger question is: Can we really ask what reaching the next generation is worth?

Yes, *some* students may not be able to financially give to the church. Yes, *some* students may be called to a different place after graduation. And, yes, *some* students will show up completely inexperienced in church, faith, and lifestyle. We pray beyond the surface presentation many more are exploring a hunch that God is real and might actually like them. The other side of this story, however, is that students will surprise you. They can be some of the most generous, committed, and wise members of the church, and God is calling them to play their part.

The good news is that God has already set a convincing precedent for investing in messy young people. With only three to four years to work with, an unpredictable lifestyle, with no clear paid employment to sustain them by traditional means, Jesus decided discipling young people was worth the time and effort. It was the predominant strategy and focus of his ministry. Besides, Jesus didn't just pick the nice, smart, obedient Jewish boys

who were already rabbis-in-training. He picked ones with tempers and ones with seemingly unrelated skill sets in fishing. He picked siblings, friends, and outsiders, and took them all on a journey of coming to faith and becoming a family. They were church. They were who then started and led the church. A band of misfit student-types, who were invited to belong to something (and in time, someone) as they learned, processed, and lived out their beliefs together. If it was worth it to the King of the universe, God himself, to serve and share life with a handful of beach-dwelling adolescents, then it's worth it for us to play our part in loving some of the thousands of young people at college.

Why student mission is really good news for society

“The university is a clear-cut fulcrum with which to move the world. Change the university and you change the world.”

—Dr. Charles Malik, former president of the United Nations General Assembly and Security Council

CHURCH AND COLLEGE STUDENTS

Finally, if you aren't quite convinced of the importance of the role you and your church have to play in student mission, just think of who is in government right now. Think of who your most influential teacher was at school. Think of the editor who gives the final go-ahead to the articles and headlines you read in your go-to news source. Think of the last time you visited the doctor or the dentist. Think of the last bridge you drove over. Think of the last not-for-profit you donated to. Think of the big industries, corporations, and leadership of any nation, anywhere in the world.

All over the world, students are being trained and sent into every sphere of society. University graduates are likely to be involved in almost every industry and profession you can name. Running the finances, planning cities, building structures, creating resources, researching cures, directing companies, teaching kids, shaping the media, funding scholarships, and even leading our churches. If the fruit and privilege of getting to be part of the story of students discovering hope in Jesus and finding their home in the local church wasn't enough, these same students then go on to bear fruit in every area of society, in ways that will genuinely change the world and shape the future.

WHY CHURCH AND WHY STUDENTS

It would be good news if people who follow Jesus and are growing to be more like him were the ones creating policies, passing laws, and innovating just systems. It would be good news if disciples of Jesus were the ones reforming law, education, and business ethics. It would be good news if students who encountered the love of Jesus and were connected to his family were the ones creating art, music, and theater, leading in thought, word, and deed. It would be good news if we reached students from so many different nations that as they leave college to settle in other countries and continents, the gospel goes with them and keeps on spreading. Choosing to be a church who serves, loves, and cares about students goes far beyond campus, far beyond your community, and far beyond your reach. This sounds a lot like joining in with the great commission of Jesus.

Reflection:

- *Which universities or colleges are local to your church? What do you know about them and the students who study there?*

CHURCH AND COLLEGE STUDENTS

- *What has prevented you from engaging with students in the past or made you hesitant to invest more?*
- *What has stood out to you from what you've read so far?*

Action:

- *Create profiles for your local universities to help you hear God and understand his plan for them. Include information around their origin, history, and motto. Who are the current student population, where are they from, and what do they study?*
- *Spend some time thinking with God about your church community. What are the ways in which you could be a blessing to students? What are the ways in which God may use them to bless you?*