

Ideas are at the root of every culture shift, and ideas in their raw form come out of the university.

Women in Student Ministry

If we want the gospel's aroma to permeate cultures as we work to bring God glory in his world, then we dare not neglect the university. The ideas generated in the university and the relationships formed in its common rooms and societies create a powerful partnership, perhaps the most powerful in human terms, in a nation. The church down the road from the campus, even if it is just a few metres away, will find the university community impenetrable from the outside. Those best placed to shake salt and shine light there are its Christian faculty and students.

As Charles Malik, one-time General Secretary of the UN General Assembly observed, "Change the university and you change the world," while there are notable exceptions in modern history, those most likely to wield influence in government, education and industry are university graduates. Malik continued: "The church can render no greater service to itself or to the cause of the gospel than to try to recapture the universities for Christ."¹ How true.

The International Fellowship of Evangelical Students (IFES) was founded in 1947 to serve the Church in the student world. As an evangelical and interdenominational movement, its aim was, and is, to proclaim Christ in the world's universities. Its largest founding member was the China Inter-Varsity Fellowship in which some ten percent of all China's students were then to be found. Its ministry, now



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with self-governing affiliates in 152 nations, is focused among undergraduates.²

One of the long-held values in IFES is that students should lead their own groups on campus, and that students should share in strategic planning for the ministry at the national level. This is a simple extension of the principle of indigenous leadership. The staff of IFES national movements would better be described as team coaches than team captains.

A compelling defense

There are many glorious descriptions of the Lord Jesus in Scripture—reflecting his Person, his role in the Godhead, and his character. The one to which I find myself turning often is found in a clause in Colossians 2:3. Paul is yearning to convey more of the mystery of God and he turns to Christ as a visual aid, describing him as the One "in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge." What a description!

Universities are the places where wisdom and knowledge are deemed to be sought and taught, yet the Son of God is held in derision in the Academy. He is the One in whom all things hold together, the binding force of the atom; the One in whom the world finds its coherence; indeed, nothing is true or has any meaning but for his authority. We must be jealous for his glory in the world's universities—and equip students to love and to fight for truth on their campuses. To me, this has been and remains a compelling defense of student ministry.

The role of women staff

Women have played a vital role in IFES movements since its earliest days, serving on staff and as graduate volunteers. In the fragile economies of Africa, South Asia and Latin America, these movements depend heavily on

volunteers, as there isn't sufficient funding for an adequate staff team.

Largely, the women staff do the same as their male colleagues: helping students to think strategically in program planning; training leaders; giving a measure of pastoral care, but always working to establish the students in a local church, where this is possible, for their ongoing pastoral support. The scope of student ministry is wide, and every gift the staff worker can offer is fully engaged.

Julia Cameron

It has been a privilege to meet many women who have given sacrificial years of service to IFES movements. Some have remained single; others have married. They have had to spend much time away from base. They have pressed often considerable abilities into this work, when their education and talents could have commanded a comfortable lifestyle. And they have exercised patience, grace, and more patience and grace, in serving a generation who often think they know better. Readers of this journal who have been students will recall the staff who served them in this way. The names of those staff are probably not widely known, and will be remembered only by the students they served and the fellow workers they served with. But they are known to Christ.

What makes a good staff worker?

Koichi Ohtawa, a doyen of student work in East Asia, once described ministry among students in a term borrowed from construction engineering. He likened it to "piling". This work is invisible once the building is completed, for it was done below ground. Yet the foundations of the building in the long-term are only as secure as the quality of the piling. It is slow work, gradual, unglamorous and messy. Yet the finished product could not stand without it. Every student worker knows the joy of

meeting a graduate ten or twenty years later and seeing that person standing firm, and with a growing maturity to their faith.

Patience and long-sightedness are critical for staff, but there are many aspects of serving students which give great joy at the time as well as afterwards. Students have energy, creativity, a wonderful humour and a keenness of mind. In some of the toughest contexts, students have shown courage which is truly humbling. I learned much from the students I served as undergraduates.

As I write, I picture the faces of several gracious women around the world, staff of student movements, who have inspired me, and who have pressed on in demanding circumstances, walking with students and young graduates through their trials.³ It is not uncommon for movements struggling financially to be months behind in their payment of staff. But for all the demands of long hours and weary, sometimes dangerous travel, serving in this way is counted as a high privilege.

The need for good women staff

The third of the UN Millennium Development Goals is “promoting gender equality to empower women.” This includes giving more educational opportunities to women who have been unfairly denied them in the past: at primary and secondary level, and at tertiary level. We are already seeing the early results, and in common with the other goals, the plan is to reach fulfilment in 2015. The aim is good and healthy, but as often happens in a fallen world, the reaction to what has evidently been degrading and unjust is an overreaction. So whereas we naturally welcome this concern because men and women are created equal in God’s image, we may sense unease about the implications of the way it is being addressed.

In several nations, women take up more than 50% of university places. It is likely that the imbalance will grow further. Secular feminists may say: “Well about time too. Now men will know what it’s like to be in the minority.” But that would be an ill-judged response for a Christian.

Across the former Communist bloc we see homes and families kept together by the women. It seems for some reason that they have been able to weather the Communist regime better than the men. In areas of high unemployment, the men’s morale is low and that can lead to severe alcoholism and drug

abuse. The women become the breadwinners and the decision-makers; the boys grow up with weak male role models; and history repeats itself in the next generation.

What has this got to do with women staff workers in IFES movements? I believe it places an unusual responsibility on them, and it means we need women with particular gifts for the role.

Male headship is not the subject of this article and much excellent material has already been written on it. But to give context to what follows, I quote briefly from the British pastor theologian John Stott. In his characteristic style, he goes to the kernel of an issue with an economy of words:

*"Since it is mainly on the facts of creation that Paul bases his case for the husband's headship (Eph 5:22f.), his argument has permanent and universal validity, and is not to be dismissed as culturally limited. The cultural elements of his teaching are to be found in the applications of the principle. But the man's (and especially the husband's) 'headship' is not a cultural application of a principle; it is the foundation principle itself. This is not chauvinism, but creationism. The new creation in Christ frees us from the distortion of relations between the sexes caused by the fall (e.g., Gen 3:16), but it establishes the original intention of the creation. It was to this 'beginning' that Jesus himself went back (e.g., Matt 19:4-6). He confirmed the teaching of Genesis 1 and 2. So must we. What creation established, no culture is able to destroy."*⁴

In late adolescence, male students are often diffident, so we need women staff who will help the female students to encourage the male students to accept leadership, and not discourage or intimidate them. This calls for women staff who are themselves confi-

dent in their womanhood and not desirous of aping a man’s role; women staff who will model that assurance to the women students and whose teaching on gender and family issues will help those students to encourage their husbands to take leadership in the home in years to come. This is what will bring change in the next generation.

In short, the nation, as well as the national Church, needs men who will lead. Shrewd secularists and evangelicals will share this perspective, from different starting points.

Some vignettes

A central feature of IFES ministry is anchoring in Scripture; staff nurture students in applying the Bible to their lives and in developing a biblical worldview as a lens through which to approach their academic studies. This is the sine qua non of staff work across the world. Students are also taught how to use the Bible in evangelism, for what better place could there be to encounter the living Christ than in the pages of his living Word? Ada Lum, of Chinese descent, grew up in a large immigrant family in Hawaii. She has often observed how her childhood equipped her for an itinerant life in which she could make herself at home in any circumstances. She joined the staff of the IFES movement in Hong Kong in 1962; from 1968-1977 she served movements across East Asia. This was a time of particular turbulence politically, and her Asian roots were of real benefit as she merged in rather than stood out. From 1977 she became an IFES Bible study trainer, with a global ministry of training in the personal study of Scripture, and training trainers. Ada never married, and now aged 80 has still not retired. Her writing and travels have left an indelible mark on many generations of students and staff across the world.



Chris Davies (1948-1992) was another whose contribution, while hidden from the world's eyes, has been of lasting significance. In the 1980s, having first served on the staff of the British IFES movement (UCCF), Chris began travelling into Hungary to re-pioneer the evangelical student ministry there. It was a secret work, and denied Chris the kind of support friends can give when ministry is spoken of freely. With her eye of faith she could see the time when Communism would collapse and she urged IFES to prepare for it. Students who became Christians would need books to read, and so a network of Christian publishers should be drawn together, ready to mobilize as soon as the time came. The Eastern Europe Literary Advisory Committee (EELAC) was formed in 1985 with the aim "to cultivate national authors and produce books of enduring worth," and now there are indigenous publishing houses in eight Eastern European countries including Russia, Hungary, Albania and Romania.⁶

Let me trace one single thread of Chris's influence, down through the Hungarian movement, MEKDSZ. Krisztina Tóth's faith was nurtured through the work of MEKDSZ in her university and when she graduated she joined its staff. She grew in her skills as a Bible teacher and in 2003 was invited to give the Bible expositions at a student conference in the Caucasus. I include her account of that experience. It brought tears to my eyes when I first read it.⁷

"When you've been in IFES as long as I have, you expect people to spend their 'quiet time' alone and quietly before God. I'd been asked to prepare questions for the students to have their own quiet times following the Bible teaching. But I began to wonder why.

Most of us stayed near the stove, as it was very cold in the building. The noise level didn't drop. It seemed these students had no idea of personal study or prayer. Had they been listening? Did they want to grow spiritually? I felt discouraged.

Then I started to watch. I didn't understand what they were saying, but suddenly I realised the 'older' Christians (who had been converted a year or so) were explaining things to those who came to faith just weeks—or days—before!

They showed them how to approach a book of the Bible they had never read before; how to apply it to their own lives; how to pray in the light of what they had just read—what 'quiet time' really means.

As the week went on, I saw more and more clearly that they are learning to understand Paul's words better than I do: to share with him

in his sufferings, and not to be ashamed of the gospel. They were beginning to see that following Christ would not make them popular, maybe not even accepted; possibly despised.

As the 'quiet time' finished I sensed that the quiet place where the Lord speaks—in me and in them—had grown a little. I'm starting to understand why there's a celebration in heaven."

We have greater opportunity for the gospel in more countries in the world than the Church has ever had before. To invest in the lives of first-generation new Christians, students who are themselves already investing in the lives of other students, younger in the faith, is an urgent privilege. This encapsulates much of what is happening week by week in IFES movements around the world.

Now to briefly glimpse another aspect of women's ministry: corruption in universities has reached a new low in many parts of Africa and Latin America, where male students are required to pay a bribe to graduate, and female students to grant their lecturer sexual favours. The IFES movement in the Democratic Republic of Congo (GBU) urges Christian women not to give in and has been active in drawing public attention to this horrific scandal and lobbying the government to act. Families have often sacrificed dearly for children to have education. The women feel themselves in debt to their families and would feel shame in leaving without a degree; now they are subject to this degradation. In the University of Kinshasa alone, some twenty staff die of AIDS in a year and many more are HIV positive. Further agony is awaiting thousands of families in years to come.

Women students here, as in a growing number of countries, often resort to prostitution to pay their fees. Women friends of the GBU have formed a ministry "Mamans GBU" to teach women students—Christians and others—how to cook and sew to enable them to fund themselves through their studies. The need for godly women to serve these students has never been higher. God is giving us such women and I wish there were space to tell more of their stories.

Students and world mission—how they fit together

We have already seen the link between the university and world evangelization. I close with a more specific reference, linking IFES movements and mission agencies. Students and world evangelization just can't be pulled apart.

All IFES movements share the same three aims: (i) equipping students for evangelism

on campus: (ii) nurturing the spiritual growth of members; and (iii) helping students to grasp their place in world mission, whether as supporters or as cross-cultural workers. Thousands of missionaries have sensed their call into mission at student conventions. So, IFES movements feed workers to agencies. But the traffic is not one-way.

The synergy between mission, campus ministry and the building of the Church in the countries where missionaries serve is all bound together. If we are to see an effective bridgehead for the gospel in the Muslim world, the Buddhist world and the post-Christian West, we need salt to be shaken and light to be shone in the places of economic influence, in the fields of education, industry and foreign policy. The church will be established by strong partnerships of preachers and teachers, with evangelists in the workplace and those who can stem the tide of corruption in high places. This brings us back to the central place of the university in a nation's life and thought.

May God give us a new generation of able and gifted women to serve students; and please God may our student groups produce Deborahs and Lydias alongside Josephs and Daniels. <<

Endnotes

- 1 A Christian Critique of the University, Waterloo lectures, 1981. My quotations do not do justice to his treatment of the influence of the university. His central question, which reappears like a Greek chorus throughout the lectures, is 'What does Jesus Christ think of the university?'
- 2 In several countries, IFES national affiliates have extended their work among graduates and in the professions. Not all 152 nations have joined the global Fellowship formally. In some countries it is wiser to remain unaffiliated formally for political reasons; in others the movement is still very new, and in the process of developing its infrastructure under a national board, in preparation for affiliation. IFES staff serve all movements in the same way.
- 3 See Vivienne Stacey, Mission Ventured (IVP, 2001) for the stories of eight women who gave decades to student ministry. Many more could be recorded. The stories are not only a part of IFES history, but they are in a real sense part of 20th and 21st Century Church history.
- 4 John Stott, The Message of Ephesians, Bible Speaks Today Series, (Leicester: IVP, 1979), p 221. He cites veiling and keeping silence as cultural applications of the principle.
- 5 For further stories and background on IFES student ministry, see Lindsay Brown, Shining Like Stars, (IVP, 2006).
- 6 See Publish and be blessed! In IFES Special Report, Vol. 2 Issue 5, for a brief synopsis of IFES-linked publishing houses. The first was Inter-Varsity Press, founded by the British movement (then known as Inter-Varsity Fellowship) in 1936. It now has sister publishing houses in 33 nations, serving much of the world.
- 7 See Shining like Stars, p 148.