

Keepers of the Flame

It is impossible to review the numbers and quality of OBU alumni who have carried the Gospel message around the world without asking the question “why?” OBU is a small school in a low population state land-locked and far removed from many of the currents of international events. Where does this century-old vision for the world come from?

Part of the answer to this question may be found in the charter documents of the school. The stated purpose as found in the school’s web site is clear and explicit. “OBU is an institution founded on Christian principles and teaching . . . The university engages in educational tasks in a manner consistent with the purposes of the Convention: to furnish the means by which the churches may carry out the Great Commission.”

On another of its web pages a prospective student would find these words about OBU’s self understanding. “Oklahoma Baptist University is a Christ-centered university dedicated to the spiritual development of students along with their social, academic and spiritual development.” “Campus ministry is the intentional and ongoing development of a Christian world view fully integrated

into life for all OBU students.” “Campus ministry helps students grow through the education of and involvement in a wide variety of ministry and missions.”

Such a purpose statement perhaps does not seem overly noteworthy until it is compared with other universities that began as Christian institutions. There is a general tendency to water down the sense of Christian mission and to emphasize more secular interests. Duke University, for example, began with ties to the Methodist Denomination. Duke’s mission, as found on the school’s web site, has evolved across the years. The last revision dated from 2001 states the following:

“The mission of Duke University is to provide a superior liberal education to undergraduate students, attending not only to their intellectual growth but also to their development as adults committed to high ethical standards and full participation as leaders in their communities; to prepare future members of the learned professions for lives of skilled and ethical service by providing excellent graduate and professional education; to advance the frontiers of knowledge and contribute boldly to the international community of scholarship; to promote an intellectual environment built on a commitment to free and open inquiry; to help those who suffer, cure disease, and promote health, through sophisticated medical research and thoughtful patient care; to provide wide ranging educational opportunities, on and beyond our campuses, for traditional students, active professionals and life-long learners using the power of information technologies; and to promote a deep appreciation for the range of human difference

and potential, a sense of the obligations and rewards of citizenship, and a commitment to learning, freedom and truth.

“By pursuing these objectives with vision and integrity, Duke University seeks to engage the mind, elevate the spirit, and stimulate the best effort of all who are associated with the University; to contribute in diverse ways to the local community, the state, the nation and the world; and to attain and maintain a place of real leadership in all that we do.”

All of these goals are worthy, but as a representation of a Christian school’s mission, they are woefully incomplete. There is no reference to Christ or a specifically Christian mission. Certainly there is no hint that the school aspires to prepare students for a Christian mission of evangelization to the world.

The formal statement of OBU’s purpose is more than perfunctory. It serves as a North Star to guide administrators, faculty, trustees and students. Long-time president John Wesley Raley remarked that “The foreign mission tide started with Rosalee Mills Appleby and is still going on. OBU reopened the harvest of these decision days and for many years has stood at the top of the list of Southern Baptist colleges and universities in the percentage of its graduates on foreign mission soil . . .” [Sights and Sounds of Falls Creek – 1980 Baptist General Convention of Oklahoma]

Every generation of professors has been marked by outstanding individuals who inspired students to adopt the Christian world view and to follow Christ's calling to the world. Dr. J. W. Jent in the early days of OBU was a leader in inspiring young people. Rosalee Mills Appleby noted his influence by reflecting on one of Jent's quotes, "God is all wise and cannot make a mistake. He is all loving and would not make a mistake. Whatever He has for your life, there you will be happiest and do the most good." This expression of faith led Appleby to surrender wholly to Christ for whatever He had for the future.

Later generations of professors carefully nurtured this Christian environment so propitious for calling out and confirming mission volunteers. I came to OBU with a clear sense of missionary vocation. This calling was supported by a wide range of professors like Dr. E. W Thornton who taught history from a distinctively Christian perspective. On a practical level, when he discovered my interest in Latin America missions, he encouraged me to develop a special studies class in Latin American history. The Spanish professor, Manuel Ramirez, provided the same kind of encouragement as we designed a class curriculum in Latin American literature.

Not only individual professors but also entire academic departments have contributed to the environment that fostered the cause of world missions. OBU

musicians have traveled the world singing the Gospel message and exposing students to the realities of world need and opportunities for ministry.

The development of the Paul Dickenson School of Business has historically provided students with significant opportunities for overseas study, experience and relationship with Christian missions. In today's world, missionaries often have to justify their presence in a country by offering some service desired by the host nation. One of the ways this is possible is through the use of platforms. For example, persons with knowledge of business principles and practices can use that knowledge to establish a business overseas and thus have legal entry to a country that might not welcome persons for a strictly missionary assignment. The School of Business through its focus on international business has proved an outstanding incubator for "platform" based missionaries.

A variety of mission emphases, activities and organizations has helped to maintain the missionary spirit at OBU. At times the mission volunteers have formed a group known as the Life Service Band. A broader organization, the ministerial alliance has served the purpose of keeping the focus of students on their vocation and commitment.

The missionary spirit on campus has been enriched by the presence of international students in the student body. There is always a danger that prospective missionaries may have a romantic and unrealistic view of missionary

life due to a lack of knowledge of other cultures and peoples. The presence of international students serves as a window to the world and to a more realistic understanding of the challenges of missionary service.

Closely related to the influence of international students is the presence of missionary kids in the OBU family. Baptist missionary kids (M.K.'s) are the recipients of a guaranteed five thousand dollar annual scholarship for study at OBU. This is an enormous benefit to the M.K.'s. It is also a benefit to the school in as much as the M.K.'s bring with them world experience and understanding. They prove to be valuable interpreters of the missionary experience for other students interested in missions.

The missionary spirit has also been fostered by the presence of the missionaries in residence. These individuals who come to share the OBU experience are available for teaching, counseling and in general being a voice for missions. The effectiveness of this program has been somewhat mixed. Some missionaries have quickly adapted to campus life and have had influential ministries. Others have perhaps struggled to find their best place of service. It is evident that the most meaningful ministry comes from missionaries who have personalities in touch with today's youth culture and who have a strong commitment to return to their overseas assignment. Missionaries who are in

transition to retirement or other stateside assignments will have more difficulty in this role.

OBU has an unusual record in involving students in mission volunteer trips. Overseas travel has become a regular part of the college experience in many schools. The focus at OBU is not simply on traveling, but on traveling with a missionary purpose. Volunteer mission trips present a host of challenges to be resolved. Some of these challenges include how to keep the focus on missions and ministry. How can projects be selected that fit in with the plans already in process on the overseas field? Should the project involve both witnessing and ministry aspects? Is there an adequate pre-travel orientation for the participants? Who should be eligible to participate? How should the project be funded? All of these and other questions should be answered in light of the central purposes of the foreign travel. The intention should be to foster missionary passion on the part of the participants and to make a positive contribution to the sharing of the Gospel overseas.

The International Mission Board has learned that a large percentage of missionary candidates today come after having had previous experience overseas. OBU is contributing greatly to the cause of missions by fostering these missionary experiences.

The missions environment at OBU took another significant step forward with the establishment of the Avery T. Willis Center for Global Outreach. Created in 2005, the center is an attempt to unify the academic and the hands-on-field experience related to missions. In a large institution the attention given to any emphasis can ebb and flow according to current fads and the particular interests of administrators. The Global Outreach Center is a means of locking the fact that OBU believes in and participates in the carrying out of the Great Commission.

Because the center is still in its formative stages, it remains to be seen the extent to which the dreams will become reality. The dreams nevertheless are impressive. Since the establishment of the center, OBU has hosted a major conference on the storying method of communicating the Gospel. Plans are under way to sponsor another conference on a significant missions topic in 2010.

The Avery Willis Center is seeking to be a touchpoint for campus efforts to send volunteer mission teams. This emphasis on overseas ministry touches the campus in numerous ways. Global outreach teams of nursing students are regularly found in Mexico. Educational teams have made a mark in Moscow and China. None of these projects comes without its share of questions and difficulties. It could not be otherwise in our confused and turbulent world. Nevertheless, both students and professors are experiencing the reality, the challenges and the successes of international missions.

Another OBU missions initiative which relates to the Avery Willis Center is the adoption of a people group, the Kaibarta of India. The challenge of ministering the Gospel to an ethnic group basically untouched by the Gospel is staggering. It is an evidence of a growing realization that the missionary task is simply too large to be left to the “professional” missions agencies. Addressing effectively the needs of the Kaibarta people will require much of the OBU community. Our culture pushes Americans toward instant gratification. Can the school maintain a long term commitment at such a great distance when confronted by changing leadership both in Shawnee and in India? Can sufficient information and inspiration be achieved so as to inspire an outpouring of effective prayer, the projection of a God-sized vision, and the enlistment of human and financial resources adequate for the task? What will be different for the Kaibara people and the OBU community in five years? An interesting test might even now be a survey to see what percentage of the students, faculty and trustees are aware of the Kaibarta commitment.

A more recent contribution to OBU’s international mission’s focus is the Oklahoma City Campus of the International Graduate School whose first emphasis is a Master of Business Administration. According to the Summer 2007 edition of the OBU Magazine, “It’s about students having an impact in the world for Christ . . . that’s reflected in every course.” (Page 3)

An unrelenting issue for mission volunteers is the cost of obtaining a university education. The perception has existed for many years that OBU offers quality education but that the cost is prohibitive for most Baptist families. Many of our finest Baptist youth are influenced by this perception and enroll in public universities, often discovering that the academic standards are lower and the total costs higher than they had anticipated. OBU and its alumni and friends have attempted to address this issue through the creation of scholarships available to mission volunteers. Often the amount of any individual scholarship award is small or almost insignificant when compared to the total educational costs. Nevertheless, these scholarships can often be combined, and the school is creative in assisting worthy students. The School of Christian Service lists eighteen scholarships open to mission volunteers. It is also worth considering that mission volunteers are no more deserving of a sacrifice free education than other students. An OBU education is both costly and valuable. It should also be available to any student willing to make the sacrifice.

There are multiple reasons why OBU has become the missions powerhouse that it is today. Nevertheless, we need to return to the question of our philosophy of history in order to address a crucial question. Will OBU remain a missions leader in the future? Many grand schemes regarding the inevitable movement of history have failed and found their way to the ash heap of history. As Christians

we are committed to the assurance of the ultimate triumph of the Kingdom of God. Within that large picture of certainty, however, we live and move within an arena in which we have freedom of action, and our choices do have meaning. We are making history.

There are notable and sad examples of institutions that once carried proudly the missionary banner. That is their history and not their current reality. It is not preordained that any school, including OBU, will be forever a missionary beacon. So I conclude by offering some thoughts on choices that can be made to propel the school into a missionary future.

First, I urge that every revision of the school's charter documents be undertaken with the missionary purposes in clear view. Words have meaning. Each generation desires and needs to leave its mark by using words that express purpose and significance. Committees that engage in such revisions should always include members who are convinced that Jesus Christ is the eternal Son of God and the only door to the presence of God. We must beware of relegating that conviction to "tradition" or even "heritage." It must always remain a present reality.

While words are important, it is also true that people interpret words. The degree of mission intensity in an institution will be reflected by the priorities of the president, administrative staff and faculty. It is too late to think of this issue after

hiring decisions are made. Past evidences of missionary support and present affirmations of theological and missiological commitment should be a part of employment interviews.

The overall campus environment should be continuously reviewed to make certain that missions can never be far from the thinking of campus residents and visitors. Missions speakers, representatives of the International Mission Board, and hosting missionary conferences should be a part of every semester's activities. Encouragement should be given to campus publications to highlight the activities of the Avery Willis Global Missions Center and other campus organizations with a missionary focus.

Another dimension of the OBU missions involvement is the actual missions participation of the campus community. It is not just the number of projects or participants that matters. The purpose and quality of the projects is also fundamental. There is a danger of being so inclusive in the enlistment of teams that the missionary purpose of the trip can be reduced to simple social ministries, or worse, tourism. Volunteers benefit from their experience when the volunteers go spiritually prepared and actually engage in sharing the Gospel.

Finally, the issue of funding must be addressed on an on-going basis. Mission volunteers need to have access to scholarship funds. The school needs long-term funding for the missionary activities which it promotes. Institutional

fund raising efforts should include a significant focus on those on-going financial needs.

OBU has a great heritage of lifting the banner of world missions. As a new century in the life of the school begins, I can only plead that the transition be made to a new generation of missionary involvement and commitment, those who will be keepers of the flame.