

August 2002
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Dear TSCF-minded person

Recently, I met for an afternoon chat with a bunch of friends, all of whom had at some stage been involved as students in TSCF. We met to discuss what's become a recurring question in TSCF circles in the past decade. That is: How do you bring the good news about Jesus to tertiary campuses fragmented by internal assessment, by semesterisation, by voluntary student union membership, and by ever increasing tuition fees? How can student groups share the gospel in institutions with a dwindling student atmosphere, institutions where the pervasive ethos regards universities as glorified vocational training schools for rich students who emerge sleepily from the suburbs in the morning and escape back to those same suburbs as soon as their classes are over for the day?

No doubt you've heard it all before. Although the details vary with the locality, it's a story that's pretty familiar nationwide. And in all probability, what follows is not new to you. But as we floated ideas that afternoon, we came up with a few suggestions about how TSCF might be able to confront head-on the usual gloomy recounting of impediments to student mission. In fact, we reckoned, there must be zillions of ways of bringing the life-giving good news of Jesus' victory over evil to the changed and changing tertiary world. So we decided to write to you seeking your ideas and looking for feedback on our ideas. We know that lots of you have done lots of living and thinking and praying in this whole area, so we'd value your comments immensely.

Here's what we were thinking. Central to the TSCF ethos, of course, is the idea that the mission to students belongs with students. That's pretty much a non-negotiable, and none of us wanted to interfere with it. But we also reckoned that there is a gulf in the background of that student mission which graduates like ourselves can fill. Often we hear of the difficulty posed by the short cycle of a student's university life: every three years, the wheel turns full circle; a new set of students turn up on the scene who want to reinvent that same wheel. Of course, there are advisors and staff-workers to guide them in the difficulties of wheel construction, but advisors can be pretty busy some times, while staff don't always have very long institutional memories. The final say, therefore, rests with the students, who are caught up in all the difficulties of semesterisation, user-pays and suburban living outlined above.

How could we tackle this head on? Can you catch a strange glimpse of what might happen if young-ish graduates like yourselves started moving deliberately into large houses in university suburbs? Just one or two of you in a house with 4, or 8, or 9 bedrooms. You're living in the house long-term as a kind of mentor or role model to a

set of eager students who live in the house. You're definitely not a staff-worker, but a kind of older sibling who has a few clues about life on campus, and about what it means to be a follower of Jesus. And you're definitely not alone. There are a network of these houses strung across Kelburn and down the Aro Valley; or nestled into Grafton and down in Ponsonby; or along Castle Street; or scattered around Ilam; or banded together in Hokowhitu.

And none of these houses is an island entire to itself. Instead, they're all bound by a common ethos and a certain deliberate agreement to meet together every week for a couple of set purposes. A bit like a monastic rule, perhaps. Maybe the houses in Aro Valley meet together for prayer on Tuesday nights and for lunch on Saturday. Maybe the Kelburn houses meet together for a Taize breakfast on Mondays and for supper on Thursdays. And then they all come together for CU or CF on Campus once a week. And in between, there are video showings maybe, or exhibitions, or theatre rehearsals. Probably, one flat goes out to help at the soup kitchen on a Wednesday. Another probably has a roster for one of the flatmates to do a shift helping at the night shelter every week. There's certainly a lot of hospitality going on - colleagues and fellow students and friends from the hostels are around regularly. And maybe there are prayer meetings for the healing of those students, Christian or otherwise, whose bones are bent and whose minds are fractured by life. And probably the University chaplain comes along to celebrate the Eucharist every now and then, or maybe the houses go to the chaplaincy.

What's the point? Well, to model an authentic Christian way of being a student and of being human, a way that is genuinely different to the individualised, job- and money-focused lifestyle that's being forced on our students today. Maybe the houses charge pretty low rents, so that students don't need to draw down such large student loans (and so that they can afford to feed all their many visitors!). Maybe they are on the lookout to befriend and provide a welcome to misfit students who've come to University from the backblocks and who are finding it all a bit tough. Maybe the odd student takes an extra year at University to run for president of the Students' Association. Certainly they are deliberately helping each other to look out for ways of bringing God's love and justice to their campuses, their cities and the world, be that through marching for East Timor, joining the Hikoi of Hope, staffing Youthline or Samaritans, wearing black on Thursdays. In all things, they are seeking to follow Jesus, and to demonstrate to their fellow students that following Jesus means living a lifestyle of genuine compassion and care for the world. And definitely, they encourage their fellow students to join Jesus for this life-giving adventure in the way to live.

Certainly, the element of social action is vital in showing people that God cares for the world and requires those who follow him to do the same. It's not always easy to see

how students can go about doing this, but we reckon that each house should be on the lookout, trying to find ways of bringing good news to the poor, freedom for prisoners, and healing to those in mental and physical pain. That's part of the gospel call, of course, and it's also a point of intrigue for students who aren't Christians, perhaps a point of contact for discussion between them and the students who do follow Jesus.

In any case, hovering in the background would be people like you - people with their own church and work commitments, sure, but people providing friendship and example and cheap rent and wise counsel to students who are passionate about following Jesus with their whole lives and passionate about showing their universities and polytechs and teachers colleges that there is another way to live, that there is, as Paul and Silas say, another King named Jesus; another Vice-Chancellor, another Minister of Education; another Prime Minister (Acts 17.7).

What do you think? Crazy idea? Would never work on your old campus? Then what would? And how could you, as a graduate, help? And how would you go about helping to incarnate it on campus, to help the students go about reaching other students for Christ? And how do you think that the imperative of Luke 4:18f can be lived out amongst students?

Let me know - we're interested.