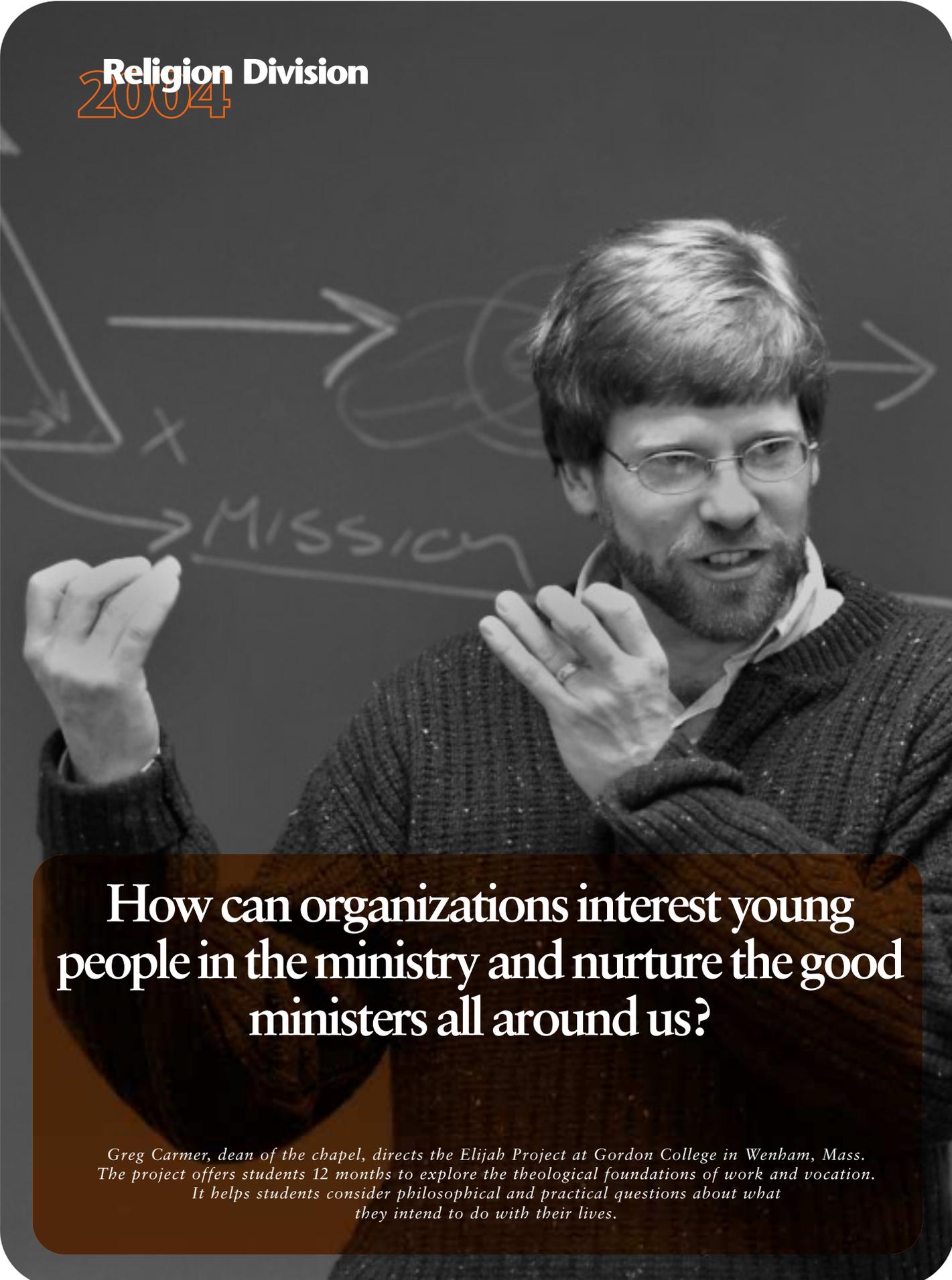


Religion Division
2004



How can organizations interest young people in the ministry and nurture the good ministers all around us?

Greg Carmer, dean of the chapel, directs the Elijah Project at Gordon College in Wenham, Mass. The project offers students 12 months to explore the theological foundations of work and vocation. It helps students consider philosophical and practical questions about what they intend to do with their lives.

“Live a life worthy of the calling you have received”

—Ephesians 4:1

Inspired to Serve

When Dillard University surveyed the members of its Class of '06 about their career aspirations, two interesting insights surfaced. First, the majority of incoming freshmen saw a link between their spiritual and professional lives and believed “a power in the universe” was preparing them “to do particular things in life.” Second, a less lofty influence – television – was nudging them in directions that had little to do with their academic ability or their God-given gifts.

“I call this the ‘Huxtable generation,’” says the Rev. Gail Bowman, campus pastor at the historically black, liberal arts institution in New Orleans. “They are a very television-oriented generation, and they make choices based on what they’ve seen and admired on TV. A lot of students grew up watching *The Cosby Show* and its various spinoffs. Consequently, we get many doctor and lawyer aspirations because Bill Cosby’s character, Cliff Huxtable, was a doctor, and his wife, Clair, was a lawyer. Unfortunately, the students don’t have the statistics on how difficult medical and law schools are. The competition is intense, but that doesn’t change the dream.”

Few enter Dillard with ministry on their minds. Bowman admits that students are reluctant to consider church-related careers because “ministry is something we’ve always been able to do,” she explains. “It’s not viewed as a step up. Until Martin Luther King Jr., pastors did not necessarily go to seminary or attend graduate school. College was considered more-than-adequate training.”

Searching for answers

Few, in fact, enter any college with ministry on their minds these days. The reasons vary. Some young people may be reluctant, while others may simply never have thought about it. Still others may have considered it privately, but the kind of encouragement and information needed to draw them along that path have not been readily available. Whatever the reasons, there are, in fact, many college students who should be thinking about ministry – and who it is now known – respond eagerly when helped to do so.

In pursuit of its key aim to encourage a new generation of young people to consider the ministry, Lilly Endowment invited church-related colleges across the



The Rev. Gail Bowman is campus pastor at Dillard University in New Orleans. She encourages members of the “Huxtable generation” to think seriously about the ministry.

United States to apply for grants to create and implement Programs for the Theological Exploration of Vocation (PTEV).

Between 2000 and 2002, 88 private colleges and universities ultimately received implementation grants of up to \$2 million in this \$176.8 million competitive grants program.

The Endowment asked the schools to consider three fundamental questions as they conceived their programs and made their plans:

How could they assist students think through their career decisions in light of their faith commitments?

What opportunities could they create for students to explore ministry as a possible vocation?

In what ways could they build on their school's mission, heritage and religious tradition as they prepare a new generation of morally grounded leaders for church and society?

Because the Endowment approached the initiative as an inquiry with no predetermined answers, it encouraged grantees to craft programs that were in harmony with their missions but had the potential to affect the world beyond their borders.

The schools that were awarded grants are quite diverse. They range in size, geographic location, student demographics and theological tradition. Some have maintained very close affiliations with their sponsoring denominations; others are more independent.

As different as they are, they share a key characteristic. "Each was ripe for this kind of inquiry," says Kim Maphis Early, who works for the Atlanta-based Fund for Theological Education and coordinates the entire initiative. "One thing that we've learned is that faculty, staff and students across the board are hungry for reflection on the question of vocation. The older generation is overworked and the younger generation is overscheduled. They all covet time and space to think about the important questions in life and not simply about how many committees they must serve on this year, or when they're supposed to register for next semester's classes."



Members of the Jerusalem and Athens Forum at Gordon College, an interdisciplinary honors program, tackle a formidable reading list – from Plato to Calvin, Shakespeare to Dostoyevsky, Augustine to Gandhi. Discussing their studies are (left to right) Rachel Van Wylene, Kirsten Heacock and Katie Howard.

Posing the BIG questions

For Pacific Lutheran University (PLU) in Tacoma, Wash., PTEV is presenting both an opportunity and a challenge. Despite the school's name, its total enrollment is less than a third Lutheran, and "mainline Christianity doesn't occupy a major place in the cultural scene of the region," says Paul Menzel, PTEV project director on campus. "If you lead with denominational identity, people ask, 'What does that matter?'" The school's mission, which resonates with students, calls for educating students for service leadership and care for others, but the campus population does not universally embrace deeply theological discussions.

How best can PLU engage the community in meaningful reflection about vocation? The answer, devised by Menzel and the PTEV coordinating team, is to focus on what they call "the big questions" and in so doing, capture students' attention and generate momentum for the project. They've named their initiative "Wild Hope," a catchy label borrowed from a paraphrase of a line written by poet Mary Oliver: "What will you do with your one wild and precious life?"

The idea of reflecting on life appeals to students because "they want to talk about meaning and purpose," says Menzel. Posing "big questions" provides a broad framework for whatever students are contemplating in private or studying in class. These open-ended questions include: What does the world need? What is it that I want to create? What kind of footprint do I want to make on this planet?

If the concept sounds abstract, it has taken concrete forms. At a campuswide event called “Meant to Live” weekend in November, panels of doctors, educators, business executives and pastors shared their stories so students could “get a picture of how this business of composing a life happens,” says Menzel. Students planned the entire conference and although it was not overtly religious in content, the spiritual dimension was present as speakers talked about the influences that have shaped their work and given meaning to their lives. “Many of these stories involved religious connections and were theologically infused,” says Menzel. Among the many well-attended discussions was Saturday afternoon’s “Changing the World One Life at a Time” that dealt with ministry.

The effects of Wild Hope are obvious beyond the student population, according to Patricia O’Connell Killen, chair of the department of religion and director of critical theological reflection. She credits Wild Hope with strengthening relationships among new and veteran faculty at a series of PTEV-sponsored workshops and retreats. “Our Wild Hope faculty seminars are helping build community among faculty and promoting a culture of conversation in which the question of vocation is central.” Again, the discussions are specific rather than abstract. “We talk about vocation as faculty members at this university at this time and in this region,” emphasizes Killen.

Understanding the “v” word

Some 3,000 miles east of Tacoma, the PTEV program at Gordon College near Boston is taking a different shape. Although the school is nondenominational (faculty prefer the word “multidenominational”), its heritage is decidedly evangelical. Here, students are accustomed to discussing faith issues; they understand the meaning of vocation; in fact, they’ve heard the term so often that one youth has dubbed it “the ‘v’ word.” Like Wild Hope at Pacific Lutheran University, the name of Gordon’s PTEV program, “Critical Loyalty,” offers insight into the direction that its planning team intends it to take.

“I liken it to a marriage,” says Thomas A. (Tal) Howard, project director and professor of history. “In any good marriage there is a certain amount of loyalty and a certain amount of criticism. That analogy works in thinking about the relationship between a college and the Christian faith that it supports,” he says.

As a college, “we’re loyal to some of the best elements of evangelicalism, but we recognize that some critics believe the evangelical church doesn’t take scholarship seriously.” Howard emphasizes the value of scholarly inquiry and endorses the practice of “testing ideas and participating in intellectual discussions outside specifically evangelical academia.”

He sees a gap between colleges and their affiliated

churches and hopes Critical Loyalty will show how the academy can serve the church by supplying it with critical thinkers. “Many of the issues that religious communities face today are so complex – globalization, biotechnology, international terrorism – that we can’t approach them with mere well-intentioned zeal. We also need contemplative thoughtfulness on the part of our ministers and the Christian leaders in society.”

As components in its plan to identify and develop a new



PTEV participants from all over the country gathered in Indianapolis in October to learn, discuss “best practices” and get to know each other.

generation of thoughtful, well-educated pastors, Gordon has initiated the Elijah Project and the Jerusalem and Athens Forum. Under the direction of Greg Carmer, dean of the chapel, the Elijah Project provides its 14 participants with classroom reflection, internship opportunities and a shared living experience that extends seminar conversations. For one year, the students occupy Dexter House where they live with peers from diverse denominational backgrounds and with varied views and understandings of spiritual issues.

"I would love for the participants to leave the program with a dynamic sense of life as a continuing adventure," says Carmer. "I want them to think of their vocation not as a one-time process of choosing a job but as an ongoing approach to living, learning and asking questions about what's going on in the world and how they can respond in meaningful ways."

The best of both worlds

The Jerusalem and Athens Forum at Gordon College is a rigorous honors program that requires its participants to study Plato, Augustine, Calvin, Milton, Dante, Shakespeare, Luther and Bunyan – and that's just the first semester's reading list. Open to students who plan to attend seminary or other graduate programs, it refutes the perception that an evangelical education isn't academically challenging.

"In my opinion, much of the contemporary literature produced by many Christian presses is shallow and trendy," says Howard, who oversees the Jerusalem and Athens discussions. "The forum is important especially for evangelical students who come to college with very good biblical litera-

cy but very thin understanding of church traditions. These books help them see they are part of a bigger and more beautiful story that begins in Palestine. We talk about what Jerusalem has to do with Athens – in other words, how the church relates to the academy."

Students also apply the books' teachings to current events. Howard was pleased when a discussion about the war in Iraq didn't disintegrate into "knee-jerk political reactions" but took on a thoughtful tone. "One student, a Mennonite, is a committed pacifist and put forth that perspective. Other students cited Augustine and Scripture. It got heated at a couple of points, but the students showed respect for each other's traditions. They recognized that this was part of a larger conversation about war, peace and justice that has been going on for centuries within the Christian faith," he says. Howard, Carmer and their colleagues hope that PTEV programs such as the Jerusalem and Athens Forum and the Elijah Project will whet students' appetites for postgraduate study in a seminary setting.

Visiting seminaries

At Dillard, as a way to introduce the notion of postgraduate religious training, small groups of students – men and women – are invited on field trips to seminaries across the country. The twice-yearly forays have been so successful that at any given time Gail Bowman generally has four to five students "in the pipeline" bound for seminary. She follows through by helping them with the application process and keeps in touch after they've left Dillard and moved on to graduate programs in theology.

She describes the seminary visits as "enchanting experiences" that make indelible impressions on the students. "I can tell them about my experiences in seminary, but it's not the same as having them walk onto a campus and feel all that energy and attention directed toward them."

Success stories multiply

Like Dillard, other PTEV schools are reporting success in generating interest in church-related careers. At Davidson College in North Carolina, 14 of 15 Lilly Scholars have chosen to complete their seminary degrees after an exploratory year funded by the college; Millsaps College in Jackson, Miss., enrolled nearly 30 participants in its pre-seminarian group,



Thomas A. (Tal) Howard, professor of history, leads the Jerusalem and Athens Forum at Gordon College.

which is twice the size of its enrollment before the PTEV initiative; and Boston College doubled its number of students applying for ministerial internships.

“The visibility and stature of ministry are being recovered in an important way,” says coordinator Maphis Early, who keeps in touch with all 88 programs from her office on the campus of Vanderbilt University in Nashville, Tenn. “Enthusiasm is growing as programs become embedded on the campuses and as freshmen and sophomores see upper-classmen exploring ministry.”

Supporting Maphis Early’s assessment are comments from students across the country who have participated in their schools’ PTEV programs. Some of their reflections are posted on the PTEV Web site (ptev.org) and reveal firm commitments to faith-based careers:

“I believe my vocation is to become a minister of a congregation,” wrote Katrina Bundy, an Alma College student, after completing a summer internship at two Presbyterian churches in Michigan.

“The choice to consider a call to ordained ministry is terrifying at points but fulfilling,” wrote Brandon Johnson, a religion major at Transylvania University in Lexington, Ky., who spent an introductory semester at Brite Divinity School at Texas Christian University in Fort Worth, Texas. He plans to return.

The PTEV initiative also is generating interest beyond participating schools. Maphis Early estimates that she fields about 20 inquiries each week from secular higher education organizations and non-church-related liberal arts colleges. “They’re curious about how to respond to students’ desires to think about their futures and connect their spiritual commitments and moral values with the choices they’re making in college,” she says. “What’s happening on these 88 campuses is getting the attention of a larger audience. It has the potential of making a broad impact on higher education in general.”

Making Connections

If **“it takes a village to raise a child,”** it also takes a whole network or ecology of people and institutions to nurture and sustain the quality of pastoral leadership needed for churches to thrive.

On that assumption, Lilly Endowment launched its Making Connections initiative and asked accredited theological schools across North America what they could do to create or enhance collaborations with congregations, denominational judicatories, college and universities and/or any of a number of church-related agencies to:

- ▶ Call a new generation of talented young people to Christian ministry.
- ▶ Improve academic programs that prepare students for high-quality ministry.
- ▶ Nurture practices that are conducive to excellent ministry in seminary graduates who are making the transition to parish ministry or who are already serving parishes.

In response to answers given in their proposals, the Endowment awarded grants totaling \$42.5 million (up to \$2 million each) to 27 theological schools in 2004.

Previous Endowment initiatives – Sustaining Pastoral Excellence, Clergy Renewal, and the Strengthening Congregational Ministry Program for theological schools – have shown that key Christian leaders and institutions can successfully identify, call, train and sustain pastoral leaders when they work together rather than in isolation.

Some of the most effective components of previous efforts are replicated and enhanced in many of the new programs. These include new kinds of peer learning groups for pastors; creative ways to place theological teaching in congregational settings where pastors and seminary faculty teach students together; and more effective ways for schools and churches to become closer partners in helping young seminary graduates get a good start in ministry as they serve their first parishes.