

# 43

## Mission Through Christian Universities<sup>1\*</sup>

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I am not a theologian. I am not a pastor. I am an MB (Mennonite Brethren), an MK (Missionary Kid), a PK (Pastor's Kid), and a TCK (Third Culture Kid).

Twenty years ago this summer the world changed in ways that most of us could never have imagined. Twenty years ago this summer the Soviet Union collapsed. The global definition of super-powers and of enemies, and the global polarization of ideologies was forever altered.

Twenty years ago in August, when I was in Moscow during the coup that changed the world, I wasn't able to tweet "Sat on tank in Red Square this afternoon!" because Twitter didn't exist. I wasn't able to change my Facebook status to "Ate at the same Pizza Hut where Yeltsin bought pizza for his troops today" because Facebook didn't exist. I couldn't Skype my family that I was fine, or check the latest status of the political situation at CNN online. In fact, in the Soviet Union in 1991 an international phone call would have required my booking it two days in advance. And the price might have been shown to me on an abacus.

I would suggest that the speed of change in parts of the post-Soviet world has been more dramatic than the speed of change in the West. From that summer of



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1991, in which I participated in the first Summer Language Institute in Lithuania in a society that was just emerging from fifty years of being closed off from the world, to 2011 at Lithuania Christian College (LCC) International University, the quantity of change, the speed of change, and what has changed can no longer be captured in a short volume on a shelf. Because in reality, in these past twenty years, Lithuania has “caught up” on almost seventy years of change.

Within the aging generation of Lithuanian citizens for whom this pace of change seems insurmountable, incomprehensible, the self-imposed solution too often is suicide, giving Lithuania one of the highest suicide rates per capita in the world and creating a nostalgia for the good old days of Communism when at least everyone had sausage and a roof over their heads. By contrast, the students that now enter LCC were born after the fall of the Soviet Union. They hear stories from their parents or grandparents that hardly make sense, given the world that now exists.

This “change” of change is evident when we look at the accelerated rate of growth in mankind’s knowledge base. The question to consider is, “How quickly does what we know change?” What would happen if we assumed that all of the scientific knowledge that mankind had accumulated by One A.D. equaled one unit of information? How long did it take that one unit of knowledge to double? Research shows that the answer is 1,500 years. The next doubling of knowledge from two to four units of information took only 250 years, until 1750. By 1900, 150 years later, knowledge had doubled again to eight units. The doubling speed has now reached every one to two years.

The speed of change globally occurs at such a pace that one wonders how the church, how the Christian institution of higher education, can even hang on for the ride, let alone participate as holistic witness.

What is our role? How can we contribute, as institutions seeking to be different, seeking to be change agents in the midst of change? I find it interesting that even UNESCO, in their proceedings from the World Conference on Higher Education in recent years, describes the relevance of higher education as being responsive to the world of work, being responsive to the other levels of the education system, being responsive to culture and cultures, being responsive to all, being responsive everywhere and all the time, and being responsive to students and teachers. There is very little that institutions of higher education are not challenged to consider, even outside the Christian arena.

So, how do we view our witness in this context? I would like to suggest three responses to this question. First, we must offer an education that is relevant. Second, we must create places of hospitality. And third, we must live as pilgrims, and not tourists. Relevant education—places of hospitality—life as pilgrims.

## Relevant Education

First, one could say that, given the pace of change, perhaps the best we can offer society is an education that is relevant in order to ensure vocational preparedness...not just for the first or second job after college, but perhaps even the fifth or sixth, perhaps even for a job that currently doesn't exist. Studies show that Americans change jobs ten times in the two decades following graduation. I would argue that a liberal arts education (a broad-based, multidisciplinary approach to education) would best serve the needs of a changing society. Under the umbrella of full disclosure, I remind you that LCC International University is a liberal arts university. For the past nine years I have introduced this concept of liberal arts, of multidisciplinary knowledge, to our incoming freshmen through a visual demonstration.

First, I reference the dominant model during the Soviet era—that of the pitcher and glass. If our brains are the container or glass, and the pre-determined knowledge is the liquid in the pitcher, then surely the pouring of the knowledge into the container should be a useful model. The challenge, however, is that our brains are more like a sieve than a glass, and thus we spend too much time patching the leaks and thinking of ways to maximize storage. This is generally the point in my presentation at LCC at which I announce my own personal number—which this year was 1520. This number represents the number of gigabytes of storage space that I personally own (laptop, camera cards, external hard drives, iPod), not including the two large bookshelves in my office. And yet, this pitcher-and-glass model is left wanting. The rate at which knowledge is created means that no number of gigabytes, no brain capacity, is large enough to capture what we need in 2011. It has been said that we live in an information-rich and action-poor society. We must push for education that moves us beyond simply the receiving of knowledge, to education that moves us/our students in the direction of doing things, the scholarship of engagement.

To put it another way, the world produces between one and two exabytes of unique information per year, which is roughly 250 megabytes for each man, woman, and child on earth. Note that an exabyte equals a billion gigabytes. By contrast, in the 1700s all the information in the world could fit into one edition of the *New York Times*. There is no strong incentive for the pitcher-pouring-knowledge-into-your-head approach.

Then I illustrate the “baked cookie” approach to education, where the whole is greater than the sum of its parts, where the combination of information, the access and reformulating of knowledge, the construction of ideas is greater than the accumulation of data. I offer the students a tray of flour, sugar, butter, an egg, and a little salt...and ask if anyone is interested in a cookie. Of course, any individual

ingredient is not sufficient to represent the whole once the real cookies are passed around; I make the point that a multidisciplinary approach to education, a well-defined integration of various disciplines, within a context of critical thinking and innovation, is an education that can prepare people for life.

At LCC, we believe that the liberal arts, with a well-ordered integration of theology and psychology and literature and science and economics and history are an educationally holistic witness within a changing society. Perhaps it is the critical thinking, the effective communication, the Christian worldview, the conflict transformation, the community building, the servant leadership, the multicultural perspective—these core competencies of our liberal arts education—that can contribute a sense of stability and preparedness within a changing society.

Some refer to this as the development of T-shaped graduates versus toothpick graduates. Employers do not want “toothpick” graduates who have learned only the technical skills and who arrive in the workplace deep but narrow, not able to break out of their mental cubicles. Society/employers need T-shaped graduates for whom the crossbar points to competencies traditionally identified with the “liberal arts” and with grounding in faith traditions (ethics, global knowledge, intercultural literacy, integrity, strong communication and collaborative skills).

These T-shaped graduates are more likely to be prepared to handle adaptive challenges (those that can be solved by the hard work of discernment by those who are impacted by the problem). On the other hand, toothpick graduates are more likely only to be prepared to handle technical challenges (those that are met with known, tested and predictable answers). The important reality is that generally adaptive challenges cannot be met with technical solutions. So it is important that our graduates (our congregations!) are trained for the adaptive challenges in our changing societies.

In 2007, the American Association of Colleges and Universities described the society that our students would be entering and how that should affect their education: “The world in which today’s students will make choices and compose lives is one of disruption rather than certainty, and of interdependence rather than insularity.”

In an era when knowledge is the key to the future, all students need the scope and depth of learning that will enable them to understand and navigate the dramatic forces—physical, cultural, economic, technological—that directly affect the quality, character, and perils of the world in which they live.

In an economy where every industry—from the trades to advanced technology enterprises—is challenged to innovate or be displaced, all students need the kind of

intellectual skills and capacities that enable them to get things done in the world, at a high level of effectiveness.

In a democracy that is diverse, globally engaged, and dependent on citizen responsibility, all students need an informed concern for the greater good because nothing less will renew our fractured and diminished commons.

In a world of daunting complexity, all students need practice in integrating and applying their learning to challenging questions and real-world problems.

In a period of relentless change, all students need the kind of education that leads them to ask not just “How do we get this done?” but also “What is most worth doing?”

And from a Christian institution, this T-shaped graduate should leave our halls with an understanding of the relationship of faith to all of life, a theology of work, a bridging of the sacred/secular divide (as Mark Green from the London Institute of Contemporary Christianity refers to it), a knowledge of the ultimate “syllabus for living,” and a Micah 6:8 commitment to obedience. These graduates then extend the holistic witness into areas of society that institutions cannot reach. (Micah 6:8—“And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.”)

I realize that I am not writing only to educators and administrators of liberal arts institutions. Nor do I want to assume that this model is the only model. But whatever model of education that we can confirm is relevant in our contexts, this is what we must pursue...with excellence. Whether we consider distance-education models, or certificate versus diploma options, whether we embrace “business as mission” or a “theology of work,” whether we exhibit a particular focus on social responsibility or environmentalism, or other institutionally distinct options, it is the paradox of the long-term relevance of the education within changing societies that speaks to the witness we are.

### **Places of Hospitality**

Second, as holistic witness in changing societies, I believe we are called, as institutions of Christian higher education, to be places of hospitality. Henri Nouwen, a well-known Catholic priest and writer during the last century, defined hospitality as the creation of a free space where the stranger can enter and become a friend. This kind of hospitality is intended not to change people, but to offer them space where change can take place.

So, what should our “empty space” hospitality look like? Counterintuitively, according to Nouwen, it includes a voluntary poverty of mind, a learned ignorance.

He suggests that in order to prepare ourselves for service we have to prepare ourselves for an articulate not-knowing. Someone who is filled with ideas, concepts, opinions and convictions cannot be a good host. There is no inner space to listen, no openness to discover the gift of the other. We need to be people whose articulate not-knowing makes us free to listen to the voice of God in the words of the people.

It is only through the silence of “open space” hospitality that we are able to learn about the soul of Lithuania:

- That Lithuania was the last European nation to move from paganism to accept Roman Catholicism, resisting religion that came with a sword, and therefore still reluctant to listen to a minister of the gospel who comes as a crusader.
- That Lithuania values fellowship more than entertainment, and emphasizes the emotional more than the intellectual.
- And, that despite the changes all around, Lithuania’s character is one of passivity and nostalgia, symbolized by the Pensive Christ—who gives a false portrait as one who only laments over but does not save from oppression and sin. Therefore for many Lithuanians the gospel ends with the crucifixion, not the resurrection. This message needs to be challenged by the true, hope-giving empowering of the One who has all power in heaven and on earth.

I would suggest that a holistic witness begins with the creation of this kind of free space. This space can be a safe place where dialogue is possible, where the many “us versus them” distinctions can be blended into “we,” whether that be related to diversity of ethnic and national cultures, language backgrounds, faith traditions, academic thought, or research pursuits.

The danger, according to Nouwen, is that empty space tends to create fear. As long as our minds are occupied we can avoid confronting the difficult questions which we do not want to surface. “Being busy” has become a status symbol, and most people keep encouraging each other to keep their body and mind in constant motion, without much tolerance for a moment of silence. But as Christian institutions of higher education, we can, we must, be places of empty-space hospitality, at least occasionally, so that dialogue can begin, and community can be built. It is within dialogue and community that we remain relevant as holistic witness in changing societies. (1 Peter 3:15—“Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect.”)

A footnote to this notion of hospitality—I do not want to be misinterpreted as saying that universities and colleges and seminaries should be places of silence. I

certainly understand that a sense of “intellectual hospitality” can often be very noisy and engaging, but occasional “open-space hospitality” is important as we listen.

And as an additional postscript to this notion of hospitality, I would offer the strange notion that there might even be something we could call “architectural hospitality.” How do we as institutions construct space? Do we intentionally seek to make it inviting? In the Soviet world, and still frequently observed, institutions were constructed with long dark hallways, and the doors out into the hallway were always closed. LCC intentionally constructed our buildings with windows on inner walls, with light and space playing as important a role as function. When the rector of the other university in town came to visit us, shortly after he had been appointed, his comment as we did a brief campus tour was, “This place just feels democratic.” He says “democratic,” I say “hospitable.”

### **Living as Pilgrims, Not Tourists**

Third, as institutions of higher education, our holistic witness is readily visible in how we live and work among others—how and *with whom* we live as pilgrims. It is visible in our choice between being exclusive in our relationships, choosing to identify only with like-minded institutions or only with our church constituencies, and being inclusive in our dealings with neighboring state/secular schools, with neighbors in the community. It is visible in how we view others—not simply as what we are not, but rather as fellow pilgrims—certainly coming from varied perspectives, but not as antagonists. Life as pilgrims, not as tourists.

What are a few characteristics of “pilgrims”?

For pilgrims the journey is as important as the destination.

Pilgrims are concerned with more than the outer physical pilgrimage; depth, not distance, is the goal.

To be a pilgrim is to assume a new and risky identity, surrendering all that clutters one’s life so that God takes center stage. Pilgrims travel light and unencumbered.

Pilgrims and pilgrimages build community. No world is perfect, and so the pilgrim must adjust to the sad fact that some companions on the journey are tourists pretending they are pilgrims. Some companions are sources of temptation; others, sources of grace, and it is the prudent pilgrim who knows the difference. But pilgrimage builds community.

Pilgrimage leads to a sense of interconnectedness, not separateness; of solidarity, not independence; of community, not privatism. Pilgrimage instructs us that however much it may appear a solo function, to be a pilgrim is always a corporate event.

What is a “tourist”?

A tourist observes, primarily, at a surface level. Tourists often make a conscious decision to be unaffected, untouched, and unaltered by their new surroundings. Tourists consciously resist transformation. If possible, they carry along their own water and food, and seek out familiar places that will not affect their equilibrium. There can be accidental transformations, but change and conversion are intentional and basic to the disposition of the pilgrim, not the tourist. (Hebrews 12:1—“Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and...let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us.”)

It is who we are on this pilgrimage when we think no one is looking that often speaks louder than any overt message we may want to send. LCC has had to be very intentional in developing as an institution of pilgrims. Lithuanian academics and Lithuanian church leaders have, since our very beginning, carried a healthy dose of skepticism about who we are. We entered the scene in 1991 at a time of incredible change, change from a communist system to an emerging free-market economy, change from a squelched church to a returned openness to religious expression. We entered at a time when the laws regarding higher education were in flux, and certainly there was no distinction between private and public higher education law. We had to compete with the big boys, the universities that were established 500 years ago and which held monopolies on so much of the system and the programs. But we were determined never to ask for special favors. Although we were unique, we still chose to follow the rules of the game, knowing that once we were on the same playing field, we could perhaps effect change from the inside.

A few years ago, after having been turned down on our fifth attempt to submit our psychology program for accreditation from the Ministry of Education—for technicalities we believed were not an accurate reading of the regulations—we determined that we needed to push the issue through the legal system. This was done at the advice of our Lithuanian business/legal advisors, not because we were coming from the litigious societies of North America.

By following the established guidelines for appealing Ministry decisions, we ended up in the Lithuanian Supreme Court ... and won! For us, this was the end of a very long process of gaining recognition for our psychology program. But, unknown to us, this was also a huge teaching moment for our fellow institutions. We had been watched. Every move had been analyzed. And days after our court decision was made public, we began to get phone calls. How did we do it? How did we manage to win the case? For many, the fact that there was no bribery, no vodka or chocolate involved, was almost impossible to conceive. But it was our desire to follow the laws and procedures that had been established.



Our living as pilgrims, incarnational living, should demonstrate a desire to both engage and transcend the culture. Our living out of faith as institutions of higher education should not only be an attempt to fit in with the existing social framework but should ultimately be an attempt to influence the culture. Where Jesus went, things were never the same again. Our roles should be similar, not to just blend in with the environment but to infect that environment with the transformational love of Christ, exemplified through a “long obedience in the same direction” that describes our sustained commitment to the work. As Alfred Neufeld has said, “Cultural dialysis for the kingdom of God requires time.”

Life as pilgrims (living among, engaging in culture and transcending culture) can be a holistic witness in changing societies. And just to clarify, lest this sounds irrelevant to those of us who do not cross international borders—life as a tourist can take place at home just as easily as in another location. If we are living in isolation, if we do not rub elbows with the world around us, if we observe society from arm’s length ... then we can be accused of being a tourist in our own neighborhood. When society is changing at such speeds, it would seem to argue for no wasting of time. If we have no non-Christians on our list of fellow pilgrims, if we do not intentionally seek ways to walk alongside, then we are perpetuating a sense of otherness that divides. If our hands don’t get dirty with the issues of the day, can we really say we are pilgrims? (To name a few: the earthquake/tsunami devastation in Japan, the use of rape as a weapon in the Congo, sex trafficking in Eastern Europe, anti-government resistance in Syria, female illiteracy rates in many countries, anarchy in Somalia, the conflict in Libya and Palestine and Israel, poverty and violence and destruction and fear.)

In changing societies, in a globalized world, for whom are we responsible? We cannot be paralyzed by the scope of the concerns. We must commit to pilgrim-living where we are.

## **Conclusion**

Our world is changing at speeds that cannot be measured. We have the answer. We can be confident in the promise that Jesus is the same yesterday, today, and forever. He is the One in whom and with whom we live and have our being. With his life as our example, with the leading of the Holy Spirit in our lives, we can (as institutions of higher education together with the church) serve as holistic witnesses in changing societies—through education that is relevant, through space for hospitality, and through pilgrim-living.

May God help us to that end.

## Notes

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\* This chapter was originally a plenary address given at the 2011 ICOMB Higher Education Consultation, Winnipeg, Canada. Present were church leaders, presidents, and academic deans of all Mennonite Brethren and many Anabaptist institutions. The theme was “Church and School: Compañeros (co-laborers) in Growing the People of God.”

## Study Questions

1. The challenges of adapting to the incredible pace of change is a theme throughout this chapter. What would you say are some of the skills a person needs in order to be able to adjust to change in a healthy way?
2. With the vast amount of information available to us, including the desperate situations of people around the globe, how do you sift through what to act on and what not to? What criteria do you currently use? How do you keep from getting overwhelmed?
3. Discuss the difference between living like pilgrims and living like tourists. Of the people in your life with whom you have frequent contact, who is God asking you to “intentionally live alongside of?”
4. Which example of “creating places of hospitality” challenges you the most? Which one are you the most drawn to? Why?