

Lost Sheep

What do you think? If a man owns a hundred sheep, and one of them wanders away, will he not leave the ninety-nine on the hills and go to look for the one that wandered off? And if he finds it, I tell you the truth, he is happier about that one sheep than about the ninety-nine that did not wander off. In the same way, your Father in heaven is not willing that any of these little ones should be lost.

THE WORDS OF JESUS CHRIST
AS RECORDED IN THE GOSPEL OF
MATTHEW 18:12-14

This is a true story. A man¹ had one child, only one child, a daughter. She was a powerful Christian young lady, he has said. After high school, she moved into the dorm of a fine public institution of higher learning. And self-destructed. He watched, in great pain, as drugs and alcohol led her to make choices over the following decade that put her in grave personal danger and deeply grieved his entire family. As a result, he asked himself a question: **What impact does the choice of a college make on a student's religious commitment?** He had the professional ability to undertake extensive research.

He reviewed the summaries of nearly 1,000 articles, books, and research. He thoroughly studied more than 300 of them. He also looked at the responses of nearly 16,000 students attending 133 different colleges and universities. And he discovered that his daughter's story was not unusual. In fact, it was typical.

The Consequences

He discovered, among other things, these disturbing – and heartening – facts:
Attendance at a non-religious college, either public or private, lowers religious commitment. After three or four years at a secular college or university, 52 percent no longer claim to be

born again or have stopped attending church. Students from more conservative religious backgrounds lose their faith at an even higher rate, up to 67 percent.

Attendance at a religious college maintains or raises religious commitment.

Only seven percent no longer claim to be born again, with a very small drop in overall church attendance, after three or four years at a religious college.

And the really good news:
Attendance at an institution that is a member of the Council for Christian Colleges and Universities (CCCU), such as Northwest, significantly raises religious commitment.

How Many Lost Sheep?

Another man², a leader in the Assemblies of God (AG), took this research and applied it to the AG, the denomination that sponsors Northwest University.

The latest Church Ministries Report, for 2005, shows there are **315,000 young people** between the ages of 13 and 17 in the 12,301 Assemblies of God churches in the U.S. **210,000** (two-thirds) will enter one of the 4,000 colleges or universities in America. **178,500** will enter a non-Christian college or university, while **31,500** (15 percent) will enter one of the 102 CCCU schools, including those affiliated with the Assemblies of God.

1. The first man in this article is Dr. Steven J. Henderson, President, Christian Consulting for Colleges and Ministries, Inc. His original article was published in the March 2006 issue of *Christianity Today*.

2. The second man in this article is Dr. George O. Wood, General Secretary, General Council of the Assemblies of God. The original article was printed in the April 2006 issue of *Perspective*, the Assemblies of God Ministers Letter.

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In nine years, after these 13- to 17-year-olds have been in college for four years (and if the same percentages hold true for those who don't go to college) up to **189,000** of AG youth – out of **315,000** – may no longer be following Christ.

What Can We Do?

If the loss of one sheep out of a hundred galvanized the shepherd into drastic action, what can we do as we face the possible loss of sixty out of each hundred of the young people in our care?

Dr. George O. Wood, the AG leader mentioned earlier, makes the following suggestions:

- **We must do a better job with apologetics** for our junior

and senior high youth. In addition to high-energy programs and emotion-focused responses, our kids need thorough grounding.

- **We must encourage** college-bound high school students to consider AG and CCCU schools.

- **We must ramp up our financial support** of AG colleges and universities, even putting the needs of education on a par with the needs of foreign missions.

He has other suggestions as well, but admits the first step is to raise the alarm and to increase awareness.

Our Commitment

Those of us who serve at Northwest University confront the gravity of this reality.

“We are mindful of lost sheep every day as we do our work in recruitment,” says Dan Neary, the Executive Vice President of Northwest University.

“Even though our work shares the techniques of advertising campaigns and sales tactics, we know there is much more at stake. We are motivated by a very real sense that we are dealing with God's plan and calling in the lives of prospective students. Our work is to help young people respond to God's call and prepare for lives of service.”

That Important First Year

Many students and parents often undervalue the importance of the first year of college.

“It's just a time to take all of your prerequisite courses,” the conventional wisdom goes. “The upper-class years, working on your major, are more important.”

But in terms of a student's spiritual life, the first year is often the most important.

The biggest degree of change is in the first year away from home, the research tells us.

Attending a secular college, where both peers and faculty are critical of and hostile to Christian faith and values, makes the first year difficult for a believer.

On the other hand, attending a Christian college or university provides an environment where peers and faculty encourage students to deepen their faith.

Impact for a Lifetime

I played golf a few days ago with three alumni of Northwest: Rick Enloe, John Vertefeuille, and Jim Heugel. On the drive home, I listened as they reminisced about their days at Northwest.

They talked about how they had met each other and become friends. Their friendships have lasted more than thirty years.

They talked about how they met their wives. Their marriages have lasted over thirty years.

And they talked about how they deepened their walk with Christ. Two of these are pastors, and one is our provost. But none has become a lost sheep. Their lives are richer today, and richer for eternity.