

# **Education for a Lifestyle of Service**

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*At the beginning of my tenure as President of Mount Vernon Nazarene College, I have the privilege and the responsibility to articulate some very definite convictions about Christian education. You will understand me – my leadership style, curriculum commitments, programs and plans – when you recognize the convictions to which I am captive. I take this occasion to share with you my perspective on “Education for a lifestyle of Service,” outlining the foundation for such a perspective, a model for it, and the result of a commitment to it.*

## **Education for a Lifestyle of Service**

### **Introduction**

In my first chapel message to the campus community in September, 1989, I shared with them my philosophy of life. It is captured in the Biblical passage which states “Whosoever seeks to save his life will lose it but he who loses his life for my sake will find it” (Matthew 16:25 NIV). If I understand this scripture correctly, it is in serving others, in the Lutheran sense of vocation, that we discover ourselves and the purpose for which we were created.

At the time of my first chapel message at MVNC, I did not realize the intimate connection between the passage and to the college motto, “To Seek To Learn Is To Seek To Serve.” Perhaps it was with these words of Christ in mind that the founding leadership of Mount Vernon Nazarene College chose the School Motto.

This institution, since its inception, has affirmed its commitment to service as both the motivation and expression of all that transpires throughout the campus community. My assignment is to accelerate the exploration of this commitment into every area of campus life and thought. My unique responsibility is to lead the institution in passionately pursuing the vision of an “education for a lifestyle of service.”

Churchill stated, “You make a living by what you get; you make a life by what you give.” And the great philosopher, theologian, and musician, Albert Schweitzer, with his life and with his words, communicated to us profoundly the truth that “The only ones among you who will be really happy are those who have sought and found how to serve.” Tolstoi concluded, “The sole meaning of life is to serve humanity.”

It is possible, I suggest, and necessary, if we are to be faithful to our mission, to identify the ethic of service as the organizing principle and burning passion around which, the whole of campus life and learning revolves. Our mandate at MVNC is to shape servant leaders to make a difference in the twenty-first century.

## I. The Foundation for an Ethic of Service

Perhaps I should pause and define what I mean by the phrase “an ethic of service.” Service in the ethical sense of which I speak refers to service that wills to do something for the sake of other people. It includes learning from others. What I am referring to is a basic commitment to a life of service, not simply tearful responses to pictures of starving people.

Service without a theology or a philosophy is likely to be short – lived, erratic, superficially emotional and fragile when the going gets rough. I am talking about a foundation for the habitual practice of service as an expression of character.

Henri Nouwen’s recent book, *In Jesus’ Name*, captures the essence of Christian service as an expression of character. Christian service is the extension of Jesus in the world; it incarnates the healing, guiding, sustaining, reconciling work of Jesus in the lives of those with whom we work and live. Jesus came to do the will of the Father. To His disciples He said, “*As the Father has sent me, so send I you.*” If we are Christians, we are called to serve others in Jesus’ name. An individual may work as a student or teacher, an administrator or secretary, a plumber or pastor, and view the position or place of service as his or her “station” of service for Christ.

To express the fundamental concept of service, the writers of the New Testament used the Greek word, *diakonia*, the same root word from which the term “ministry” comes. From the New Testament perspective, all Christians are called to be servants. This is especially true of leaders. Listen to the words of Jesus in Luke 22:24-27 (NIV):

*A dispute arose among them as to which of them was considered to be the greatest. Jesus said to them, “The kings of the Gentiles lord it over them...but you are not like that. Instead, the greatest among you should be like the youngest, and the one who rules like the one who serves. For who is greater, the one who is at the table or the one who serves? It is not the one who is at the table? But I am among you as one who serves.”*

If our imperative is to shape servant leaders who will make a difference in the twenty-first century, then students who plan careers in medicine or education, business or drama, athletics or art or any of the other numerous degree programs available at MVNC, must wrestle with the implications of Jesus’ statement: “*I am among you as one who serves.*”

These words of Jesus provide the theological foundation for the mandate of a Christian institution to shape servant leaders. However, it is the philosophical foundation which distinguishes the institution as a Christian liberal arts institution.

The ethic of service must be reinforced by knowledge gained through the humanities. Liberal arts education represents the philosophical ground for service. The role of the liberal arts is to explain on scientific, religious, and ontological grounds the meaning of life in its wholeness and how to act effectively in light of that meaning. In the article “The Idea of Service in International Education”, Lawrence Burkholder states, “Just as Bishop Anselm spoke of theology as ‘faith seeking understanding’, we should speak ethically of the liberal arts as service seeking

understanding.” He continues, “psychology, sociology, religion, history, and the sciences are the fertile ground through which the impulse to serve others is granted a comprehensive framework of meaning...” The business of MVNC is not primarily to grant degrees; rather our responsibility is to shape leaders who serve from a rich theological and philosophical foundation.

## **II. A Model for Teaching a Lifestyle of Service**

A model of education for a lifestyle of service is needed. But how do we teach to shape servant leaders? What is the primary teaching method by which this vision or calling will be realized in the lives of students?

Twelve years ago, just after its publication, I read the book, *Servant Leadership*, by Robert Greenleaf, former Director of Management Research of AT&T. I lived in Europe at the time, having just begun my first administrative teaching assignment in Christian higher education. I remember the impact the book had on me.

The second chapter focuses on “The Institution as Servant.” Greenleaf states: “... caring for persons, the more able and the less able serving each other, is the rock upon which a good society is built. Whereas, until recently, caring was largely person-to-person, now most of it is mediated through institutions – often large, complex, powerful, impersonal, not always competent, sometimes corrupt.” He continues, “If a better society is to be built, one that is more just and more loving, one that provides greater creative opportunity for its people, then the most open course is to raise both the capacity to serve and the very performance as servant of existing major institutions by the generative forces operating with them.”

If students depart from MVNC committed to a lifestyle of service, and if, through our graduates, a better society will be built, one that is more just, more loving, and one that provides greater creative opportunity for its people, then Mount Vernon Nazarene College must, to use Greenleaf’s words, “raise both the capacity to serve and the very performance of a servant.” This will only happen as a servant lifestyle is modeled in every faculty, administrative, and staff office, every classroom, and every residence room or apartment to the point where the institution itself is perceived by its constituency as a servant institution.

But how do we as a college exemplify a lifestyle transformation for both those we lead and our leaders? How do we teach the necessity for change in values, priorities, commitments, character qualities and an understanding that education is a lifelong pursuit? How do we so communicate with each other on campus that the Christian faith is presented not as an intellectualized belief to be learned, but a life to be lived? How can we live together in a vigorous academic setting so that, to use Greenleaf’s words, “caring for persons, the more able and the less able serving each other” increasingly characterizes the members of the campus community and MVNC as an educational institution?

Ephesians 4:11-16 enunciates such a model. The passage outlines the context, task, goal, dynamic, and purpose for us as Christian educators in our passion to equip students for a lifestyle of service.

**The context...**is “God’s people” (Ephesians 4:11). The key focus is participation.

Since all Christians are called to serve others in Jesus’ name, all the people of God are participants in educating for a lifestyle of service. Learning is not limited to the students in the classroom. It permeates all the different roles and responsibilities to which we commit ourselves. All of us are on a spiritual pilgrimage and are in process of becoming what God the Father, Creator, and Redeemer envisions for us. From this perspective, administrators, faculty, staff and students provide the context for our educational pursuit.

**The task...**is to “prepare God’s people” (Ephesians 4:12). The key idea is formation.

Christian formation means enabling the individual to grow in Christlikeness. This demands an acquaintance with the Christian tradition, an awareness of world issues, development of personal faith, competence in vocational skills, a philosophy of life, a global perspective and growth in community life.

We need guidance in developing a lifestyle of devotion to Christ, in caring for the world, nurturing our own spiritual lives, relating to other world citizens, developing personal qualities and inculcating values by which we will live and die.

**The goal...**is “works of service” (Ephesians 4:12). The key thought is expression.

Our theology of service is mission. Service, like mission, is a function and expression of the entire church.

Our goal is to prepare God’s people to participate in the mission of the church, which is to proclaim the kingdom of God, nurture the people of God, and serve the whole human community.

We must be captured by this vision which transcends service to the students and for the students, to service with the students and by the students.

**The dynamic...**is “love with the Body of Christ” (Ephesians 4:15-16). The key concept is interaction.

Interaction is defined as an intimacy of relationship between members with the Body of Christ. In every New Testament passage where the Body of Christ is discussed, close attention is paid to the relational context in which this kind of mutual nurture takes place.

Passing on information cannot by itself produce a servant of Christ. Truth needs both to be explained and demonstrated in an intimate relationship context, where love and trust free us to know and reveal ourselves to one another. Modeling, rather than indoctrination, is the method of education for lifestyle change.

The Ephesian passage also identifies **the purpose...** as a “holiness lifestyle” (Ephesians 4:13). The key issue is Christlikeness.

The purpose of the Christian education enterprise is to equip students for a Christlike ministry of service to others as they fulfill their vocational responsibility.

A holiness lifestyle focuses on the progressive transformation of the Christian toward the character, values, motives, attitudes and understanding of God Himself.

### **III. The Result of an Education for a Lifestyle of Service**

Having explained the ethic of service and amplified a model for service, I wish to suggest the result of an education for a lifestyle of service.

What will be the outcome of a Christian liberal arts institution consciously viewing itself as a servant institution, where education for a lifestyle of service is the theme around which the whole of campus life and learning revolves? The result, I believe, will be found in students who graduate with a commitment to lead as servants and to make a difference in the twenty-first century. I stake my life on the conviction that we can live together redemptively while fully acknowledging the conflicting expectations that are so pervasive on a dynamic college campus.

Mount Vernon Nazarene College came to Manila in the summer of 1986 when Professor Jim Skon and family traveled at their own expense to work in the Asia-Pacific Regional Office of the Church of the Nazarene. I was so impressed with the quality of their work that I asked Jim for names of two MVNC computer science students whom I could challenge to travel to Manila at a later date to assist me and my staff at the Asia-Pacific Nazarene Theological Seminary. Keith Shaffer and John Hatcliff arrived the following summer. They made a tremendous impact on our students as well as on the staff of the seminary.

John returned to Manila upon his graduation from MVNC in 1988, at his own expense and with no salary, to spend a year with us in personnel training and additional computer program development. He worshiped regularly with Filipinos in their humble worship facilities and visited with them often in their nipa hut shelters. He returned to the States last May and is now in graduate studies in Canada. John’s life has been radically changed and he and made a profound impact on others.

Other MVNC students have worked in the Lamb’s Club in Manhattan and in inner-city work in Los Angeles. MVNC graduate Doug Flemming served as a volunteer on the island of Sipan (near Guam) as a radio announcer for Far East Christian Radio Broadcast Company. Students and

faculty travel frequently to the country of Belize to assist in various projects of need. In giving to others, their lives have been changed.

These examples increasingly illustrate the kind of opportunities I want to make available to students as an integral part of their education at Mount Vernon Nazarene College.

I desire deeply to see our students at work on campus, conceptualizing with small business entrepreneurs, composing music, devising breakthroughs for the physically disabled, promoting racial harmony and cultural understanding, and working with the poor, the hungry, and the emotionally disturbed.

I envision students who are among the best and the brightest, who, at the same time, have long lists of volunteer activities, honors and award. We must graduate students who are set apart by their blend of leadership, initiative, and creativity, and by their contribution to society even while carrying a full load of college work. MVNC alumni, increasingly, will be marked as leaders who give something of themselves in order to help someone else – servant leaders who will make a difference in the twenty-first century.

## **Conclusion**

The next step for the MVNC faculty and administrators is to examine the implications of the ethic-of-service motif. We must explore together the implications of our commitment to a lifestyle of service as we review our general education core curriculum; develop seminars, conferences, workshops, and short-term modules for the Free Enterprise Business Center; consider nontraditional and degree-completion programs; enlarge continuing education opportunities on and off campus, and revise the field education and intern programs.

We must understand the implications of our service conviction in the teaching of the humanities, languages, math and sciences. We must consider that our concern should provide direction for us as we commit ourselves to intensifying our recruitment and support of minorities and immigrants. We must realize that our commitment to service should enable us to enlarge our world view, to see a global society, to understand ourselves as world Christians. We must be willing to stretch our vision to include working with other institutions for programs in international education.

We must ask ourselves what our organizing principle suggests to us about the way we relate to each other on campus, especially if modeling is the primary method of teaching for lifestyle change. Can students be so guided in the process of gaining an education that the commitment to service is intricately connected to their pursuit of learning and their quest for excellence?

I have a vision – a passion with me – of MVNC increasingly and significantly articulation its purpose and structuring its entire life – its classes, offices, dorms, and apartments – around the organizing principle of “education for a lifestyle of service.”

I dream of graduates continuing to depart from the campus with learning and vital piety tightly interwoven with a deep conviction of giving to and serving others, and in so doing, not only experiencing life as it was designed for them to be lived by their Creator, but also becoming the servant leaders who will make a difference in the twenty-first century.

May it be so, Lord. Amen.

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