

Andy Dennis: ‘Training a generation of cultural shapers’

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Since 2007, Andy Dennis has served the students of Rice University and the Texas Medical Center as Baptist Student Ministry director. From deep in the heart of one Texan, he shares his background and thoughts on ministering to college students. To suggest a Baptist General Convention of Texas-affiliated leader to be featured in this column, or to apply to be featured yourself, [click here](#).

Background

Where else have you served in ministry, and what were your positions there?

I served in the NAMB program US-2 after college as a missionary in Ft. Myers Beach, Florida, chaplain to Six Flags over Texas, and as BSM director at Southwest Texas State University and Howard Payne University.

Where did you grow up?

Nashville, Tennessee.

How did you come to faith in Christ?

I grew up in a Christian home that regularly attended a Baptist church in our community. When I was at VBS in fifth grade, I was listening to the pastor give the invitation, and I understood exactly what I needed to do without any conversation with family, friends or teachers.

When he gave that moment to respond, I pushed the other kids out of the

way, rushed up to the pulpit, and told my pastor that I wanted to give my life to Jesus! He later told me that it was the first time anyone had ever beaten him out of the pulpit to tell him their decision!

Since that day, Jesus has shaped, molded and led my life in ways I would have never dreamed.

Where were you educated, and what degrees did you receive?

Undergraduate: Bachelor of Arts in communication arts (speech and broadcasting), minor in sociology: Carson-Newman College in Jefferson City, Tennessee.

Graduate: Doctor of Ministry with biblical languages emphasis in missions and evangelism from Southwestern Seminary in Ft. Worth, Texas.

Ministry

Why do you feel called into campus ministry?

I feel called to campus ministry because there is no greater place to impact the lives of people at the most crucial moments in their lives. If we can introduce people to Jesus and grow disciples at the level of the university, we can make lifelong disciples who will continue to make more disciples beyond the campus.

In my particular setting, I realize that students who will graduate from Rice University and the medical schools will have the opportunity to take the gospel to places I will never be able to go, both globally as well as into the hospital rooms of people who are in physical need and the halls of power globally. We train them to be the presence of Jesus in these places, an important opportunity that we need to train disciples to serve.

At Rice, we are training a generation of cultural shapers. The students who will graduate will go on to have influence in entertainment, sports, science, medicine, politics and law. It's vital for us to raise up disciples who will be able to carry Jesus with them into the halls of power around the world!

What is your favorite aspect of campus ministry? Why?

I love the moments when students discover the joy of sharing their faith and seeing someone respond by accepting Christ for the first time. I love also to be able to see students discover some new truth from the Bible that they've never known before. Lives transformed are the moments that keep me coming back!

What one aspect of your ministry gives you the greatest joy?

I love being on mission with our students, both on campus serving as well as beyond the campus. Being able to serve alongside students and see them gain a love for taking the gospel out with them through missions is constantly fun.

What would you like more people to know about campus ministry?

It is a crucial mission field in our cities.

In Houston alone, there are almost 300,000 students. It is a huge opportunity to reach people who are making life decisions that will influence them forever. Through campus ministry and the local church, we can impact a large group of people who are still figuring out who they are and what they believe.

It is worth investing in our students as they will lead after we're gone!

Describe a situation or event that provides an insight into collegiate ministry.

After one of my medical student lunches, I was approached by one of our guys asking if we could sit down to talk one afternoon about spiritual growth. I met this student, and he told me of his own spiritual journey of growing up in the Valley as a nominal Catholic.

When he arrived at graduate school at TCU, one of his friends shared the gospel with him and he was transformed. Since then, he has worked for continual growth in his life through church and conversations with friends about the Bible.

Upon coming to medical school, he made great friends who continue to help him grow as he asks great questions about who Jesus is and why he said and did the things he did. He's helping his friends know what they know better and growing himself at the same time!

In the short time that we've known each other, I've seen tremendous growth through his life as he is so hungry for knowing Jesus more than any student we've had in a long time!

What priorities or goals guide your ministry?

The priority is making disciples of Jesus. That one principle guides all we do. It leads us to share the gospel. It leads us to teach students how to lead Bible studies and teach others to make disciples. It leads us to show people how to take the gospel beyond the campus to the community and world!

The verse that I use so often in talking to our students is 1 Thessalonians 2:8: "We loved you so much that we not only shared the gospel, but our very lives." To me, this verse implies what we should be about loving people deeply ... with our lives and sharing the gospel.

If we do this, then lives will be transformed eternally!

What is the most exciting or joyful thing that has happened in your ministry?

One of the great joys we have at Rice is being able to have the opportunity to *be* Christ in places where he is not welcome or seemingly present to share him.

Each semester, we've been invited to be a part of several campus parties to serve pancakes and give free rides on golf carts to students who might have drank too much. In the place of the party, we are able to be and share Christ to students who are looking for something else. Every time we are able to serve, it's inevitable that we meet a student who is tired of the party or looking for something more than what the party scene has to offer.

As we serve pancakes, we are able to show the love of Jesus first and then discuss how they can have the full and abundant life that Jesus offers apart from the party scene at Rice! More often than not, when we offer the opportunity, we make several follow-up gospel appointments to discuss the salvation Jesus offers!

What is the most heartbreaking thing that has happened in your ministry?

Watching students walk away from discipleship for what I call "intellectual laziness" or "moral laziness." Intellectual laziness is when a student says, "I don't believe in Jesus, but I don't have time/care to investigate who he says he is." Moral laziness means a student would rather live comfortably with sin than to turn their lives to Jesus completely.

Based upon what you have observed from campus

ministry, what do you think about the future of our country and/or world?

Rice and medical school students really give me a limited view, but, as I can see it, our students are very driven to be successful. There is a bit of a redefining of what success looks like in the world ahead of them.

They seem to value community, technology and activism. It's an interesting time to be on these campuses as community and technology tend to battle one another at times. One can enhance the other or harm it as well.

There is a real need to learn empathy and the ability to have civil disagreements. It's easier to demonize the other online through social media, but it's difficult to do that person to person. I think the future will be an opportunity to regain a sense of empathy for other people.

Based upon what you have observed from campus ministry, what do you think about the future of the church?

It is more imperative than ever to reach the college students now. Many models of church in the past just ignored the college student or didn't have a place for them after youth group until marriage.

Now, as students drift away from church in college and delay marriage longer and longer, the time between youth and when we traditionally had people come back when they had children is continuing to grow wider.

On the campus, we as a church have one of the greatest opportunities to engage students who have never heard the gospel or have grown cold to it and help them become authentic, lifelong disciples at a crucial point of their development and life choices!

How has your ministry or your perspective on ministry changed?

Generational shift over the last 19 years has changed my perspective the most.

The need of sharing the gospel and being intentional about making disciples remains the same as always. As generations change and technology changes, it has changed our methods and the types of opportunities have changed.

It is so much different to reach students who are largely more tied to their computers or smart phones, so our creativity in using technology to connect with students has changed. Though our society is more connected than ever, we still have a need to belong and be loved. Showing students how to do this is a part of taking the gospel to the campus.

If you could launch any new ministry, what would it be? Why?

Maybe a podcast talking about the intersection of the gospel in popular culture because we get glimpses of it throughout our culture, but not many people are using it to point people to Christ!

Name the three most significant challenges and/or influences facing your ministry.

- consumerist culture
- polarization of culture
- and campus regulations regarding religious organizations

What key opportunities will campus ministry

undertake in the next 10 years?

I think understanding how to reach the Community College will be the greatest piece of this ministry in the coming years. In Houston alone, we have almost 300,000 college students. Most of them are on Community College campuses. The numbers continue to grow as the price of a normal four-year school increases. If we cannot reach these campuses, we will not be able to reach many of the students who are in our city.

In addition, it will need to be a partnership with local churches in each of our communities/suburbs to reach them. BSM isn't able to do it alone! We need a church who sees the need, hears the call and responds by being present and asking local BSM directors how they can partner to reach these campuses!

What key issues face college or university campuses today?

From the spiritual perspective, there are two aspects that face students.

One is the growing acceptance of pluralism that pervades mindsets on our campus. "That's good for you, but it doesn't work for me." "You just need to believe something." Many students voice this perspective in a variety of ways that don't help students understand what they mean when they say this.

The other idea that is growing on campuses outside the southern US (growing in the South as well) is that you cannot stand for certain moral issues that are deemed genetic or hate speech. Taking moral stances on a variety of issues has greater implications than before, which leads to loss of status on the campus or other punitive repercussions for campus ministries — which is why it is vital for us to have great relations with our campus administration, to have these kinds of conversations that are ongoing and building trust from them.

One of the other issues that will continue to grow in Texas will be that of race relations.

If we as campus ministries are not a reflection of the society or the kingdom we speak of, then we will miss many opportunities. For us, to respond to racial issues has opened many doors for ministering to many people of many races!

We work to build bridges and understand the experience of all students on our campus. In a place like Houston, it is vital that we learn to live in harmony with people different than whatever cultural background we are because we are the most diverse city in America!

About Andy

Who were/are your mentors, and how did/do they influence you?

Dr. Rick Spencer was one of the biggest influences on me in BSM work. He was my first supervisor and wasn't really sure I was up to the task. Rick gently pastored me and shaped me into a much better minister. He knew all of my hard edges and rough places but showed me much grace through my late twenties and early thirties, when I needed someone to help me understand myself.

He was a pastoral presence in my life that showed me how to love others with a mixture of truth and grace. In pastoring students, I realize how much our conversations help me to walk with students in much the same way to help them to grow closer to Jesus.

What is the impact of your ministry on your family?

I think there are several great ways that I've been able to merge the two and learn to be a better husband and dad at the same time.

In recent years, I've learned a lot about racial reconciliation, and having people from all kinds of backgrounds in our home has been a blessing. My daughter gets to be around all people from many different backgrounds, and no matter how she is treated by people of other backgrounds at school, she is able to look to the examples of students that we have in our home and loves them as she would anyone in our family no matter what their racial background might be.

In addition, I've gotten to the place where she is old enough to bring along with us to serve on campus, and she is seeing the value of sharing Jesus in the act of serving others!

Name some of your favorite non-biblical books or authors and explain why.

I love the works of N. T. Wright. He writes with such scholarly language and appeal but on a level that's accessible for all believers!

I also love the works of Brennan Manning. He speaks of grace in ways that anyone can understand, apply it and give it.

I find myself drawn to the works of Brené Brown as well. Her works on shame and courage inspire me to be a better leader, dad and husband. I think she speaks to a great need in our cultural understanding, especially the generation I get to work with every day.

What is your favorite Bible verse or passage? Why?

I love Paul in Athens in Acts 17. It is a picture of what life is like on our campus when he shares to the smart, successful people of Athens.

He shares with them about the "unknown God." Our "altars" at Rice and the Medical Center are so much different, but the responses and people are much the same. People want to discuss "big issues" or the "big questions,"

but the response is much the same too, where some will scoff and others will want to hear more.

In addition, Paul does an excellent job of showing us how important it is to understand the culture where we are, use language that can be understood, use cultural markers that are understood and share the gospel boldly in the midst of places that God is only an idea or intellectual exercise!

Other than Jesus, who is your favorite Bible character? Why?

I love Daniel because he was someone who actually lived in a pagan culture but was never touched by it. He was able to thrive in a place that was not natural or familiar to him.

I feel like that many days with students in the Medical Center and Rice. They've been thrust into the middle of a "pagan" culture that doesn't understand them or sometimes accept their beliefs. The challenge to remain faithful and thrive in the culture speaks to the power only found through Jesus.

I love the fact that Daniel was not only intelligent in the things of the Lord, but the Bible tells us that he knew all of the Babylonian studies as well or better than his Babylonian peers! It's a great picture to keep before students who face daily challenges to be faithful and understand the culture they live in.

If you could get one "do over" in ministry, what would it be, and why?

I think I'd learned to have developed a growth mind-set at a younger age. It's a real shame that we don't realize that we don't know everything until we've been doing a certain job for a while.

I just assumed that things would work or be successful in the same ways they were when I was in my twenties or early thirties, but, as I've grown older, I can see that being flexible and learning new things has only served to benefit me more and more working with a challenging campus.

Write and answer a question you wish we had asked.

How can local churches partner with us to reach the campus?

Beyond serving lunch, which so many churches are faithful to do, there are probably community colleges in your area which are desperate for help in serving their population regularly.

What if a church were able to serve the administration there? Lunches might be expensive weekly, but what if a church were able to serve coffee and donuts one day a week with one of the retired Sunday School classes or young moms? They could be the front lines of reaching the campuses across Texas and the US that have no gospel presence!

In addition, make space for students in the church. Make sure they have a space to feel comfortable in your church; otherwise, they may not come at all.

Find creative ways to disciple students through families or senior adults, or giving them places to serve the church! They need to have people around them who have walked the road they are on and can help them when the time comes.

I love telling my students that the kingdom of God is not 18-22, and they need a place where they can use their giftedness and live among people of all ages!