

# **Shawn Shannon: Present everyone fully mature in Christ**

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Shawn Shannon has brought a contemplative approach to ministry for nearly 19 years as director of the [Baptist Student Ministry](#), part of the Spiritual Life Department at the University of Mary Hardin-Baylor. From deep in the heart of one Texan, she shares her background and thoughts on collegiate ministry. 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 have previously served as Campus Minister at Houston Baptist University (1995-2000), Associate BSM Director at Baylor University (1982-1995), Assistant BSM Director at Stephen F. Austin State University (1980-1982), Student Secretary, Counseling Center, Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary (1977-1979), Student Minister/Team Leader, A Christian Ministry in the National Parks, Yellowstone National Park (1979), Youth Minister, First Baptist Church, Stuttgart, Arkansas (1978), and Summer Staff with Young Life (1973 and 1975).

### **Where did you grow up?**

I was raised (or “reared” as we like to say) in Little Rock, Arkansas, with a two-year term in Fort Bragg when my father was in the Army.

## **How did you come to faith in Christ?**

I came to Jesus through the gracious generosity of God and the prayers of my grandparents. Though my parents were raised in church and were God-fearers, church was not a part of their lives when I was young. Yet they did what it took to take me to meet my Granny and Gramps at First Baptist Little Rock.

When I was eight years old, I ended up sitting by myself in the balcony at “Big Church.” It was a special revival Sunday, and my grandparents were elsewhere. I think this was the first time I sat alone in a large, holy place. And that impacted how I listened.

At the end of the service, the pastor asked the “lost” people to come to the front of the church. I thought that was a sure-fire way to find my grandparents, so I headed down the stairs toward the pulpit. Part way down, I paused and thought this was something more significant than finding grandparents. This was a way of saying I felt the need for and wanted to belong to God, which was all true for me.

I proceeded to the front, took the preacher’s hand, and said, “My grandparents will be here soon.” This was perhaps my first and only prophecy, for it was true! They came.

After this time, my parents arranged for me to attend a church closer to our home, and family friends took me.

As part of the larger story of saying yes to Jesus’, “Follow me,” I was baptized at age 11. When I was 14, I realized my relationship with God was going to impact other life decisions. When I entered high school, I began to read the Bible for myself, to be discipled, and to be part of fellowship with and ministry to others. God used strong youth groups, church musicals, camps, retreats and Young Life to make the path of life known to me.

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

Though I was not homeschooled, I was raised in a house with an English teacher (my mom) who was constantly encouraging me to read and learn — and who could correct grammar from the other end of the house (Beware of the sin of hanging prepositions!).

I attended public school in Little Rock during our second major wave of desegregation, which was amazingly formative. I first became aware of and cared about civil rights when I was in the third grade.

I attended Ouachita Baptist University, majoring in psychology and sociology, and taking many classes in speech and drama. I was called to Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, where I received a Master of Arts in religious education. I was trained through the Spiritual Direction Institute of the Cenacle Retreat House, Houston. I earned a Doctor of Ministry degree from Beeson Divinity School at Samford University with a project/dissertation about the spiritual formation of campus ministers.

The Center for Collegiate Ministry is committed to providing educational experiences. They also send us books and encourage us to read.

## **Ministry**

### **Why do you feel called into campus ministry?**

I went to Southwestern Seminary with a background of varied experiences and interests. I made the most of opportunities to try on different ministries like social work and youth ministry, and I discovered these things aligned with my values yet left me drained.

I had been active in the Baptist Student Union in college; so, I was glad to take a seminary class in collegiate ministry under W. F. Howard. What a

privilege!

He asked us to complete a brief questionnaire about our experiences and interests and set up individual 15-minute meetings to discuss our responses.

As we reviewed my answers, he said, “Shawn, why aren’t you interested in student work?” Wow! Though I had been involved with BSM — and I was raised around multiple women in ministry — I had not thought of student work until I was asked.

At that moment, the bits and pieces of me that were like a stack of unrelated tiles suddenly spread out like a mosaic! All sorts of things had places in the larger picture of campus ministry.

I took part of my spring break to shadow a friend of mine who worked at the BSU at the University of Arkansas. I noticed my days were longer than they had been at previous places of service, and I was incredibly energized by what we were getting to do. Student work fit and was fruitful. Then the discernment began where this sheep (me) began to hear the Shepherd in new and definitive ways.

## **What is your favorite aspect of campus ministry? Why?**

I love to watch the mystery of seeing people grow to be closer to and more like Jesus. Due to the nature of the campus culture, it sometimes seems as if students are growing right before my eyes.

I love to be a part of dynamics that can best (or only) be explained by a work of the Spirit.

I love the sense we are in this together — staff, students, others and the Lord.

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

I experience deep joy when others grow in knowing and loving God and people, when they increasingly live a life of trust and obedience, extending themselves for the sake of others.

I flourish on mission trips, when we are doing one main thing as a group and are prayerfully dependent on the Lord. It is great to be free to “go about doing good,” as Jesus did.

I am so aware the person I meet when she or he is 18 will someday be 29, 37, 43, 54. It is a treasure to meet people as students and know them for decades.

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

Campus Ministry is intrinsically cross/multi-cultural. Culture is evolving so quickly that even on a residential campus, freshmen and seniors may be natives to differing cultures. Add to that non-traditional students, those with military connections, internationals, and staff and faculty members — it is a very diverse microcosm!

Campus ministry also includes the entire campus community: administrators, faculty, staff, vendors, alumni, and neighbors, in addition to students!

Due to the compactness of the academic calendar (sometimes there is the birth, life and conclusion of a community in a nine-month span), campus ministry is often like shooting rapids or navigating white water. A lot of things happen quickly.

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

Sarah had done very well at UMHB. She was anticipating her senior year and might have felt entitled to coast on in to graduation. Yet she had a dream for a women's discipleship experience she wanted to pilot. The energy and strategy were both there. What she needed were support and resources.

We talked and prayed and proceeded as the Lord opened the way. A ministry called Gathered was born. It drew women together to pursue Christ and to include and encourage others. The ministry sponsored an amazing spring retreat that engaged a significant number of women on campus. Sarah raised up a young woman to lead the ministry when Sarah graduated.

I could tell similar tales of how a freshman who was commuting from a small town in central Texas revived the BSM drama ministry. The troupe included over 50 students that year, and the ministry flourishes today. A young man got involved in a community ministry in Belton and envisioned college students mentoring youth and now Raising Arrows is an established ministry. A missionary kid saw how children in poverty could be engaged with the Gospel through the use of sports and games, and Called to Play was born.

Add to these the hundreds of students who have their first Christ-motivated, cross-cultural experience in college (missions, friendship with an international, local missions) and go on to live missional lives.

Sometimes students simply need an open door, a hand up, a chance or an invitation.

## **What priorities or goals guide your ministry?**

Succinctly stated, we provide opportunities for students to grow, give and go. Most of our ministry groups, settings and options encourage students in and equip students for servant leadership in one or more of these areas.

For me, I am called to nurture lifelong, lifestyle, disciple-making followers of Jesus. “We proclaim him, admonishing and teaching everyone with all wisdom, so that we may present everyone fully mature in Christ” (Colossians 1:28).

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

Some of those who are students when I first meet them quickly grow to be peers in ministry. Years later, they are bearing fruit, fruit that lasts; they are disciple-making disciples. What a privilege to have a front row seat on such a work of God!

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

Sometimes there are students who were active in serving, leading, sharing, and investing who later lose their “first love” of Christ. It is for a reason John ends his letter to God’s people by writing, “Dear children, keep away from anything that might take God’s place in your hearts” (1 John 5:21). May we all heed this loving warning.

## **Based upon what you have observed from campus ministry, what do you think about the future of our country and/or world?**

Our collegiate brothers and sisters are likely to continue proactively addressing big issues (such as human trafficking, world hunger, poverty,

specific diseases and water scarcity) with great confidence that we truly can make a difference. Many of these people are great goers and givers. And they see this as their preferred lifestyle.

They are also quite open to caring adults coming alongside of them as mentors or partners.

My main concern: Some struggle with resilience. There are a lot of anxious and overwhelmed young people.

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

Welcome to new paradigms of staffing, worship, ministries, outreach and discipleship. I believe we will continue to see younger people interested and drawn to multigenerational relationships. I look for others to cultivate new and varied ways of things to do and ways to do them.

My concerns include a lack of exposure to personal stewardship of resources, the endurance to keep commitments past the point of initial interest or convenience, and a lack of awareness of history (church, national and world).

## **How has your ministry or your perspective on ministry changed?**

Over the years, I am aware of an increased dependence on Jesus. I rely less on plans and more on things like obedience and the Giver of daily bread.

I keenly feel my need for a compass to guide me, and I cherish those opportunities to recalibrate to true north. I experience sabbath as a challenge, a gift and necessity if I am to keep going.



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

Soul Care for Ministers. So many of us are sometimes drawing water from a dry or muddy well.

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

1. Paul prayed that the Philippians would be able to “discern what is best” (Philippians 1:10). There are so many options and opportunities, causes and concerns, muchness and manyness, so much competing for time and attention both for ministers and for those with whom we minister. There is a great need to ask, seek and knock to discern what God would have us do. In 1978, Richard Foster wrote: “In contemporary society our Adversary majors in three things: noise, hurry, and crowds. If he can keep us engaged in ‘muchness’ and ‘manyness’ he will rest satisfied.” How can we offer experiences with quiet, unhurry, solitude or true fellowship?
2. The need to persevere in prayer. Not treating prayer as something to do before or after ministry, but as the work itself.
3. The temptation to do things to please — or to avoid disappointing — others. To do things to be seen or known. To do things for any other reason than trust, obedience and love.
4. To keep up! With people, information, opportunities, paper, stuff and time.

## **What key opportunities will campus ministry undertake in the next 10 years?**

The global picture will continue to morph and shift. How do we stay alert to the implications of these changing dynamics? How will we be kingdom citizens in such times?

How do we connect with those who are primarily engaged in distance learning, who may rarely if ever come on campus? What options do they have to experience community?

How can we enhance what we do to help students discern their callings and to raise and address questions about vocation?

## **What key issues face college or university campuses today?**

It would be great if you could interview those who work in counseling centers on campuses. Anxiety, depression and stress are impacting students greatly, as are concerns for how they will pay for college and what to do about the debt they incur.

Universities may need to be clearer about the benefit of paying for a broader education when it might be more practical for someone to learn a trade.

Private faith-based universities will increasingly face issues that will bring us face-to-face with changing cultural practices and mores.

## **About Shawn**

### **Who were/are some of your mentors, and how did/do they influence you?**

F. Howard encouraged me to seek to offer a full buffet of ministry and involvement options.

Carolyn Teague models for me being a life-long learner, a door-opener for others and a bridge-builder between people. I have always seen how she loves Jesus.

George Loutharback has shown me how to cultivate leaders and how to give others both chances and the support to take chances.

Ginny Cannata's trust in the Lord instructs me! She once said to me, "Shawn, it doesn't entirely depend on you." Whew!

## **What is the impact of your ministry on your family?**

Well, when it comes to critters, I have cats and not dogs. I am simply not available to be a good pack member for a dog-friend.

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

*Invitation to Solitude and Silence* and *Sacred Rhythms* by Ruth Haley Barton and *An Unhurried Life* and *An Unhurried Leader* by Alan Fadling instruct me in soul care.

Henri Nouwen's books *Wounded Healer*, *Reaching Out*, *In the Name of Jesus*, *The Way of the Heart*, and *Can you Drink the Cup?*, Gordon McDonald's *Ordering Your Private World*, *Restoring Your Spiritual Passion*, and *Rebuilding Your Broken World*, and Eugene Peterson's *The Pastor*, *Working the Angles*, *The Contemplative Pastor*, and *Under the Unpredictable Plant* are excellent ministers writing to ministers.

Those who have instructed me in spiritual formation are Richard Foster (*Celebration of Discipline*, *Sanctuary of the Soul*, and *Streams*), James Bryan Smith (*The Good and Beautiful God*), M. Robert Mulholland (*Invitation to a Journey*), Dallas Willard (*The Spirit of the Disciplines*), John Ortberg (*The Life You've Always Wanted*), and wonderful resources developed by Renovare and InterVarsity Press's *Fomatio* series.

The first Christ-centered book I ever read was C. S. Lewis's *Screwtape Letters*. Lewis has influenced and impacted me at the water-table level of

my soul. Meeting Aslan in the *Chronicles of Narnia* may have saved my life during the dark season of my parents' separation and divorce. And Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* and *Hobbit* have encouraged my weary and sometimes overwhelmed soul. These authors have placed admirable characters on my horizons, and I am better for that.

Fiction: Ellis Peters' Cadfael mysteries have revealed to me the goodness of God in the messiness of life. George MacDonald's fictional works have helped disciple me in loving God and others.

Missionaries: Inspiration and instruction abound in Amy Carmichael, Elisabeth Elliot, George Mueller and Don Richardson. Even missionary quotations do me great good!

### **What is your favorite Bible verse or passage? Why?**

"He is the one we proclaim, admonishing and teaching everyone with all wisdom, so that we may present everyone fully mature in Christ. To this end I strenuously contend with all the energy Christ so powerfully works in me" (Colossians 1:28-29).

This gives me both direction and fuel! It is so full of Christ. This is the verse on my gravestone.

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

I treasure the story of Joseph, how so many things were so very difficult, and yet he kept living as if God was with him. I see the faithfulness of God and the faithfulness of Joseph. How wonderfully their faithfulness meets.

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

Fiercely avoid triangulation in relationships.

Be more welcoming of the feedback of others. Take advantage of opportunities to grow in self-awareness. Speak the truth in my heart about myself and situations.

## **What stirs your affections for God?**

- Good stories! Especially Gospel stories where Jesus becomes freshly real and alive to me. Certain movies or books can also be carriers of stirring stories. Listening to people's real-life stories.
- Songs. Good ones that become my "mental Muzak" and provide a background of holy wonder and hope for all else going on in my world. Singing in choir.
- Being around people when we are talking about and listening to things that matter.
- Retreats. Big church. Being unhurried in sacred spaces (chapels, sanctuaries, prayer rooms, some libraries). Nature (waterfalls, vistas, incoming storms, night skies, the National Parks system). Watching children or animals be themselves.
- Some conferences. Some books.
- Observing Advent and Lent — especially knowing others are doing the same.
- A really good conversation. A good walk. A good, clean laugh.
- Doing something kind for someone.
- Watching someone care for someone who is weaker than they are.
- My Sunday school class!