

Church/Para-Church

Is the para-church legit? Should I be involved in a para-church campus ministry if it infringes on my church involvement? Do I need to serve both equally? How can I do both well?

Those are the questions I get weekly if not daily. They are really good questions and ones that I personally am still trying to figure out. I am in communication with many of the local churches in the Chapel Hill area and we together want to figure out what it means to be a member of a local church while also taking advantage of the things that we as a para-church campus ministry offer. So, let's take a look at the context of what these questions involve.

First, if one asks these questions, it shows some maturity in that you are wanting to follow the Lord during your college career. Personally, I wasn't concerned with these questions in college due to my lack of maturity, but I wish I had been.

I am assuming it also shows you hold value in Church life which is God's ordained instrument for the family of God. (Hebrews 2:11, 1 Corinthians 5:2) But to see that you are also concerned with what your role in a para-church looks like shows that you see some benefit to how a campus ministry connects with your specific experiences as a college student and living life missionally on campus. Both are very important concerns.

So I think the questions beg some articulation of what the mission of each entity is. What are the roles of the Church? What does the para-church offer to the Kingdom of God and how could/should a student in college maximize his/her growth in Christ? (I use "could/should" here because I am not sure there is a "should" in these matters. There are certainly Biblical commands applying to the local church qualifying as "shoulds". Some of them are listed below. But the relationship between the local church and the campus ministry probably falls under the "could" category where you as a student are free to follow wisdom from the Spirit of God rather than "shoulds" imposed by potentially false agendas.)

Here are 3 main strengths/roles of the church:

1. The Church is God's *primary* structure of developing the Kingdom of God. (Eph 4:11-16).
Under this heading there are many structures that God ordained to the church in her role of developing His Kingdom for His glory.
 - a. Authority of the local church. (Hebrews 13:17)
We are all called to live under the authority of God through his earthly establishment of the local church. The church singularly is called to carry out church discipline.
 - b. Sacraments (Baptism Matthew 28:18-20, The Lord's Supper/Communion Matthew 26:26-29)
Instrumental in the life of the believer, the Church is to perform the 2 sacraments ordained by Jesus.
 - c. Missions- (Ephesians 3:10-11)
The Church is God's fullest expression of his mission to bring his glory to the universe.
 - d. The Church is a full expression of the body of Christ in its Multi-generational and multi-focused Breadth of ministry
In the church one can find a multitude of ministry foci to a multitude of generational and ethnic backgrounds. One could argue what the breadth of those ministries should be. However, one can at least say that all churches

should be open to all of society and that individual churches are free to choose ministry emphases. (Ephesians 4:4-7)

2. Long term life of a member
Pragmatically, a campus ministry serves a Christian for a short time. The Church by definition is a family of long-term connectivity. (Ephesians 3:14-15)
3. Keeper of Truth- (2 Tim 4:3-4, Galatians 1:6-8, 2 Tim 3:15)
The Church is entrusted with the keeping of the integrity and authority of God's Word. A campus ministry helps in this matter and communicates God's Word, but the Church is specifically tasked with its preservation.

Here are 4 main strengths/roles of the para-church campus ministry:

1. A contextualized expression of the local church on the college campus
 - The campus ministry is not the Church as described above. It is not the fullness of the "body of Christ" as described in the Bible. It is a local ministry serving the local church in a specific niche audience.
 - There are many para-church ministries that serve niche audiences that are accepted without question. Just because para-church ministries are accepted does not itself give legitimacy, but it does offer an apologetic for the way the church/para-church could function. For example, one wouldn't mandate a Christian book publisher to be located under the Church's heading. The same goes for Christian magazines. The same for Christian bands, Pregnancy support services etc. All those organizations are "para-church" (*alongside*-church) serving the body of Christ where the Church does not have the capacity nor perhaps the expertise to do all things for the life of the Church. The campus ministry is an organization like this.
 - The Church is God's *primary* ordained structure for the growth of the Christian faith but that does not mean it is the only legitimate structure for growth. To say such would be to commit the dangerous flaw of making a secular/sacred split. Making this error is to say that all things not specifically of the Church are deemed "secular" and have nothing of value to offer. While all things of the church are "spiritual" and are thus all that have value in God's economy. Your job, your education, your leisure, your relationships would all have to fall under the Church to have any value if this were to be true. Quite obviously, it is not.
2. Campus ministry staff specifically target the niche of college students (1 Corinithian 9:19-23)
College life is a specific season of life that is complicated and nuanced. The large majority of people that come into college with some sort of "faith" leave college reporting divergence from that faith. It can be beneficial to have specifically trained staff to work alongside students running through the greatest "dropout" years of their lives. From specific training we receive, to time logged dealing with student issues, to cultural nuances that change seemingly overnight, full-time presence on the college campus is very helpful in furthering God's kingdom in the lives of students.
3. Inter-Denominational outward focus eases potential barriers of entry into faith with Christ
One of the greatest obstacles to people examining organized religion IS organized religion. The campus ministry's broad connection with Evangelical denominations can break down some of the barriers to encountering Christ for the first time. In turn the campus ministry is charged to send students to the local church for the fullness of their growth in life and godliness.
4. Contextualized ministry setting that provides foundation for ministry the rest of life
No matter what one does in life or where one does it, everyone will be a part of contextual communities for the rest of their lives. The model of the New Testament was to "go" to places where non-believers are rather than "bring" them to where Christians are. The campus

ministry lives alongside a student. We are where students are in order to develop and train them for a life-time of contextual ministry going to those with whom they live, work etc. I believe this provides the backdrop to a lifetime of outward focus. We hope to help develop Christians that see the Church as instrumental. At the same time we do not want to produce a reliance on the structure or the “professionals” of the Church to do the ministry. We hope to help students learn how to minister in the place that they can minister best- in the context of place that God puts them.

Concluding thoughts: The following are some of my personal opinions

Symbiosis- My own inclination is that the church/para-church relationship is not an either/or but one of symbiosis. It can be a relationship where the campus ministry is used to benefit the local church for a certain contextual period of a student’s life. It seems to me that the local church can actually flourish more fully due to the work of the para-church on campus.

If the church were fulfilling its role would there no longer be a need for the para-church? Does the local church “trump” the para-church when both have similar missions and goals? I don’t think so. Again, some of the things the para-church can do are an advantage to the local church, not at odds with. Furthermore, it would stand to reason that the local church would need to do all things that are deemed ministry if it be prescribed that the local church always trumps the para-church. It would need to be experts in and financially responsible for every area of ministry possible. That would not be pragmatically feasible nor Biblically warranted.

Overlap- There are many areas of overlap specifically in an area or city in which the Church is in close proximity to a college campus and indeed the Church is living out its mission to serve the community to which it is called. It is my suggestion that the church-para-church (once agreeing that the para-church is legitimized) “could” seek to find competitive strengths (competitive here is not used in an adversarial sense) in the discipling and reaching of students.

In my experience the Church often gravitates most /quickly to reproduce what strengths the campus ministry already has. The campus ministry model is more established and that can be the only model readily available to the Church. In contrast, I believe the Church (given that there are strong campus ministries in the area) could seek to strengthen the campus ministries’ presence while seeking to provide a complementary contribution to the ministry towards students. The campus ministry *does not/should not seek to provide* exposure to the breadth of ministry foci and opportunities, the Church should. The campus ministry *does not/should not provide* adequate long-term depth of theological development, the Church should. The campus ministry *does not* connect to the Church “attenders” that are not a part of a campus ministry; the Church should pursue that population. The campus ministry *does not/should not provide* the amount of cross-generational relationships that would benefit a large group of students, the Church should.

Rather than confusing students by doing the same things while attaching different brand names, the church/para-church could humble them selves to one-another and express need for one-another. This could provide the greatest opportunities for the greatest amount of students to experience God’s Kingdom revealed here on earth. My hope is that this vision would be compelling during their four years in college and continue beyond.

Faithful and Engaged- Finally, while in college a student *can* be faithful to the local church *and* fully engaged with a campus ministry. Again, this is not a “should” but a “could”. The campus ministry is serving the local church so a students’ primary role of service to the Church could be serving in a campus ministry. Within a campus ministry, a student can be led to 1) engage with the context in which they already live, 2) be a leader in the context of a campus, 3) have outward focus through the campus

ministry all while submitting themselves to the authority and teaching of the local church and further serve the Church in several potential ways- (time is certainly a constraint so one shouldn't feel pressure to do all things well) Here are some potential ideas:

-By bringing other students to Church, students serve the church. This is one of the majorly overlooked ways campus ministries serve the local church, simply by bringing other students a student serves in a greater way than most long standing members!

-Serve during Church service times- Child care, welcoming, parking, there are many roles that need volunteers during a typical church service that can be low on time commitment but connect a student to the greater body, allow cross-generational connection and minister greatly to the local Church. (One caveat is that serving on Sunday mornings usually deters you from being able to bring friends)

-Be a part of service to the community alongside the local Church. When you serve together, you get to be known by others in the Church and being known is very important for Church life to grow. The campus ministries typically do not focus on community ministry. The breadth and longevity of the church's service to the community can be holistic and very significant for a student and the Church's mission.

-Simply get know at a Church- One way that the church can serve students is to allow easy connection to multi-generational connectivity. The local Church should develop "host" families that invite students into their homes. Students should take advantage of these opportunities.

Conclusion

These are a few of my ramblings that I would like to set forth to promote the dialogue between many of us; Church leaders to para-church leaders, Church leaders and students, para-church leaders and students. Students indeed are the future leaders of our world and yet the statistics are overwhelmingly negative. College can and often does rock the feeble foundations of faith with which students first set out from home. It is going to take a collaborative effort between the Church-para-church to ebb the flow of tide through the power of the Spirit of God. Let's join together.