

College Forum

A Good Neighbor



My time at Azusa Pacific University (APU) spans three decades and encompasses numerous roles, including campus safety officer, campus pastor, dean of students, faculty member and chief operating officer. What keeps me coming back day after day, month after month and year after year is an unwavering love for college students and the powerful God-given vision for who they can become when a Christ-centered education is combined with their own God-given gifts and abilities.

One of the people who helped me carve out this vision for young adults was the late Ernest Boyer, the former president of the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching. More than 20 years ago, I asked him, “At the end of the day, what then is the primary goal of a college education?”

Boyer, a Christian who knew of our Christ-centered mission, responded that a college education from Azusa Pacific University should prepare men and women to be the neighbor you want to live next to. He spoke about the strong foundation provided through a liberal arts core curriculum, the effective knowledge and skills passed on through professional programs, and the deep sense of community experienced at residential colleges. All these, in the context of Christian higher education, should fulfill the great commandments given in Scripture for us to love the Lord our God with all our heart and mind and soul and strength, and our neighbor as ourselves (see Mark 12:28-31).

For more than 109 years, Azusa Pacific has fostered a community of disciples and scholars, graduating men and women who are the kind of neighbor you want to live next to. What does that mean practically for us today? What are the skills and abilities needed to be a good neighbor?

Quite simply, a good neighbor is someone who places the needs of others ahead of his own needs. When Jesus gave the great commandments, He was addressing religious leaders who were primarily interested in what they themselves needed.

But Jesus insisted that we should love our neighbors as we love ourselves. To love people in this way, to serve them ahead of our own needs, allows the Spirit of God to constantly realign our motives with His motives and our plans with His plans. Selfishness meets its match when surrendered to God's Word and God's Spirit working in us.

I am amazed by how much is accomplished when students, faculty and staff engage in acts of love and service in our own community. I delight when hearing transformational stories from students who serve in after-school tutoring programs, homeless shelters, food pantries and other community services in Azusa, the greater Los Angeles area and abroad.

In preparing students to take their responsible place as a good neighbor, the most important attribute is their heart's condition toward God. In 1899, the founders of this Christian university gave us the motto that we still hold today: *God First*. It comes directly out of our understanding of what it means to love God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength.

So where do we hope these graduates who love God and their neighbor end up? I don't know about you, but I would want them on my PTA, my community board and my city council. I would want them teaching my children, doing my taxes, writing my traffic tickets and providing my health care.

I would want them serving as deacons and elders, teaching Sunday school, leading youth groups, greeting me at the front door of church and handing me the Sunday bulletin. I would want them in politics, government, law, medical research, technology and humanitarian efforts, working to solve the very world issues we see on the front page of the morning paper. I

would want them in every part of our culture, every segment of the church and every corner of the world.

I know that not every church member, professing Christian or APU graduate lives up to this biblical standard. But I also believe that a person with an exceptional Christ-centered education who is fully committed to God's purposes and to the love of others will be the neighbor who lovingly, graciously and courageously points the way for a broken and needy world.

Jon R. Wallace, ., serves as the 16th president of Azusa Pacific University, a Christian university outside Los Angeles that offers 60 areas of undergraduate study, 23 master's degree programs and seven doctorates.
