

School of Life

How a generation bent on making a difference is changing Christian higher education

What did you used to dream of doing when you grew up? Jen Cook wants to change nations. Hers is an outsized ambition, but Cook is infused with the youthful exuberance of one who believes she can make it happen.

Cook is a 21-year-old marketing senior at Oral Roberts University (ORU), where this fall she will be president of her university's chapter of Students in Free Enterprise, an international organization helping students apply business concepts to projects for the needy. In 2009 she traveled to Paraguay with a team of students who sought to spread ethical business practices in the country, one rife with crime.

The students spoke at churches, schools and universities, and the experience revolutionized her thinking of "how business can be connected to missions, and how you can change a country through equipping them with a business skill set and teaching them to be independent and creative," Cook says.

She returned home with a passion for the work, one that is representative of a groundswell occurring at colleges and universities nationwide on behalf of the needy. Today's students want to serve. At ORU alone, about a third of the university's 3,200 students are involved in Students in Free Enterprise, for which they happily set aside full schedules of coursework and jobs for evening and weekend meetings, says Steve Greene, dean of the business school. He describes these students as having "bigger eyes than I've ever seen"—and colleges and universities such as ORU in Tulsa, Okla., are responding, adding academic programs, missions trips and more opportunities to serve.

At ORU, another team went to Nepal in 2009. There the students

sought to address a sex trafficking problem by training women and girls in sewing and other crafts they could sell to support their families. Other students worked with another organization called World Compassion to negotiate lower prices for shoes for the needy in Iraq, where the desert heat can wear shoes out quickly. It was such a successful year for the ORU chapter of Students in Free Enterprise that its annual report placed in the top 10 of a national competition between some 600 chapters, Greene boasts.

"There is a huge revival coming up in this 20-something generation," says Cook, who spent the summer as an intern at *Relevant*, a magazine for 20- and 30-somethings led by Cameron Strang, son of *Charisma* Publisher Steve Strang. Cook refers to an article she read about a man who "wanted to live life beyond what was just him. He wanted to live for something that was more than he could actually see. I just really feel that is a perfect description of this generation. ... We realize it's bigger than us."

The Changing Landscape of Ministry

Today fewer divinity students are interested in traditional church roles such as senior pastor. Instead they gravitate toward service work through organizations involved in an array of causes such as disaster relief, says Michael Palmer, dean of the divinity school at Regent University. He commissioned a task force to engage in a yearlong study of the trend after he began noticing more interest among his students and alumni in service work. The findings, presented this summer, were stunning, he says.

Well under half of Regent's divinity students aspired to traditional church roles. Regent already incorporates the theme of service work into some of its coursework, and the 5,000-student university in Virginia Beach, Va., offers service opportunities through organizations domestically and internationally.

Now, after the findings, Regent will revamp its offerings, adding academic programs, internships and missions trips that reflect the things students want to do, Palmer says. "For a seminary that's supposed to be preparing pastors, that's stunning," he says of the findings. "Compassion ministries, these not-for-profit organizations that are service-oriented, that is who the minister of the 21st century is."

Colleges and universities nationwide are adjusting with the times. Wheaton College, a school of some 2,500 students in Wheaton, Ill., offers a Human Needs and Global Resources (HNGR) academic certificate program and has experienced ballooning enrollment in its introductory course, Third World Issues.

Enrollment rose from 30 or 40 students to 150 last year, says Ryan Juskus, assistant director of the HNGR program. Students in an array of majors also are opting for internships that take them abroad for service work.

Organizations such as the International Justice Mission and World Vision ACT:S are spreading across campuses. Events such as the Urbana and Passion conferences are attracting thousands of college-age youth.

A Faith and International Development Conference held in February and organized by students at Calvin College featured speakers that included Ron Sider, president of Evangelicals for Social Action. Azusa Pacific University has a department of global studies that sends students abroad on semester-long trips.

Fuller Theological Seminary has a School of Intercultural Studies and Indiana Wesleyan University offers an academic major in international and community development. Liberty University and Lee University also offer programs encouraging service work.

David Kinnaman, president of The Barna Group, a leading research organization focused on faith and culture, says this generation has a higher degree of confidence than their parents' generation that major issues such as economic injustice, sex trafficking, human trafficking, AIDS and HIV can be changed for the better. "Part of that may be youthful idealism, but they are—especially compared to 10, 15 or 20 years ago—compared to Generation X or the Busters, there's much more optimism and sort of a pragmatic approach that this generation has."

Technology and improved communications have led the way. Students today easily can reach across the globe through blogs, Skype and YouTube. They can observe the world as never before as it grows more multicultural. They want to be involved in this, and they feel their faith should be, too.

Religious leaders in developing nations also feel empowered to speak out and are doing so through better communications, better education and diminishing language barriers. Many students were raised in suburban communities. They feel perhaps protected, and when they hear of problems through speakers at school or the media they want to be engaged in addressing those concerns, Juskus says.

"It's not a concept anymore. It's not a spot on the geography map," Greene says. "Their eyes are open to it because of social media and technology. They can download a video on YouTube and feel it. They can see anything that's out there."

The economic downturn has caused many students to delay their careers, and many are tapping into a broader, developing social consciousness about our culture's consumerism, Kinnaman says.

Some might feel lost because of the economy, and perhaps service work provides them with a sense of direction. Young adults today also are less interested in old boundaries

separating conservative from progressive Christians, Palmer says. They realize service work and faith can combine to work for real change.

“They see the old battle lines as being largely irrelevant, and they want to be of service,” he says. “There is an increased dissatisfaction with simple answers that just a prayer will turn everything right. Some of the world’s problems are intractable and require prayer and fasting and very long, hard work.”

Kinnaman is concerned that students today could become “consumers of causes,” as he puts it—conscious citizens who drop in on causes in a superficial way by buying T-shirts and plastic wristbands without involving themselves in real work. He compares the generation to those who came of age during the 1960s and points out that in the end boomers mostly conformed to previous generations.

He wonders whether today’s young adults will be able to do that given all the change they face in the economy, technology, environment and more. He says the situation should empower church leaders to help students realize the impact they want so badly to make.

Greene believes students today will make a difference. Eventually they will raise families who will share their ideals, he says. Juskus sees his students going in a variety of directions, such as jobs in nongovernmental organizations, teaching or business.

“Growing our economy and serving the poor and taking care of creation—those are the sorts of questions that students leave with, that guide their professional directions, and certainly not all go into nongovernment work,” he says. “Many premed students will go on to medical schools, and they will serve in low-income areas of Chicago and Ghana.”

Putting Hands on the Gospel

Durant Kreider represents what today's students are capable of in the future. He is a 2008 Regent graduate in practical theology and senior pastor at Coastlands Community Church in Chesapeake, Md., where his congregation has helped reduce crime and improve quality of life in some of the most blighted neighborhoods.

Using municipal data, the congregation began identifying the neediest neighborhoods and partnered with city government, the police department and other churches to touch each neighborhood through child mentoring, home repair and other outreach programs.

Their efforts were so successful they received a national award this spring from Neighborhoods USA for best community transformation project. "It's just been an absolutely amazing transformation," says Kreider. "Crime is way down, and the city is saying thank you, thank you, thank you."

Kreider, 42, never dreamed of changing the world when he was growing up. He was raised in Pennsylvania's Amish country, the first in his blue-collar family to go to college. When he was 18 he began traveling the world on missions trips. Today he's done missions work on every continent except Antarctica, he says.

Eventually he married and became a youth pastor with his wife in Laurel, Md., in a low-income neighborhood where his congregation engaged in after-school care, child mentoring and other outreach programs. He felt excited to watch crime diminish and the neighborhood transform.

He decided to enroll in graduate school after a nationwide motorcycling vacation with his wife and selected Regent because the university was near Coastlands Community Church, which needed a pastor at the time. While he was at Regent, Kreider and his wife adopted six children from Colombia after he discovered through his travels how many children are

parentless. The couple also has a child of their own, born last year.

Kreider also takes high school and college students with him on missions trips to Colombia and Kentucky, where they nurture needy children. Today's young adults know there is more to the world than their own American middle-class upbringing, he says. They welcome challenges to the things they've always taken for granted.

"They want to make a difference," he says. "They want something that is not status quo. They're not going [on missions trips] for just, let's go see the world. They're very capable of making change."

Amy Green is a journalist based in Orlando, Fla. She once dreamed of becoming an astronaut but chose writing as a means of changing people's minds.

Watch a video of college students changing the world through missions at