

MAKING THE MOST OF COLLEGE

COME AND SEE: LOOK OUT FOR THE FELLOWS INITIATIVE



**COLLEGE
GRADS
ARE BEING
VOCATIONALLY
MENTORED
THROUGH
A CHURCH
PROGRAM
THAT'S
SPREADING
ACROSS MORE
THAN A DOZEN
STATES**

**BY STEVEN
GARBER**

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP:

- Trinity Presbyterian Church (Charlottesville, Va.)
Fellows class of 2008-09
- Trinity Fellow Kenton Martin tutors at Charlottesville's
Abundant Life Center.
- Fellows from Trinity Presbyterian Church have traveled
to New Orleans each year since Hurricane Katrina to
work on rebuilding efforts.

If you really wanted to learn something, what would you do? Read a book? Go to a lecture? Take a class? Get a degree? All that, and more, of course. But as good as books, lectures, classes and degrees are (and they are essential, for some) the deeper reality is that we do not learn the truest truths without seeing whether the ideas have legs—if, in fact, the words have flesh.

If you believed this was true, what would you do, and where would you go to learn to learn about things that really matter?

Twenty-five years after their undergraduate careers at the University of North Carolina where they made commitments to common loves, two good friends lived within a few miles of each other in northern Virginia, in the Washington, D.C. area—one a businessman and the other a pastor. Believing that there was something for everyone everywhere in the incarnational pedagogy of Jesus, Doug Holladay and John Yates decided to try something. They wondered what might happen if they invited recent college graduates to “come and see” the meaning of vocation within the life of a congregation of Christ’s people.

With hopes and dreams—as well as fits and starts—The Falls Church Fellows Program was born, and now, 15 years later, nearly 200 young men and women have come through this almost 300-year-old Anglican congregation known throughout the world for its commitment to live orthodoxy. As good as this has been for the church and for the fellows, even more intriguing is that along the way other congregations began to see the good work being done at The Falls Church, and slowly a movement has started which is now called The Fellows Initiative (TFI).

First Trinity Presbyterian Church in Charlottesville began a program, and then another church

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somewhere else, and then again somewhere else. And now spreading across the United States—Virginia, Pennsylvania, New York, Texas, Tennessee, Florida, Louisiana, North Carolina, Colorado, Indiana, Missouri, South Carolina, Georgia and growing—churches of all shapes and sizes are beginning their own, offering the “come and see” learning about things that matter most, each congregation committed to bringing into being a program marked by The Fellows Initiative’s vision:

*Explore an all-encompassing faith,
Nurture a heart for the Church, and
Awaken a hunger to engage the culture.*

There is theological diversity, and ecclesiastical diversity, and geographical diversity. But if there is a thread that weaves its way through the different programs it is this: we believe in a coherent faith, and want to help our Fellows come to see its plausibility.

Years ago the sociologist Peter Berger observed, with a pessimism marked by hope, “To have a conversion experience is nothing much. The real thing is to be able to keep taking it seriously; to retain a sense of its plausibility. This is where the religious community comes in.”

While we may differ with Berger on the meaning of conversion, his insight is profound. It is altogether different to profess faith than it is to keep faithful; it is one thing to say, “I believe,” and something altogether different to act on the basis of belief, to live out one’s beliefs in the push-and-shove of life over the whole of one’s life.

Perhaps the word “seamless” best captures the vision. In a world marked by complex fragmentation—do we belong to anyone? anything? anywhere?—the possibility that life can be coherent, that there can be and must be integrity between what we believe and how we live,

personally as well as publicly, is an unusual gift for a 22-year-old on the cusp of engaging the *realpolitik* and *realeconomik* of the 21st-century world. But it is that vision which is at the heart of

the Initiative.

Long the chairman of the board of The Falls Church’s program and now serving a similar role for the Initiative, Steve Skancke—professor of economics and international businessman—puts it very simply: “We want the Fellows to understand the seamless character of faith.” That a worldview shaped by the gospel of the kingdom honestly makes sense of life, of one’s vocation with its complex responsibilities and relationships—and sometimes with some people this really happens. A few years ago one fellow put it this way as she came to the end of her year: “What I have come to believe is that truth is woven into the fabric of the universe.”

How does this happen? It is by grace, and that is a mystery. And yet, at the same time the Fellows curriculum is unusually rich, offering many different ways to “come and see” that words do have flesh after all, that the vision of the kingdom is true to the way the world really is—whether we like it to be or not, whether we choose for it to be or not. In fact, it is God’s good gift to us that we are given eyes to see the truthfulness of the Christian vision of life and the world, that its claim is not just parochially true, “true” for Christians when they do “Christian” things with other Christians. Rather, that “truth is woven into the fabric of the universe”—and there are social, political, sexual, economic, educational and cultural implications, if that is true.

Come and see what? Principally this: men and women of many different experiences and ages

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For your church, too?

By Dennis Doran

Director of the Trinity Fellows Program | Trinity Presbyterian Church, Charlottesville, VA

After a business career, during which I lived in exciting cities like Los Angeles, Amsterdam and Miami, I found that I had been successful and made a lot of money, but was still left with a deep need for a solidly Christian mentor who could help me make better sense of my journey of faith, vocation, marriage and all of life. During my early thirties, I was trying to make sense of my faith and my vocational journey which, in my twenties and early thirties, had taken me from studying political science, to teaching at an outdoor education facility in Australia, to riding the telecommunications dot-com wave, to serving at a church as interim director of student ministries.

After leaving the corporate world, I moved to Charlottesville, Virginia to spend a year working at a church as its (interim) director of student ministries and thinking through my vocational calling, either to church ministry or a life of entrepreneurship in the business world. During this year of thinking through my own sense of calling and vocation, I began to explore what the Bible had to say about “faith and work.” I wrestled with the creational and reformational views of work and calling—I began looking at what God had intended for work to look like in creation, then read some of the reformational writings of wise believers from Calvin and Luther to modern-day thinkers like Tim Keller and Os Guinness. I

realized how helpful it would have been for me to have had experienced this same level of thinking upon graduating from college. If I had only had a mentor and a solid theology of work, I might have saved several years of my life and had greater lifelong direction and foundation for my faith and my work.

During this year I had the privilege of seeing one of my best friends, a former Falls Church Fellow, make use of the great mentoring and foundational thinking that he had received during his Fellows experience. As he embarked on a career in law and business, he had a great understanding of how his work was to be redemptive and a source of hope, goodness and truth in the marketplace and the public arena, as well as in the local church. Through great mentoring and a solid “theology of work,” he was poised to be intentional in his career about making a difference with the vocational gifts that God had given him—to worship God, using, among other things, his law degree and his MBA. It was exciting to see that the “redemption of all things” as spoken of in the book of Revelation would be partially ushered in by my friend’s redemptive work in law and business, as he used his God-given “talents” (as in Matthew 25:14-30) and “craft” (as in Exodus 31:1-6). My friend understood what it meant to love God and neighbor in “word and deed” and he did so in a

spiritual and physical way—using his mind, body and spiritual gifts to set the captive free, give drink to the thirsty, food to the poor, and bring justice to the oppressed.

Seven years ago it was this vision of faith at work, and vocational mentoring—all done in the context of the local church—that inspired me, along with the leadership of Trinity Church, to take the model of the Falls Church Fellows Program and birth that same vision here in Charlottesville and in other churches around the country. The next generation of believers in the Church and the marketplace are lacking direction because they lack a vision of these things I’ve described; the Fellows Program brings them all together—faith, vocation, calling, hospitality, service and mentoring.

Though many in our church still do not understand the vision, in September we will welcome our 85th Fellow to Trinity Presbyterian Church. With each graduating Fellows class, the people of our city and Trinity Presbyterian Church gain a clearer picture of why the Fellows Program is such a hopeful venture within the kingdom of God and his church. I am thankful to have the opportunity to labour alongside an excellent team that understands the profound Kingdom impact of this initiative. All involved are confident that it will continue to bear much fruit.

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who in their own very different ways each believe in the seamlessness of faith, and show by their own vocations that it is possible to connect belief with behavior. If as Lesslie Newbigin argued so persuasively in *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, “the congregation is the hermeneutic of the gospel”—a hard truth for me when I first read it, and one that took some years to believe—then for a young person to live within the life of a healthy congregation can by grace be a primary means to understand the meaning of the gospel for human life under the sun.

Typically, Fellows are very busy, as the word “curriculum” is multi-faceted, a “big C” word, accounting for living in homes of the congregation, for internship/work responsibilities, for mentoring from older people and with younger people, for biblical and theological studies, as well as courses on apologetics and contemporary culture. While this is a “gap year” between college and the rest of life, there are not many gaps in the weekly schedule, and that is by design. Everything about the year is focused on helping the Fellows learn to live in the world that is really there.

Why does that matter? As the website for TFI puts it: *Because every area of your life matters to God, not just what you do on Sundays.* It goes on, arguing that “Culture matters... Family matters... Service matters... Discipleship matters... Knowledge

matters... Work matters... Church matters.” In Abraham Kuyper’s great image: every square inch of the whole of reality *matters*.

Like “curriculum,” the word “vocation” is also profoundly rich; in some ways it covers all that matters to us, and to God. From the very beginning the two friends from Chapel Hill, as deeply committed to each other as ever 40 years later, believed that it was the issue of vocation which was central to the Fellows vision. The reasons have been refined, the insights have been deepened, but years later The Fellows Initiative invites young people to come and see the meaning of vocation, and in particular callings in the ministry and the marketplace, with no hierarchy of spiritual significance or sacred/secular dualism to stumble through. TFI argues this instead: “Cultivate and steward God’s creation through your vocation; whether you’re called to business, education, politics, health, law, or the arts”—and to the ordained ministry, as “the local church is the expression and embodiment of the gospel.” Yes, the hermeneutic of the gospel in and for the world; that is what that the church is.

A few weeks ago I had a letter from a former Fellow, Susan Den Herder, now a young wife and mother, and an entrepreneur too—as well as an occasional writer for *Comment!*

I forget if I mentioned that I have started attending a Bible study with some other women and we are looking at the book of Isaiah. During last night’s discussion I was struck by how much my reading and understanding of the Word is filtered through the context of Creation/Fall/Redemption/Consummation and how unique that seemed among the group. When that happens, I am again and again grateful [for the teaching and friendship of the Fellows program].

We also ended up in a discussion about what to do with culture... what to watch, what not to watch, how to decide. They got very excited about the word

- For more information on The Fellows Initiative, see: www.thefellowshipinitiative.com.
- For the “Don’t Leave Your Brains at the Box Office” article, as well as Denis Haack’s website, see: www.ransomfellowship.org.
- For Susan Den Herder’s business, see: www.freshlypressed.etsy.com.

“tension” and the idea of “engaging” rather than disengaging or consuming. So I have passed on your Box Office article and Denis Haack’s web site. Again, I am grateful for you and the many ways you have shaped my life and understanding. Hope you are having a blessed week ...

It is the question of plausibility that looms over every life. Can you live what you believe? Do these words have flesh? Have you learned to incarnate what you believe, the worldview you are coming to call your own? It is life, a seamless life, and “the long obedience in the same direction” that is required of us, that is the hope of The Fellows Initiative.

At the end-of-the-year banquet for The Falls Church Fellows, I offered this prayer:

...we ask that you fan into flame the hopes and dreams of this year, that over time these Fellows will become those who invest themselves in your church and in your world. That they will seek the welfare of their cities, wherever their callings take them, knowing the perennial reality that it is in the flourishing of their cities that they will find their own flourishing. In their thirteen very different ways, teach them to be common grace for the common good, becoming signposts of the coming kingdom in and through what they do and how they do it.

Amen and amen.



A teacher of many people in many places, STEVEN GARBER directs The Washington Institute for Faith, Vocation & Culture (washingtoninst.org), and serves as a professor for Fellows programs at The Falls Church and McLean Presbyterian Church in Virginia.

