

Harvesters, harvesters everywhere

It probably came as a bit of a shock to the Christian Education audience on Sunday. We had just read from Matthew 9:38 where Jesus told the disciples to pray that the Lord would send more laborers into the harvest—because the harvest is plentiful and the workers few. That’s when I threw our class a curveball. *“I cannot, with any degree of sincerity, pray for any more harvest-mentality Christian laborers at the College of Charleston,”* I said.

We’re working our way through a series called *“Christ and Culture”*, a title which I’m certain Richard Neibuhr stole from me in order to write his eerily similar-sounding book Christ and Culture back in the 1950’s. We’ve enjoyed 12 weeks of lively discussion, particularly about big issues in the cultural landscape—topics like science, faith and politics, and how to relate to the LGBTQ community. Now, after all our discussions, it’s time to turn our attention to how we can actually invest in the culture we care so much about. We can do that as we learn the art of sowing.

Two terms that would be helpful to clarify at this point: harvesting and sowing. Both are biblical modes of evangelism. Harvesting, in evangelism as well as agriculture, is the gathering of a final product. It is the communication of the gospel message so that someone can come to faith in Jesus. You could also say that harvesting is the gathering of people who have a ripe belief system (churched, even cultural Christians) and showing them how to follow Jesus. Sowing, on the other hand, precedes harvesting. Sowers get the spiritual soil ready for a future harvest. It is, according to Tim Downs (author of Finding Common Ground) the *“slow, gradual, behind-the-scenes work that prepares a listener—or an entire culture—to be able to hear the gospel”* and one day believe it¹.

So when Jesus tells his disciples in Matthew 9 that *“the harvest is plentiful”* and in John 4 that *“the fields are white for harvest”*, a process of sowing must have occurred beforehand. In fact, in John 4 Jesus also mentions the sower: *“For here the saying holds true, ‘One sows and another reaps’. I sent you to reap that for which you did not labor. Others have labored, and you have entered into their labor.”* The harvest is not always plentiful, the fields are not always white. Harvesters can harvest because sowers have sowed, Jesus tells the disciples.

What was true about the culture of Jesus’ day that made the harvest plentiful and ripe? As Jim Belton insightfully and only half-jokingly put it, *“Well, Jesus was there.”* The answer to all questions, even in adult Christian Ed., is still *“Jesus”*. Also, people had been waiting for the Messiah. There was knowledge of the Scriptures. They were under oppression and wanted a rescue from God. John the Baptist, a sower, had prepared the way. It was the fullness of time and the culture was ready.

If you think about it, even different periods in American history seemed to provide greater gospel receptivity. For example, my organization Campus Crusade for Christ (now called Cru—we dropped the Crusade not Christ) was born in 1951 on the campus of UCLA. And, as goes the organization’s history, that first year on campus proved so fruitful that by the end of the school year the bell tower on campus played Christian hymns. Talk about a plentiful and ripe harvest! The following decades continued with similar stories of God’s work on college campuses around the world.

As such, this verse in Matthew 9 has been and continues to be one of our organization's rallying cries. *"Reach the campus today, reach the world tomorrow! Come help change the world! The fields on campus are ripe, pray for more laborers!"*

Only one problem: many of the once-white fields aren't so ripe for the harvest anymore. Some fields on our campuses aren't ripe at all. I'd call them rocky. And full of weeds.

*hard soil cracks and gasps
only creeping weeds stretch tall
harvesters scratch their heads*

I could talk for hours about the culture of the campus and what has contributed to it. But not now. Suffice it to say that our college campuses in Charleston and across the Lowcountry—both the campus culture and the individuals on them—qualify as hard soil.

And that's why I said *"I cannot, with any degree of sincerity, pray that prayer in Matthew 9:38 for more harvest-mentality Christian laborers at the College of Charleston."* In fact, if one more harvest-mentality ministry sets foot on CofC's soil, you'll find me in the Cistern, banging my forehead against Randolph Hall until my head matches the red walls.

Right now, on the College of Charleston's student organization roster, there are no fewer than 14 registered Christian ministries. Add to this the dozen or so churches in the area who also have some version of a college ministry. All of us have fairly similar ambitions—gather students, communicate to them the gospel, help them grow, send them. Or, *"Win, Build, Send"* as we've called it.

This **could** be a good thing. **If** we were all gathering students from among the 10,000 undergrads at the College. But we're not. We're actually gathering from a pool about 10% of that number, perhaps 1,000 students. These are the church-ed, spiritually open, and Christian students who show up on campus looking for a campus ministry or Christian community. We call it *"Christian Rush"* and, anecdotally among campus ministries at the College, we can account for about 1,000 students. This matches up with David Kinnaman's findings in UnChristian that *"fewer than one out of ten young adults mention faith as their top priority."*²

At the Citadel, also here in our Charleston backyard, the harvest-mentality is even more prolific. Here there are around 3,000 cadets and 19 registered ministries. Not to mention the many other churches engaging that same 10%.

Now, I may be precariously perched out here on my self-constructed limb. And feel free to let me know if you think that I am—I'm all too happy to be wrong about all this. But I don't think this is what Jesus had in mind when he said the harvest is plentiful and the laborers are few. Not when you consider that the average ministry to student ratio is 1:288 (for the whole student population) or 1:28 (for the 10% faith-interested population) for those two schools.

Let me ask you something. What do you think happens when that many harvest-mentality campus ministries and churches show up and try to scratch out a living among 10% of a campus? Hint: the harvest begins to look more like a drought.

That's why I can't, in good conscience, pray that exact prayer found in Matthew 9 for harvest-mentality laborers. I will however pray *"Lord, the spiritual harvest on campus and even in our country is anemic right now. The harvest-mentality laborers are many. The sowers are few. I pray that you would send behind-the-scenes sowers to our campuses to work in the culture and lives of students so that we harvest-mentality ministries can harvest again in the future. And I pray that both the sower and the harvester will rejoice together on that day."*

We love to harvest—to see people come to faith in Christ and to be gathered together in a community. But some of us harvesters need to take some time, away from that well-known mode of evangelism, and sow.

Our Cru staff team is beginning to pray for and do just that. We have developed some exciting, strategic, behind-the-scenes sower activity that is already happening at the College of Charleston. We're preparing the soil for the gospel. Some of it is slow, some of it is even a little scandalous (don't worry, no laws will be broken and no animals will be harmed). Some of our efforts may not prove fruitful in the long term. It's hard to tell. But we're practicing the art of sowing, as best as we know how.

Are you frustrated by the sin and trends you see in our culture? Start to sow.

Do you find it hard to have fruitful spiritual conversations? Sow.

Does the world around you seem hostile to your faith? Get out there and sow.

Want to know what it looks like to sow? Come to Christian Ed on Sunday. And sow.

1. I'll concede that there are extreme moments in a culture's history—like a disaster—that God also uses to prepare listeners to hear the gospel. But those seem to be the exception, not the rule.
2. [UnChristian](#) data sheet