

## OUR STUDENTS: BECOMING BELOVED DISCIPLES OF JESUS

Stephen A. Macchia

Published in Contact Magazine, Summer 2010

The fresco displayed in the front of the Cooley Chapel at our Charlotte campus depicts Jesus as the Sower of the seed upon the soils: the resistant path, the impenetrable rock, the wandering thorns and the productive good soil.

The stunning portrayal of this parable is ideally suited for our seminary. Why? Because we exist for the purpose of preparing a new generation of students to become “good soil” for the extravagance of seed offered generously to us directly from the loving hands of the Sower, Jesus. As we are fully receptive to the lavishing provisions of Jesus, we, in turn, become his beloved disciples.

When John and Lois Pierce established the Pierce Center for Disciple-Building, their vision was for every Gordon-Conwell student to grow as beloved disciples of Jesus Christ while attending seminary. They knew the rigors of academic studies, combined with demands of family, work and ministry, could curtail students from prioritizing the care of their souls. As a result of their visionary generosity, we have the unique opportunity to come alongside our students and offer spiritual formation ministries that nurture their relationship with the Lord. When these ministries are combined with their academic studies, the soil of their souls is nurtured during this significant season of life.

For the past eight years, the Pierce Center has served our community by becoming a conscience for the priority of soul care. We engage in spiritual formation experiences communal place of worship, love and service to others. The Pierce Center is located on all our campuses and is serviced daily by a committed team of staff and steering committee members who long for Gordon-Conwell to be a place conducive to the growth and depth of the spiritual lives of our students.

We offer many programs that foster the priority of becoming beloved disciples of Jesus Christ. These include the facilitation of Soul Sabbaths, day-long retreats that focus on creating quiet space to practice the spiritual disciplines of biblical reflection and listening prayer. We coordinate Soul Care Groups on campus, encouraging students to maintain ongoing fellowship in small groups that emphasize authentic relationships and learning how to listen with, and pray for, one

another. In addition, we offer ourselves to students as confidentes and spiritual mentors to help sort out basic priorities and attend to the ever-deepening invitation of Christ to come close, draw near and follow after him in all aspects of life.

The Pierce Fellowship is the centerpiece of the Pierce Center, where more than 60 students are selected each year to receive financial support as fellows and to participate more fully in the ministry of the Center. Here the vision of the John and Lois Pierce is most vibrantly fulfilled, as we devote large blocks of time to invest in the lives of new and existing students.

Our Pierce Fellows are disciplined through retreats, spiritual formation groups and one-on-one mentoring with our staff. Our intentional focus with these students is to invest in the balancing of their multi-faceted personal lives, train them in various areas of spiritual leadership, help develop their daily spiritual rhythms in the context of crafting a personal rule of life, and teach them how to listen prayerfully to one another. Each fellow is required to lead a Soul Care Group on campus.

The Pierce Fellowship has been a remarkable experience for all involved. We are delighted with the ways these students have demonstrated their genuine desire to develop healthy receptivity to the seeds that are being extravagantly bestowed upon them by the Sower, Jesus. They are learning how to receive God’s love and God’s Word, and growing deeply in attending to His still, small voice. The listening, pondering and reflecting they are doing collectively and individually is opening up the eyes of their hearts to the lavishing love of God. In turn, they love and serve others in Jesus’ name. What better gift can we offer to them...and to the Church of Jesus Christ worldwide?

