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Soul Care: Christian Faith and Academic Administration

Heie, H. & Sargent, M. (2012).
Abilene, TX: Abilene Christian University Press.

Reviewed by Jean-Noel Thompson, Ph.D.

66

Effective leadership is paramount to the advancement of colleges and universities today, and in an increasing number of cases, to their survival. As a result, those of us in higher education find ourselves inundated with a number of books, webinars and professional conference opportunities aimed at enhancing our ability as higher education leaders to make better strategic decisions for the institutions we serve. Unlike much of the often contradictory advice that arises from these more secular opportunities, *Soul Care* takes a refreshingly personal and highly introspective, faith-based approach to how one might best connect with the personnel for which he or she is responsible. Heie and Sargent make the argument that academic leaders and other leaders in Christian higher education must fully examine their daily walks as Christians in relation to the insurmountable tasks and cultural pressures they have before them. At the expense of leaving the reader here with a series of lengthy quotes, the following so poignantly encapsulates what the authors believe is at the center of Christian administration:

So the challenge for us, as Christian academic leaders, is to consider how we can meet legal scrutiny and the common standards of academic professionalism without losing the deep conviction that our Christian faith causes us to lead and respond

in ways that often run against the grain. How do we love the Lord with heart, soul, strength, and mind, and care for our community and our neighbors, all the while keeping our institutions accredited, efficient, and fiscally sound? (pg. 9)

This compelling question spans the reach of all leadership positions in Christian higher education, and the rich collection of perspectives in this book are just as profoundly relevant to student affairs administrators as they are to academic administrators.

The authors of this book demonstrate high transparency throughout, starting with the notion that many of us who take on leadership roles in higher education have done so void of much theological preparation for the broad range of challenges and difficult judgment calls of daily administration. Keeping with this commitment to transparency in our work and walk as leaders in Christian colleges and universities, both Heie and Sargent attribute many of the most restorative moments of their careers to the transparent and frequently unplanned conversations with other deans and provosts who share our Christian faith. For instance, “at national conferences or during sidebar conversations over coffee, we have shared struggles and aspirations. We have challenged each other, vetted strategies, listened, prayed, and found humor and joy in the midst of the weight and ambiguities of our jobs” (pg. 8). For this very reason, Heie and Sargent have set out to expand and share such conversations. Methodologically, they have asked a number of well-respected academic leaders to reflect on how their faith informs their approach to academic administration. These reflective essays seek to merge theory and practice, as well as to explore some theoretical and theological premises for administrative work, offering specific applications and scenarios as well.

Organizationally, this set of essays is grouped accordingly: The opening third examines some underlying virtues and values in academic leadership. For instance, one of the contributors, Darryl Tippens, asserts that “administrators would do well to appropriate elements of the ancient traditions of spiritual practice to their leadership styles, viewing their work as spiritual service, even pastoral ministry” (pg. 9). As a necessity, he encourages such practices as Sabbath rest, active listening, hospitality, confession, care of others, and self-care. The middle portion of this book intricately covers the dynamics of academic


governance, drawing upon the concepts of “redemptive change” and trust building. The authors repeatedly stress the importance of building trust with all university constituencies, especially with faculty. The final third of these essays examine relationships in the academy and the on-going need to lead with a personal touch in administrative work. Perhaps, Les Steel in the concluding essay says it best: “There is no better service than to come alongside faculty who are seeking to ‘become selves before God’ and whose vocation it is to serve the gospel through their high calling as teacher-scholars” (pg. 238).

Given the intent of the authors to enrich and inspire through a set of reflective essays, the simple methodology of inviting highly respected administrators with many years of higher education experience to share their perspectives is sound and effective. While one could easily argue that such an approach comes with high levels of personal bias and subjectivity, one cannot escape the deep sincerity and vulnerability with which the authors collectively share their lives as Christians in higher education leadership. Furthermore, the scope of the topics covered by these essays are impressive, ranging from addressing specific personnel issues to developing a university strategic plan – all while promoting Christ-centered leadership.

The personal stories, scenarios, and other books referenced in this collection both support and expand the Christian worldview, drawing upon specific biblical text and timeless Christian principles. While different in some regards, this collection of essays strongly resembles *Thriving in Leadership: Strategies for Making a Difference in Christian Higher Education*, edited by Karen A Longman in 2012, ACU Press. Parker J. Palmer, author of *Healing and the Heart of Democracy*, *The Courage to Teach*, and *Let Your Life Speak* sums up *Thriving in Leadership* this way:

These essays shed light on “secrets” that all academic leaders should find to lasting value: the importance of “showing up” as a whole person; the centrality of tenacious relationships; the vital role of rich, transformative conversations with all stakeholders; and the courage it takes to lead in ways that do not always conform to our cultural model assumptions about how leaders should act. (pg. 1)

One core and intentional difference between *Soul Care* and *Thriving in Leadership* is that the latter draws upon the collective wisdom of an all women cast of authors who have held or currently hold positions in academic leadership (all having contributed to previous publications through the Women’s Leadership Development Institutes). Both books add deep insight and pose challenging questions that are highly relevant to higher education leadership from a Christian worldview.

By reading *Soul Care* academic and student affairs leaders in higher education will be challenged to nurture and develop themselves as whole persons, and more importantly to lead as such. Drawing from the very real life experiences, work experiences, and spiritual wisdom of caring experts in higher education administration can provide both purposeful and practical advice for our walk and work in university life. 

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