

Failure to launch: I planned a service for students. None came.

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by [Mark Yaconelli](#) in the [August 3, 2016](#) issue

The advertisement in our church newsletter was simple and straightforward. “We need someone to direct the college prayer service.” I’d spent two years as a parishioner of the 250-member church and was looking for a way to serve. As a veteran youth worker, a retreat leader, and author of four books on prayer and ministry, I felt like the ad was directed at me.

I met with the pastor, and she informed me that the church had received a grant to develop a service that would attract students from Southern Oregon University, a school with over 5,000 students, conveniently located just across the street. I told the pastor about my experience in developing prayer services for youth and adults. I showed her my books, told her about the research I’d done in spiritual formation, prayer, and ministry. She was impressed and gave me the volunteer position. I was ecstatic.

Over the next month I bought hundreds of candles, built and painted a six-foot cross, collected baskets of river stones, and designed and printed song sheets. I recruited and trained a trio of local musicians (violin, piano, and guitar) in various chants from Taizé, Iona, and other contemplative communities. I found three elderly church members to prepare a simple supper to serve the students after the service. I designed a logo, gave the service a religiously ambiguous title (“Thirst”), and put ads in the college newspaper. I then met with the college chaplain and various faculty members and asked them to help spread the word about the new service. Finally, I met with student groups, mailed letters to students who had identified themselves as interested in Christianity, and ate lunch each day on campus. In all

my publicity I emphasized the service would provide free dinner and comfort for stressed-out students.

The night before the service I couldn't sleep. I had visions of undergraduates, weary and lost, showing up for the service. I thought about the conversations I would initiate once the service ended. I began to dream about a campus Bible study or maybe a theological reflection group. I imagined taking a core group of students on a service trip to Mexico during the spring recess. The possibilities were endless. I was excited to see what God would do.

I showed up three hours before our first service. I helped prepare soup and then set up the chapel. I removed the front pews, placed the large wooden cross on the floor, filled metal trays with sand and primitive clay bowls with water and floating candles, set out fresh flowers, and placed warm-colored icons at the perimeter. I then sat in the chapel and prayed. I'd been praying for the service all along, but tonight I wanted extra time to pray. I sat by the cross, lit a candle, and in silence I asked God to bless the service. I prayed for the students, prayed that all my work would bear fruit in the lives of the students. My heart filled with a quiet joy as I sat in the chapel, grateful for the work that God was doing, grateful that I had been called to serve such a beautiful vision.

Fifteen minutes before the service began I lit the candles around the chapel, opened the front doors of the church, picked up a handful of the service bulletins, and stood at the church entrance. Immediately, I saw a group of 15 students walk across the street from the university. I smiled with warmth and gratitude as the students stepped onto the sidewalk in front of the church. They looked at me, a young woman waved, and then they turned and walked to the nearby grocery store. I stood and watched as various students passed by on the sidewalk, some glancing at me with curiosity, most oblivious to me and the publicized prayer service. At five minutes past the designated hour, I walked inside. There were the three musicians at the back of the room, the pastor, the three elderly women who fixed the evening meal, and me. That was it. Two months of work and prayer and preparation, and not one student.

If I ever become an actor and have a scene where I need to make myself cry, it will be easy. I'll only need to think of that first college prayer service. It was the saddest service I've ever witnessed—and I don't mean Jesus in Gethsemane praying "I am sorrowful unto death" kind of sad. I mean more like overweight middle-aged white

man at an Usher concert dancing “I am a sex machine” kind of sad.

Midway through the service the bulletin instructed participants to come forward and pray around the large cross that lay on the floor. There were baskets of candles so that after people knelt down, they could light a candle and place it in one of the sand trays along the edge of the cross. When the moment arrived the three elderly women stood up. All three of them were well into their seventies, but they liked me and wanted to support the service, so they walked forward. There was a long, anxious pause as the three women stopped at the foot of the cross and contemplated the distance to the floor. Finally, one woman gripped the arms of her two companions and carefully lowered herself into a half-squat. She paused for a few seconds, then suddenly released her hands and fell back with a hard thump onto the carpeted floor. “My goodness!” she cried out. *God help us!* I thought to myself.

The second woman walked to the left side of the wooden cross, stretched her arms out and bent at the waist with her knees locked. She tilted forward until her hands struck the floor. Now in an upside-down V, the woman stretched out her legs and began to walk her fingers forward. But her arms suddenly gave out, and she collapsed face down on the floor. Alarmed, the third woman hurried to help her prostrate friend, but she tripped on the candle basket and crumpled over on top of her. All of this took place while the pastor, the three musicians, and I chanted, “Stay with me, remain here with me, watch and pray. Watch and pray.”

For the next nine months I led the weekly college prayer service. Not one college student ever attended. Not one. I spent hundreds of hours visiting the campus, tacking up flyers, placing ads in the college paper, and meeting student groups, but not one student ever walked across the street—not even for the free postservice dinner (which we eventually stopped serving).

My life has never matched my expectations. Never. Sometimes life exceeds my expectations, other times it falls short; more often life does something unusual, unexpected, unpredictable, something that renders my expectations absurd. I often find myself living within a world of expectations—the expectations of family, pastors, neighbors, and the surrounding culture. The most damning expectations, however, come from deep within, goading me, judging me, criticizing me for falling short.

Expectations in ministry and life often arise from two distracting energies: worry and fantasy. Anxious expectations are grounded in our fear of failure. They are nurtured

by the belief that our accomplishments determine our value and worth. This is the message in our secular culture, and this is frequently the driving force within most Christians. Some voice inside of us tells us that faithful people are successful. Deep down we believe that if we pray, follow the Ten Commandments, and work hard, God will grant us a successful life. When our lives fail to match our expectations, we get anxious, work harder, and worry more. Eventually God moves to the margin of our lives.

Expectations are also built out of fantasy. The spiritual life is hard. There are few tangible rewards. It's much more pleasurable to dream of social justice, to talk of serving the poor, than to actually do it.

In Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*, an elderly monk, a wise man named Father Zossima, converses with a wealthy woman. The woman is in anguish about the existence of God. The wise elder tells her that only by acts of love will she be able to know God. "Try to love your neighbors, love them actively and unceasingly. And as you learn to love them more and more, you will be more and more convinced of the existence of God and of the immortality of your own soul."

At first Zossima's words comfort the woman. She confesses she often imagines giving away her wealth in order to live a life of poverty and service to the poor. She tells the father that this image often brings her tears of joy. But then, as she entertains the fantasy of a life of Christian service, she worries that the people she would serve would be unappreciative of her sacrifice and efforts. She realizes she would be unable to tolerate ingratitude. "I want to be praised and paid for love with love." And so her dream of serving others dies and she continues to wonder if God exists.

How do we live with the great disappointment of Christian living? How do we continue to serve when our lives don't match our expectations? What do we do when our efforts, our commitment to Jesus, our prayers and spiritual yearnings don't pay off? During the nine months that I directed the college prayer service, I began to read the Gospels—paying special attention to the disciples' experience. I began to feel the confusion, helplessness, frustration, anxiety, fear, and even ambivalence the disciples often experienced. For the disciples Jesus was often a bewildering disappointment. He acted in ways that seemed completely unproductive compared to the disciples' expectations. In the final interaction between Jesus and his followers (Acts 1) you can sense their disappointment. Still expecting Jesus to overthrow the

Roman oppressors, the disciples ask, “Is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?” Jesus responds, “It is not for you to know.” He ascends, and the disciples depart, still unclear of what the future will bring.

Again and again the disciples are forced to give up their expectations and remain in a state of spiritual poverty. To enter into spiritual poverty is to keep from seeking to possess or control God. Spiritual poverty is the willingness to be empty, to allow our expectations of God to dissipate. Like those who followed Jesus, it’s a willingness to be helpless, confused, anxious, and wanting. It’s a willingness to enter the void, the uncertainty that so many people, particularly the poor, live with every day. It’s a willingness to allow God to be God and me to be me. It’s only in this empty and vulnerable state that we become available to the God who lives in the present moment, the God who lives in our immediate relationships, and the God who lives within the small acts of love that we are asked to undertake.

Over nine months the college prayer service grew to about 30 souls—still mostly women over 60 years old. In the spring, one month before the service was going to break for the summer, I met with the pastor and resigned my position. I felt like a failure. One month later Kim, the pianist from the prayer service I had hired from a music school, asked to meet with me. She told me her story. It was a heartbreaking history of abuse, betrayal, grief, and sorrow.

When she finished she told me, “I don’t know anything about religion. I don’t know anything about God, but I heard you were quitting the prayer service, and I wanted to thank you for what you’ve done because it is the only thing I’ve looked forward to each week. I want to become a Christian, even though I don’t know what that means. And I wanted to ask if you would be my sponsor.”

Three years later the “college prayer service” continues. Every Tuesday night somewhere between 15 and 30 people gather to sing and pray, sit in silence, and listen to scripture. The heavy wooden cross has been replaced with a table cross so that the elderly folks can light candles without kneeling on the floor. In the back of the room sit the same three musicians I hired three years ago. The violinist frequents our church retreats and youth programs; the guitarist, having suffered a painful divorce, often comes to a weekly Christian meditation group; and Kim the pianist now leads the Sunday morning music.

We minister because we want to know love; we want to live love. To live a life of love is to trust what we're given more than what we give. The Christian path is a commitment to practicing the art of love, learning the dimensions and character of love—its boundless depth, its endless horizon. On the Christian path we are learning to let go of our expectations—expectations of ourselves, of God, of others. We are learning to live in spiritual poverty, to be empty, open, helpless, uncertain, so we might be available to God's hidden, humble work.

When the wealthy woman in *The Brothers Karamazov* admits she can't serve God if her service will be unappreciated, Father Zossima responds,

A true act of love, unlike imaginary love, is hard and forbidding. . . . [It] requires hard work and patience, and for some, it is a whole way of life. But I predict that at the very moment when you see despairingly that, despite all your efforts, you have not only failed to come closer to your goal but, indeed, seem even farther from it than ever—at that very moment, you will have achieved your goal and will recognize the miraculous power of our Lord, who has always loved you and has secretly guided you all along.

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