

Transforming faith into action

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Ideas, faith, our lives, our churches, our cities—all must be transformed as we seek to put into action the love that God first offered to us.

In February a year of planning came to fruition as the School of Social Work, Truett Theological Seminary and the Leadership Network offered our conference for church-related ministries. Participants offered great feedback and appreciation for our content and our lineup of speakers that included Lynne Hybels, Eric Swanson, Rick Rusaw, Amy Sherman, Dennis Myers and two journal staff, Diana Garland and Heidi Unruh. (Diana has served as editor and now senior editor, and Heidi joins us in this issue as editor of the Faith in Action section.)

With a name like “The Next Big Idea,” we knew we had a lot to live up to! The event was organized around the theme of transforming ideas into action. We are a university; we are “ideas” people. Yet, we trust that God does transform these ideas into action and we see it in the ministries offered by students, alumni, friends and colleagues. Our theme can be slightly adjusted for the church; we are equally interested in transforming faith into action.

Eric was the first to speak and highlight this connection. He really talked about the transformation of churches and communities where deep faith and vast ideas have been put into externally-focused action. Most speakers emphasized similar themes. Ideas, faith, our lives, our churches, our cities – all must be transformed as we seek to put into action the love that God first offered to us.

The next big idea can be no larger or more significant than the core commands of love that are central to the Christian faith - loving God and loving our neighbor. We closed the conference with a reminder that the next big idea is really as old as God’s love expressed in all of creation, as the prophet’s commitment to justice and mercy, as the gospel message of Christ’s grace and compassion, and yet as new and fresh as the calling that Christ offers us each day to follow him wherever he leads.

Empowering us to heed Jesus’ call often takes the kind of encouragement many of us heard in this event. The attitude of worship that Ryan Richardson combined with the word of God the speakers brought to us served as a reminder that our love is meager in light of the love God first offered us, but meaningful in light of the needs of our neighbors. However, even when we offer the first steps of a faithful response, and even when we know Christ will be faithful despite our meager efforts, we can’t help but realize that there is another side to engaging in ministries that really makes a difference in the lives of neighbors we love.

This other side asks us to consider the same kind of preparation for community ministry that we offer for pastoral ministry. The prayers and preparation look and sound different, but the skills required for community transformation do take time and energy to develop. Just as a preacher engages in prayer and study and writes several iterations before a sermon is ready for delivery, community and family ministers must understand family and social systems and human development and behavior in learning how to deliver service that can be effective. There are relevant theories of ministry and more and more research on what actually works, and why, is being offered – here in our journal and in books and presentations that share effective models and best practices.

It takes time to understand the complex lives and experiences of some of our neighbors and while the call to love sounds simple, the responses that overcome cycles of poverty, illiteracy, unemployment, abuse, addiction, and mental illness only come with much prayer and preparation. I was with a friend from church this week who went back to school last year to become certified to teach middle school. She felt called to teach in inner-city schools as a part of her response to how God is calling her to service through the lives of the children in our community and in light of some of her own experiences as a child. Halfway through this first year of teaching, she told me she already feels “chewed up and spit out.” She’s applying for positions in schools where she’ll have support from colleagues and administrators, and more in common with the children. Perhaps her calling is to teach children in a different setting, but equipping for service in situations of poverty does not just come naturally. It takes time, energy, research, and resources. It takes prayer and it takes preparation.

To see lives transformed through the kinds of action that can be sustained takes big faith and it takes big ideas. Even as an academic I am leery of some of the ways we present our big ideas. Oftentimes our statistics

and our methods make finding the relevant information and ideas a daunting task. However, our journal is but one example of a growing trend to transform ideas into action, to make research relevant.

We hope that if you made it to our conference, you left feeling a little more prepared (and prayed up) than when you arrived. We hope that as you read through these pages, you find the kinds of ideas that might contribute to the transformative ministries you are engaged in. And, we hope you’ll let us know how we’re doing.

At the end of our conference, after singing “Wherever he leads I’ll go,” an emotional Kay Warren reminded us of the simplicity of following Jesus while also suggesting that our faithful response must engage in the everyday challenges of fostering partnerships with local leaders, listening to the genuine needs of our neighbors, and offering well-planned ministries that are able to truly make a difference. Our purpose in the Journal for Family and Community Ministries is to encourage each of these things.

We hope the prayers and meditations this month nurture your sense of calling. Michael Sciretti continues to bring us insightful resources for contemplation and spiritual formation as we walk the inner journey of preparation for ministry.

The research articles from Wanda Lott Collins, Michael Sherr, Diana Garland, and James Stamey as well as the contributions by Heidi Unruh, Sterling Severns, and Kretcha Roldan-Rodriguez all point to examples for transforming ideas into action.

May these pages offer you next steps in prayer and preparation as you practice Jesus’ commands to love God and your neighbors. And, may our faith and all our ideas be truly transformed into actions used for the sake of God’s reign in our world.

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