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Q&A:

CHRISTIAN, COMMITTED, AND CALLED: AN INTERVIEW

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Key Words *adapt, teaching methods, divine appointments, called to teach, advice, retirement*

Abstract

After teaching in a Christian University for more than 40 years, three professors who are retiring and have received emeritus status reflect on how students have changed over the decades and how they—as professors—have had to adapt to meet the needs of an ever-changing student body. The three professors were asked four questions: (1) how have students changed during the last four decades, (2) how have the professors adapted to meet the changing needs of students, (3) what was one unexpected thing each professor learned once they started teaching, (4) what advice do the professors have for those still teaching in higher education or just starting out in a teaching career, and (5) what can those who are no longer in the classroom pray about for those who are still teaching?

Introduction

The Journal of the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning for Christians in Higher Education seeks to support Christian educators by providing a forum for an exchange of research, educational resources, and ideas

in order to encourage excellent teaching for the benefit of the students. *The Journal's* mission for Christian educators is—in part—the following statement:

Called by God, Christian educators allow their faith to influence (either directly or indirectly) all that they do in and out of the classroom. They transform their students by inspiring love for God and others and by stimulating intellectual curiosity and creativity. The ability to teach is a gift from God, and those who are truly called to teach have a desire to see learning take place (https://digitalshowcase.oru.edu/sotl_ched/aimsand_scope.html).

Three such teachers answered the call and dedicated themselves to a career in educating and connecting with students. Much has changed in U.S. culture in recent decades, requiring teachers to adjust their methods of reaching students who are markedly different from their parents' generation.

The Interview

Until the last few decades, it was more common to find American workers who had spent their entire adult lives working for a single company in the same location; however, in recent decades, Americans have been more likely to move to other states or even change careers. Do you know people who have spent 40 or 50 years working in the same bank building or an elderly couple who spent their entire married lives running a restaurant they had started decades earlier? How long have you been teaching where you currently work? How much longer do you plan to walk the same halls of academe? Twenty more years? Thirty-five more years?

The three emeritus professors answering questions in this Q and A segment have taught at Oral Roberts University (ORU) for more than 40 years each. Considering the university first opened its doors to students in the mid 1960s, these faculty members have taught the majority of the years that ORU has been in existence. To see three

senior professors who have devoted the majority of their lives to serving in one academic institution retire in the same year is bittersweet for any university.

Dr. John Korstad was Senior Professor of Biology when he retired this year after having taught undergraduate students for 42 years at Oral Roberts University in Tulsa, Oklahoma. He earned bachelor degrees in both geology and biology, two master's degrees (one in environmental science and one in zoology), and Ph.D. in Zoology. Since becoming a professor at ORU in 1980, he served as the Honors Program Director from 2001-2013, served on the editorial board of seven professional journals, spent two sabbatical years conducting research in Trondheim, Norway, and taught the limnology (lake ecology and management) at the Au Sable Environmental Institute in Michigan every summer since 1996, except for the 2000 Covid shutdown. Dr. Korstad is a prolific researcher and author or co-author of dozens of scholarly articles and has presented over 75 talks at professional meetings. Every two years, he teaches a marine biology course, and the lab portion is completed by a week spent diving in the Caribbean.

Dr. Even A. Culp was Senior Professor of Media and Communication at Oral Roberts University at the time he retired in spring 2022. He earned a B.A. in Communication, an M.A. in Instructional Design and Media in 1975, and his doctorate in 1987. During his 44 years at ORU and besides teaching, he created the Center for Faculty Excellence and was its director for 10 years, and he directed the Online Curriculum and Media Development Team for five years. Dr Culp also created the MultiMedia Institute at ORU, where students experience all aspects of media during an immersive year. He has been recognized with numerous awards, including five Telly awards, Professional of the Year by the Oklahoma Governor's Commission, Best of the Region by the College and University Personnel Association, the Dean's Award for both Innovation in the Classroom and for University service, and the ORU Alumni Award for Professionalism in the Classroom.

Professor Laura Holland was Senior Professor of Theatre when she retired last month after 46 years as an Oral Roberts University faculty member. She earned a bachelor's degree in communication from ORU

and a master of fine arts degree in theatrical arts from the University of Oklahoma. Professor Holland served 12 years as the Chair of the Communication, Arts, and Media Department and then six years as the Chair of Theatre, Dance, and Visual Arts Department. While chair, she launched the dance major, several enhancements in student facilities, and has been awarded numerous drama and teaching awards. Outside of ORU, Professor Holland has been an active member of CITA (Christians in Theatre Arts), participated in CITA conferences, and served as Chair of the Board of Directors. She has also directed approximately 95 plays, designed sets and/or costumes for over 100 plays, and served as Artistic Director for Discoveryland's *Oklahoma!*

Question: Each of you has taught at ORU for more than four decades, and a lot has changed in education, lifestyles, and American society since the 1970s. Dr. Korstad, what are some changes you've noticed in students over the years you've been teaching?

Dr. Korstad: Many students in the last five to ten years are under-prepared for the academic work needed to succeed in challenging majors at ORU and other colleges. Most haven't been academically challenged or taught how to persevere in learning material that isn't simply presented to them, and they don't know how to take the necessary steps in looking up information themselves through various sources. Mentors can point students in the right direction to look up information they need and not compromise the learning process by simply giving them the answers directly.

Question: Dr. Culp, have you noticed a decline in student preparedness like Dr. Korstad mentioned—that students are entering higher education without the academic skills previous generations had and that they need to succeed in college?

Dr. Culp: Yes, I've noticed that students are coming to college with weaker writing and analytic skills than students used to have. Certainly, this is not true for all, but there definitely is a trend in the general population. Another difference is that over the years,

students seem to have less resilience, have shorter attention spans, and they are more easily distracted. Recently, too, it seems that students expect any explanation or excuse to be adequate for missed assignments or class absences. Accountability is waning, and students appear to feel less responsible for their academic work.

Question: To accommodate this changing student body that the two of you have mentioned—both in their degree of academic preparation and in their social and emotional well-being—explain or describe one or two changes you have made to how you teach over the years.

Dr. Culp: I have had to reinvent my teaching strategies every five years as the student population changes both in the skill sets and expectations they bring to the class and the larger world we live in. Over the years I've moved away from delivering content to creating learning events where students must apply the content at a higher level of learning. I've learned that students want to participate in the process and be connected to the teacher, fellow students, and ultimately the content in a relevant context.

Dr. Korstad: Slowly but surely, I've continually had to learn how to recognize each student's strengths and weaknesses. Some have amazing IQ but less EQ (emotional quotient). They may know every answer and let everyone know that they know, or they may be more introverted and reticent to share. Others think they know the answer, but when you ask them to explain something, they can't do it accurately. Still others don't want to be challenged to learn, often sit at the back of the room, and look at their phone or take a nap and are physically—but not mentally—present. When I am sensitive to the Holy Spirit's leading, I have learned—and desire to keep learning—creative ways to help each of those students grow in all areas.

Prof. Holland: Something I've finally done the last two years I taught was change how I take roll. I know it sounds simplistic, but I

decided to do two things. I am a quote-a-holic. I love quotes, so I created a roll sheet that had a “quote of the day” at the top of the page. Then, rather than the students just signing their names, I asked them a question about themselves that they could answer instead. Some questions were very simple, such as “What is your favorite color,” or “What’s your favorite flavor of ice cream?” Then I would ask some serious questions like “What positive ways do you use to handle stress?” or “What do you fear the most?” This last semester I had a student from China, and her answer to the fear question was “I am afraid I won’t be able to go home.” Their answers gave new insight for me to better understand and get to know my students. I like this also because as the roll sheet is passed around, other students can read each other’s answers and share a bit more about themselves.

Question: Sometimes in life, what we think a new job or new friendship or new season in life will be like turns out to be different from what we had anticipated. What was one unexpected thing you learned once you started teaching?

Dr. Culp: Though it may seem simplistic, I realized I was not there to teach content; I was there to teach people. Therefore, mentoring students within the class and beyond the class with the lifelong orientation became more meaningful both to the students and to me.

Faculty have various seasons of their life. To enjoy the richness of the teaching profession, it’s important to adapt to the various seasons of your professional career. Early on I connected with students easily because I was so close to their age. In my 40s and 50s I was a taskmaster knowing I needed to prepare my students for the competitive media industry. Finally, in my 60s I connected with my students through utilizing a mentoring approach.

Question: Yes, realizing that people/students should be the teacher’s focus helps everyone understand the caring human connection

within the classroom environment. School is not just facts; it's a community of people.

Dr. Korstad, you already had teachers in your family, so you may have had a better understanding of the life of a professor than others starting out in the teaching profession. What, if anything, did you encounter that you had not anticipated?

Dr. Korstad: Yes, I grew up in a family of teachers, so I knew that I would enjoy this profession. Coming to ORU in August 1980 and now reflecting on the past 42 years, I realize that I have absolutely loved every aspect of teaching and mentoring students. I realize that professors who submit themselves to the Lord's guidance can be used as pastor-teachers. We are all part of the process of what the Lord prophesied to Oral Roberts in 1963: "Raise up your students to hear My voice, to go where My light is seen dim, My voice is heard small, and My healing power is not known. Even to the uttermost bounds of the earth. Their work will exceed yours and in this I am well pleased."

Question: Each of you was called to teach, and each of you has answered that call by devoting 42 years or more of teaching at ORU. As a retiring professor with decades of teaching experience, what advice can you offer to aspiring or newer faculty members—perhaps something you wish someone had told you when you were new to the profession? Professor Holland, let's start with you.

Professor Holland: There are three things I've learned that I'll pass on here, but they're not in any particular order:

- Don't be afraid to abandon your lesson plans when the Holy Spirit urges you off topic. I can't tell you how many times I tell a story that feels like it has nothing to do with the subject I'm teaching that day, and then a student will approach me after class and tell me that was just what the student needed to hear.

- Don't resent or ignore "divine appointments." So many times—especially when I had a really tight schedule—someone would come across my path and need something that required my time, help, or information. Every time I chose to allow the pressure of my schedule take a back seat to the need at hand, God worked out my schedule, and many of those "appointments" were beneficial to both of us.
- See your classroom, your office, and your computer (in my case the costume shop, the scene shop, and the stage) as your altar. When you see all your labor as a sacrifice of praise, then you do your job very differently. You can handle the downsides of the job like the endless meetings and paper work as part of your praise, and you usually have a grateful heart when you count the blessings of the job.

Dr. Culp: Here is some advice I can add:

- Teach with passion for your students, the content, and your profession. If you aren't enthused yourself, why should you expect your student to be?
- Create a safe classroom where discussion and transparency are encouraged.
- Utilize instructional strategies that allow students to perform at higher levels of thinking (e.g., application, analysis, synthesis) rather than to simply regurgitate basic content. Provide other relevant experiences that connect students with the real world, such as projects, student presentations, case studies, and internships.
- Approach assessment as a form of collaboration and feedback to develop the student professionally rather than merely as a grade.
- All assignments and projects must have clear instructions, including grading-performance criteria with individual accountability.

Dr. Korstad: Let me add a couple of items:

- Respect those in authority but never compromise what you sense the Lord is calling you to do.
- “Don’t just do the minimum that will get you by. Do your best. Work from the heart for your real Master, for God ...” (Colossians 3:23 Msg).

Question: Congratulations to all three of you on your well-earned emeritus status as you retire and begin a new season of life. Your dedication to helping raise up two generations of students to discover God’s call on their lives and preparing them to carry out that call will continue to bless them in their lives and careers. I thank you for sharing these words of wisdom—gleaned from your own 40+ years teaching at a Christian university—to encourage and advise professors still in the process of providing a God-centered university education.

Dr. Korstad, how might those of us who are no longer in the classroom pray for our Christian colleagues in higher education and who are still in classrooms around the world?

Dr. Korstad: I am praying for the Lord to give them even more energy, excitement, joy, peace, and sense of purpose in everything they do as the Holy Spirit leads them into continued areas of ministry. May those divine appointments be a beautiful aroma of Christ in them, the hope of glory.

The Lord has continued plans for all of us, so my humble prayer is that Jesus will continue to increase, and we will continue to decrease every moment of every day.

“Now to Him who is able to [carry out His purpose and] do superabundantly more than all that we dare ask or think [infinitely beyond our greatest prayers, hopes, or dreams], according to His

power that is at work within us, to Him be the glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations forever and ever. Amen” (Eph. 3:20-21 AMP).

Dr. Linda Gray is Professor Emerita of English at Oral Roberts University where she has taught composition, linguistics, technical writing, and education courses for more than 35 years. She has served as president of the Arts and Sciences Faculty Senate and of the Education Faculty Senate as well as the chair of the English and Modern Languages Department. She has a B.A. in Linguistics from California State University-Fullerton, an M.A. in Theology from Fuller Theological Seminary, and an Ed.D. in English Education from Vanderbilt University. Dr. Gray can be reached at lgray@oru.edu.