



Forum for
Theological
Exploration



Senior Vocation Small Group

Presbyterian Campus Ministry of UNC Chapel Hill
Rev. Paul Burgess

Part of the UKIRK Launch Series

INVITING STUDENTS TO DISCOVER WHO THEY ARE,
WHO GOD IS,
THE GIFTS GOD HAS GIVEN THEM,
AND HOW THEY ARE CALLED TO SERVE AND LEAD

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Basic summary of the program:

This group meets once a week for about an hour whenever school is in session and is open to all students planning on graduating in the coming year. It is designed to provide support for these students as they navigate together the unique challenges associated with the milestone of college graduation. The major goals of SVSG are first, that students be able to name and engage the difficulties and anxieties of the coming transition and second, that they build a stable, spiritually-grounded community that will continue to sustain them in their life after college.

Our opening ritual starts with the set up of the space. We meet in a common space that students often use to study and hang out. Right before we gather, I turn off the overhead lights and turn on the lamps, which provides lower lighting and gives the space a little bit more of a sacred feel. I'll give a sentence or two of welcome, then issue a general invitation for someone to open us in prayer. Whoever prays then lights a candle that is specifically reserved for SVSG (we vote at the beginning of the year on the candle...last year it had Kelly Latimore's "Parable of the Mustard Seed" print on it), and the lighting of that candle completes the opening ritual. I'll usually ask if there's anything pressing going on in their lives that should take precedence over whatever I have planned to talk about and, if there is not, I'll introduce the topic/questions we'll be considering that evening.

Basic summary of the program (cont.):

We tend to discuss topics that encourage self-reflection for the first semester, and clarifying a sense of vocation and desire second semester, essentially encouraging students to ask as young adults and people of faith "Who am I?" and "What do I want?"

During our time together, we practice quite a bit of silence. It adds to the vibe that this hour together harbors something sacred and heavy. We do this by giving a prompt/question and setting a timer for 1-3 minutes for them to think about it in silence before we start discussing. It's uncomfortable, but feedback at the end of the year indicates that it's also helpful.

Closing happens in two parts. The first part is the question "What are you proud of from the last week?" It gives us a chance to end by celebrating one another's triumphs. A guiding principle is that nothing is mandatory in SVSG-- if there's something someone doesn't want to participate in, that's fine. Answering this question, though, is the closest thing we have to a mandatory exercise. Each is encouraged pretty hard to answer every week-- and even if they have to leave early for some reason, we'll pause the discussion so they can share.

After everyone shares, a volunteer closes us in prayer. After they conclude, the pray-er blows out the candle, and that's the formal end of our time together.

At the end of the year, in addition to our seniors being celebrated with the larger group, SVSG has a celebratory dinner as our last meeting where we go out to a restaurant on PCM's dime and have an opportunity to reflect on our time at college and share what we're looking forward to/anxious about what comes next.

Brief description of why the program is designed or organized the way it is:

As facilitator, I endeavor to make SVSG a space that is reliable and safe, a space that invites the vulnerability and authenticity that nurture community. Because such vulnerability is risky, I follow two basic rules: no activity/question is mandatory, and I am willing to do anything I ask students to do. This creates an "opt-in" culture, where participants are there because they have freely chosen to be. Any programming is held loosely, and is quickly shelved if a student brings a question or issue from their own lives. The calendar is otherwise loosely determined by what is happening in students' worlds– for instance, the week before Thanksgiving Break may cover the topic of navigating fraught family relationships. Speaking broadly, the first part of the year is spent on a shared "fearless moral inventory," wherein students delve into their own identities, passions, and desires together. The intimacy this vulnerable joint venture builds allows us to engage specific anxieties around graduation and "real adult life" more directly in the latter half of the year. Thus far, these tasks are generally accomplished through reflection and discussion, and very rarely incur any cost in materials or money.

What do you hope the students discern, discover, or reflect upon during their participation?

I hope that students in SVSG learn to embrace more readily the reality that they have enormous control over what their lives look like– that despite protestations of well-meaning voices who would "protect" them or even their own insecurity, they are real adults capable of making choices that matter, capable of molding the world to their desires, capable of loving well and being the Church in tangible ways. For many of our students, one of the questions they are least-equipped to tackle is "What do I want?" My hope is that SVSG is a place where they can wrestle with that question, along with the underlying questions of what God desires for us and the expectations that influence us every day. I hope that SVSG provides an opportunity for them to see their peers struggling with the challenges they thought they were alone in, and to overcome them together.

What action(s) do you hope their participation inspires after the program or experience is over in both the short-term and long-term?

Because of the culture of our specific institution, one of my greatest hopes is that students leave SVSG more able to recognize (not necessarily accompanied by any moral judgment) the influences on their lives; that they have a clearer understanding of the person God is growing them to be, and are able to decide for themselves how the supports and expectations they are surrounded by serve that identity. I hope that students leave college as children of God who are whole and at peace with their own identity and relationship with the divine, that they are hopeful and excited to explore what being Christ's hands and feet in the world might look like outside of college, that they have internalized the importance of living in holy community with those they love and trust, and that they are grateful for all who have contributed to their growth and well-being.

What have you discerned, discovered, seen or reflected upon as you have engaged students in this program/practice?

More than anything, I have been consistently grateful for the culture of trust and vulnerability embedded in the broader PCM ministry. This culture makes the work of facilitating SVSG effectively inestimably easier- there is little I can offer students before they make the choice to trust me and one another. I have also been struck by the difference between different classes- I am on the verge of leading my third iteration of SVSG, and the adjustments I've had to make from one year to another have been significant, based on the relationships that students shared at the beginning of the year. Lastly, I am convinced that the guidance I can offer as a facilitator has only a fraction of the power of a peer acting in solidarity...as important as it is to create the space, the best ministry serving SVSG's mission is done by students.