

Toward a Gospel-centered Campus Ministry¹

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A voice cries out:

“In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord,
make straight in the desert
a highway for our God.” (Isaiah 40:3)

In this memorable academic year, marking the 150th anniversary of Aoyama Gakuin’s founding and the 75th anniversary of Aoyama Gakuin University’s opening, I would like to express our gratitude for the efforts and dedication of our predecessors. In the following, I would like to outline key aspects of my vision for the future of our university’s Campus Ministry.

1. Important aspects of our Campus Ministry

First of all, I would like to define Campus Ministry relying on Isaiah 40:3 as “the ministry that aims to create pathways where individuals can experience the love of God on our campus, like a straight and broad highway in response to God’s call.” I do not intend to cite specific examples of ‘wilderness’ or ‘desert’ on campus, nor do I have particular cases in mind. Nevertheless, in general, we can refer to “wilderness” or “desert” as “any situation that is not evangelical”. In other words, it is a situation where the dignity of each person, which is cherished and encouraged by God’s love, is neglected.

To begin with, the Good News can be simply described as the love and grace of God, as demonstrated by Jesus Christ, that saves the unworthy despite their shortcomings. Therefore, those who hear the Good News and embrace it are filled with surprise and

¹ It should be noted that this essay is solely my personal opinion as University Dean of Religion and is not based on the consensus of Aoyama Gakuin University Chaplains’ Council nor Aoyama Gakuin Christian Activities Center as a whole. Biblical quotations are from New Revised Standard Version.

gratitude, saying: “Despite who I am, I am loved and saved.” In other words, it is the experience of coming to realize that one is accepted, loved, and valued in a way that transcends worldly values, which produces this “wonder and gratitude”.² If there are factors that hinder the direct reception of such ‘wonder and gratitude,’ they could be seen as the ‘wilderness’ or ‘desert’ on campus. In that case, addressing these hindrances and fostering healing would be one of the paramount tasks of campus ministry.

While respect for diversity is gaining more emphasis and becoming more common in today’s society, our university still tends to focus on performance, achievement, and merit, and to value and praise winning. Naturally, as an educational and research institution, our university should recognize and value effort and achievement. Needless to say, the primary goal of university education is for students to learn effectively, receive intellectual stimulation, and enhance their expertise. As a research institution, it is only natural that its faculty and staff should strive to contribute to society by utilizing their expertise, and it is gratifying to see their achievements and accomplishments recognized as a result of their efforts. The true value of Campus Ministry will be tested in how we support students struggling to achieve their desired results. It is not my intention to be too naïve, but I hope to fulfill our duty as “servant leaders” by helping them grow as individuals and as a community beyond grades, achievements, accomplishments, wins, and losses.

2. Important Aspects to Focus on in Our Campus Ministry

If Campus Ministry is considered an extension of Christian activities on campus, its three major areas will be 1) University Worship Service, 2) Courses designed to foster an understanding of Christianity, and 3) Activities at Christian Activities Center. In this section, I would like to discuss each of them, focusing on several points.

(1) University Worship Service

We are very grateful for the fact that during the school term, worship services are offered at two campuses (Aoyama and Sagamihara) from Monday through Friday between 1st and 2nd periods (10:30-11:00) and on Tuesday evenings (18:30-19:00, Aoyama Campus only). We would also like to express our deep appreciation to all those who support our worship services. Specifically, our services are supported by pastors from neighborhood

2 See 1 Corinthians 1:26-31.

churches and Christians in various fields of society, who share messages from their life experiences during Chapel Week (special worship week). On campus, we have 7 university organists and worship leaders who provide worship music. We also have praise teams for evening services, along with members from ACF (Aoyama Christian Fellowship), University Choir, Gospel Choir, and Handbell Choir, who occasionally provide musical offering during the service. At times, students, faculty, and university staff members lead, deliver messages, and perform music. In addition to all these individuals, the Christian Activities Center staff create weekly worship programs and occasionally record, edit, and post videos of worship services on YouTube. Members of the University Chaplains' Council preach six times each semester³. We are grateful to offer heartfelt worship services, supported by the dedicated work of these individuals and guided by God's protection and deep wisdom.

In the first half of academic year 2024, morning worship service attendance at the Aoyama Campus averaged about 170 people per day, while morning worship service at the Sagamihara Campus averaged about 90 people per day. Evening worship service at the Aoyama Campus averaged about 70 people per day. However, with 20,000 undergraduate students, over 800 graduate students, and 800 full-time faculty and staff members on both campuses, we aim to further expand the range of people attending worship services. (For the numbers of the students and faculty members, see <https://www.aoyama.ac.jp/outline/information/student/>, <https://www.aoyama.ac.jp/outline/information/faculty/>, respectively).

One of the new developments in university worship this academic year is the transition from distributing the weekly bulletin in paper form to providing it via QR codes at seating areas and entrances/exits. We plan to further improve this system in the near future, aiming to facilitate students' access to the Christian information in the weekly bulletin and enhance the dissemination of information to students.

I would like to mention two more points about university worship. The first is about singing the praise. Every week at the evening service and occasionally at the morning service, we sing worship songs in a contemporary style that is very different from the traditional hymnal. Although the students may have different perceptions, we would like to encourage students to sing their own hymns, whether from the traditional hymnal or contemporary worship songs, so that many students can offer their hearty praise to God.

3 The Aoyama Gakuin University Chaplains' Council, mentioned here, consists of 12 University Chaplains and 1 missionary, excluding the General Manager of the Christian Activities Center. For a detailed description of its members, please refer to note 6.

Furthermore, if possible, we would like to create our own Aoyama Gakuin original hymns and sing them repeatedly during worship services to provide more “songs to nourish the soul” of our students.

Second, we hope to offer university worship as an opportunity for meditation. Worship serves to prepare one’s mind and body by placing oneself in the presence of God. Just as the Sabbath is a time to rest our minds and bodies and to remember that God created this world⁴, we can designate university worship as a time to reflect on God, the Creator of the world, to experience the love of God shown to us by His Son, Jesus Christ, and to rest our own minds and bodies. We aim to further promote university worship as a valuable opportunity for students, faculty, and staff to prepare their minds and bodies amidst their hectic schedules of classes, research projects, and campus duties.

(2) Courses related to Christian understanding

We greatly appreciate that, in addition to the required “Introduction to Christianity” I and II, a variety of courses related to understanding Christianity are offered. (See <https://www.aoyamagakuin.jp/outline/christ/subject.html> for individual course titles.) Furthermore, we are grateful for the Soper Program, an educational initiative for students aspiring to become teachers in Christian schools. Since it is not feasible for all of these courses to be taught solely by full-time faculty members on campus, including the 12 University Chaplains, we rely on the cooperation of many adjunct instructors. We are deeply grateful to all those who have accepted part-time teaching positions. At the end of each semester, we hold a round-table meeting for those in charge of courses related to Christian understanding, providing an opportunity for learning and exchange. Sometimes the focus is on lectures on specialized areas, while other times it is on discussing and confirming common understandings and directions for the classes.

One of the new developments in the area of Christian understanding related subjects is that we have begun to work on revising the Introduction to Christianity textbook, “*Salt of the Earth, Light of the World: An Introduction to Christianity: Christian Servant Leaders*” (Kyobunkan, 2006). The current textbook, “*Salt of the Earth, Light of the World,*” was written 20 years ago by eight University Chaplains, all of whom contributed to the work. In this revision, while basically following its contents, we decided to take this opportunity to revisit the people and the contents of each section. Through these efforts,

4 See Exodus 20:8-11; Deuteronomy 5:12-15.

we hope to reaffirm a common understanding of what and how to teach in “Introduction to Christianity” I and II, the only Christianity-related courses that are required for all students. As we offer courses in Christianity with the help of many adjunct instructors, we hope that the revised textbook, *“Salt of the Earth, Light of the World,”* will serve as a guideline for Christian understanding and its educational content at our university.

Christianity embraces diverse perspectives on biblical interpretation and various theological matters. While respecting individual beliefs, we undertake this revision with prayer, seeking to clarify the core Christian values we uphold as a university. In this sense, the new textbook will be a historical declaration of Aoyama Gakuin University’s “Confession of Faith.”

(3) Activities of Christian Activities Center

The University Choir, Gospel Choir, Handbell Choir, and Aoyama Christian Fellowship (ACF) are four student organizations affiliated with the Christian Activities Center, and they have a total of over 200 students registered as members and are actively engaged in their activities under the guidance of their respective leaders and chaplains. (For more information on individual organizations, please visit <https://www.aoyamagakuin.jp/outline/christ/action/student/>). In addition, the number of students who have entered the university through examinations specifically designed for Christian students also exceeds 200 in total, and we are very happy to be engaged in Campus Ministry together with these students. In addition, about 20 students are enrolled in the organist training course offered by the Christian Activities Center offers, and some 10 students are enrolled in our worship musician training course. The three-week Australian Christian Homestay Program, held every March, also has more than 20 participants. Despite some students participating in multiple organizations, courses, and programs, there are still likely at least 300 students involved in the activities of the Christian Activities Center each year. We thank God for inviting each and every one of them to our Center activities and cherish the faithful relationships with them. At times, some students may have to leave our activities due to some difficulties in relationships. In such cases, we hope to have the heart of a shepherd searching for a lost sheep, as Jesus demonstrated.⁵

The Christian Activities Center on Aoyama Campus moved to the former Aoyama Gakuin Women’s Junior College Library building in September 2024. We hope to use this

5 See Matthew 18:10-14.

larger space to increase contact with students who have not previously been involved in the Christian Activities Center. On Sagamihara Campus, the Christian Activities Center is located in the Chapel building at the center of the extensive campus, where many students come and spend time in the open lounge.

To paraphrase the words of Isaiah quoted at the beginning of this article, we hope that the Christian Activities Centers on each campus will gather new ideas to “make a straight highway through the main street” and enhance the attractiveness of both centers as places where students, faculty, and staff will want to come.

3. Campus Ministry in society

In the beginning of this paper, we defined campus ministry as “the ministry that aims to create pathways where individuals can experience the love of God on our campus, like a straight and broad highway in response to God’s call.” However, it will not be completed solely on campus. It is necessary to deepen the cooperative relationship with local churches, where students, faculty, and staff touched by God’s love on campus will become more aware of their own faith and confess it. We also need to develop cooperative relationships with the local community and the local government surrounding each campus. In other words, we should strive to exercise servant leadership to make Aoyama Gakuin a community appreciated by both the churches and the local community.

As one proposal toward achieving this goal, I wish to establish a “Christian Research Center” within the Aoyama Gakuin Christian Activities Center. This center would bring together not only University Chaplains but also researchers, church pastors, and practitioners of social activities from Japan and abroad in a free and open dialogue. It would provide a place for study and joint research in a wide range of Christian research fields and promote activities to present the results of such research to the world. I believe that the presence of 12 University Chaplains and 1 missionary at our university⁶ is a gift and a challenge from God, inviting us to go beyond the daily routine of Campus Ministry and taking a broader perspective on broader issues.

In these efforts, the “Christian Research Center” may be able to work on issues faced by contemporary churches and church pastors and publish, for example, the results of

⁶ One for each of 7 faculties on the Aoyama Campus, 4 faculties on the Sagamihara Campus, and 1 in the Graduate School of Professional Studies. The total number of the University Chaplains on campus is 12.

joint projects. This will offer opportunities for pastors to engage in research and it will also help rebuild a church theology. By establishing a cooperative relationship between churches as counterparts for service-learning program and the “Christian Research Center,” we will be able to address local issues and greatly contribute to local churches fulfilling their function as “a blessing” (Genesis 12:2). Furthermore, I hope to establish a forum for joint research on theological and practical approaches to peace-building with researchers and practitioners from Japan and abroad.

Fortunately, we have channels that we can utilize, as indicated in the following. The Methodists, the source of our university, have a worldwide network called IAMSCU, and there is also a network of Christian schools in Asia called ACUCA⁷. We believe that it is a holy commission from God to deepen our research and disseminate the results, tackling contemporary theological and missionary challenges within and outside Japan.

4. Conclusion

I have written my vision about the Campus Ministry of the University, based partly on my two-year experience as University Dean of Religion. I am deeply grateful for this special opportunity to clarify my vision. I am sure that there are many points that I have not fully considered, partly because of my lack of experience. I hope to receive comments. It would be my great pleasure if this essay will help us with prayer seek God’s will for the Campus Ministry of our university.⁸

⁷ IAMSCU stands for International Association of Methodist Schools, Colleges, and Universities, ACUCA for Association of Christian Universities and Colleges in Asia, respectively.

⁸ See Romans 12:2.