

“Nurturing a ‘Spirit’ of Excellence”
Faculty and Staff Awards Dinner
Mount Vernon Nazarene University
Dr. LeBron Fairbanks
August 24, 2004

Anne and I spent ten days this summer on vacation in Roan Mountain, Tennessee. We stayed at a Christian Retreat Center near the Tennessee and North Carolina border. We have vacationed at this location on several occasions since moving to Mount Vernon Nazarene University fifteen years ago.

What makes this place so special, besides its beautiful location at the base of Roan Mountain, is that there are no TV’s and no telephones in the cabins. The location of the retreat center is outside cell phone range. Yes, there is a telephone booth on site as well as a TV/Activities room, but with no cable connection, only many great videos to watch. Oh yes, Joy could reach me – and she did – through the retreat center director.

However, I read several books from the deck of the cabin as I listened to a trout stream roar through the front yard of the cabin we rented. Books like A Century of Holiness Theology, Kingdom Ethics, Faculty Diversity and the biblical books of Job and Colossians.

In the TV/video room, Anne and I watched numerous videos including perhaps my favorite musical, “Fiddler on the Roof.”

In the Activity room one day I noticed a video entitled, “The Spirit of Excellence.” I returned to the room the next day to watch the video on the work and ministry of the Moody Aviation School, located in nearby Elizabethton, Tennessee. I was captured by the title and the content of the video on the work of Moody Aviation School, where many missionary pilots are trained and prepared to serve as missionary aviators around the world. The facilities and equipment of the school were highlighted. Testimonies of faculty and students were given. The title and theme of the video, “The *Spirit* of Excellence”, fascinated me and I began rather immediately to list people and projects on the Mount Vernon Nazarene University Campus who reflect this daily *spirit* in the work they do on campus. Without trying to be exhaustive, very quickly I listed the following:

1. The physical plant crew, housekeeping and grounds keeping staff and the numerous campus construction and beautification projects undertaken on campus by this team,

2. The Dean's Council with Dr. Timpe, and faculty in each academic division who exudes excellence in their teaching,
3. Coach Veale and the baseball team at the NAIA World Series,
4. The "Old" Task Force who developed the catalogue statement on the liberal arts,
5. The Standing committee on Diversity,
6. The Excell (now Adult and Graduate Studies) leadership team who are guiding the MVNU expansion efforts to Cincinnati,
7. The chapel worship leader, Geri Rosser, who received her Ph.D. in Music Theory from OSU this summer,
8. The "new" Student Financial Planning Team,
9. The Technology Advisory Committee,
10. The expanded student development and small group leadership team working to enhance residence life for students,
11. Dr. Kyong Kim, the Korean poet and best selling author, who is on our faculty,
12. And the mid-decade Strategic Review Committee.

The list could and should grow longer!

"Excellence" in a university like MVNU, or a professional training center, like Moody Aviation School, is often defined in the "eyes of the beholder." Excellence compared to what? To whom? And when this comparison takes place, usually negative comparison, we easily become discouraged at what we may *not* be doing, rather than encouraged at what we *are* doing.

"Excellence" is sometimes defined as *excelling* in the expectation others have placed on us. Often, we place on ourselves near perfection expectations. Viewed from this perspective, "excellence" can be a worthy and noble "ideal," yet seldom, if ever, achieved. And the negative impact of these unrealistic expectations on us can be devastating.

However, I found myself this summer *celebrating* excellence in individuals on this campus, colleagues with whom I work, day in and day out. These Christian professionals deeply desire to *be* the very best servants they can be in the assignments God has given to them. My brothers and sisters in Christ, faculty and staff on this campus, give evidence *daily* to their intense commitment to *do* the very best they can do in the work asked of them.

I work with individuals on this campus who reflect a passion – a *spirit* for "academic" excellence, "professional" excellence, and "character" excellence. I see this *spirit* manifested every day at MVNU, and I celebrate God's gifts *to* you and His blessings *on* you.

One big question, of course, is this: How do we *nurture* and *cultivate* this “spirit of excellence” in ourselves and others on this campus?

My study this summer of Colossians chapters 3 & 4 provided for me numerous insights to my question, but especially two.

Insight #1 for nurturing a Spirit of Excellence: *Remember whose you are and whom you serve (Col. 3:23).*

It is the *Lord Christ* whom you are serving in your work assignment. He has placed you here. His hand is upon you. He empowers you. You are serving Him – not primarily your supervisor or the MVNU president – as you toil in assignments and responsibilities. Even when no one seems to recognize your work.

We experience a “peace that passes understanding” when we understand that the reward for “working with all our heart” comes from the Lord Himself, not from coworkers or colleagues. What a profound lifelong pursuit: to do and say everything in the name of the Lord!

This convictional passion nurtures within me and cultivates a “spirit of excellence.”

Insight #2 for nurturing a Spirit of Excellence: **PRAY often. (Col. 4:2-4) ***

Saturday, August 14, 2004, I experienced a “first” for me at MVNU. A group of individuals representing faculty, staff, pastors, and community leaders met with me for prayer.

They not only wanted to pray for me as MVNU begins a new academic year, they wanted to walk through out the campus – building by building – and pray for those students who would live, study, or eat in these facilities, faculty members who would prepare, advise or teach in the classrooms or offices, and for the support staff who works behind the scenes so often to facilitate the smooth work of the university.

We started in the Hyson Campus Center and offices, continued in the newly renovated Faculty and Regents Hall, walked to the Lakeholm Administration Building and then to the Chapel/Auditorium, paused at the Free Enterprise Business Center and the expanded Jennie K. Moore Family and Consumer Sciences Center as we walked to Oakwood Hall, prayed for the students who live in various resident halls, participate in intercollegiate or intramural sports and eat their meals in the dining commons. Resident directors, Resident and Medical assistants, and resident small group Bible study leaders were included in our prayers. Also encompassed in our

prayers were housekeepers, grounds keepers, physical plant personnel, administrators, teachers, secretaries, and other support staff. We prayed for the non-traditional Adult and Graduate Studies programs, and our personnel, plans and academic programs at our satellite campuses.

The group spent approximately three hours in prayer as we walked from building to building and sometimes from office to office, before returning to Bailey Conference Room. They concluded the morning by praying for me, and for a profound spiritual renewal on campus this year, even a spiritual awakening that students, faculty, and staff would never forget. What a powerful experience!

What does it mean to “pray often?” How do Paul’s instructions regarding prayer relate to us at MVNU? He guides his friends in how to pray for others, and for oneself. For me, he is encouraging us at MVNU to:

1. Pray that God will open doors for us to minister to others at MVNU – in word and deed.
2. Pray that God will effectively speak through us in our ministry.
3. Pray that God will use our words as “channels of grace” to individuals with whom we work, associate or serve.
4. Pray that we will be wise in the way we act toward “not yet Christians.”
5. Pray that we will make the most of the opportunities God grants us.

In short, Paul is encouraging us to be known as people who go around doing good. He states in Philippians 4:5 “*Let your gentleness be known to all.*” For this to happen, much prayer is needed!

Another big (human) question is this: How can we live and work together at MVNU so that our relationships are redemptive and a witness to unbelievers of the reconciling work of God in Christ?”

With approximately 450 full and part time faculty and staff, and approximately 2,400 students, there is so much potential for misunderstandings and disagreements. I *choose* to believe that these disagreements are honest differences between good and godly people, and that there is a way through these honest – and sometimes intense – differences.

Asked a different way, how does a commitment to the ministry of reconciliation nurture and cultivate in us a spirit of excellence? St. Paul answers our question: Remembering whom you

serve and pray often ... especially when people around you do not recognize what you do or appear to appreciate what you do.

Join me this year in intentionally and proactively nurturing and cultivating a *spirit of excellence* within ourselves, co-workers, and students. May it be a campus-wide passion!