The world is full of displaced persons. Think about that term: displaced persons. It’s far too dehumanizing of a term to use for people. It makes us think of misplacing people as if they are books misplaced among the otherwise neatly ordered shelves of a library. Or, glasses misplaced somewhere in your dorm room. But, any awareness of world events reminds us of the tragedy of displaced persons.

Within the last 12 months, I’ve twice received a message from state government in Springfield, asking if Trinity could receive displaced persons. First, it was Hurricane Katrina last year at this time, and then, within the last month, to ask if we had temporary housing available for Americans fleeing war-torn Lebanon.

Perhaps you’ve heard about displaced children in Uganda or even participated in the Global Night Commute last April 29. These children, between the ages of 3 and 17, from Northern Uganda, are referred to as "night commuters". They walk every night up to 12 miles from internally displaced person camps to larger towns in search of safety from the Lord’s Resistance Army.

Displacement of people results from a tragedy, whether of human making or natural disaster. But I believe there’s a psychological displacement of individuals that can occur as well. I’m not thinking so much about a dissociative identity disorder—or a multiple personality disorder. I’m thinking, instead, about the dynamic that you first year students have read about in “The Color of Water.” For sophomores, juniors, and seniors who haven’t read the book, the author, James McBride, tells his story and that of his mother’s, as both she and he live both in place and out of place in a race-conscious society.

The book’s title, however, gives a hint that maybe living outside the box is a calling. The title is taken from his mother’s explanation that God is the color of water, transcendent from human conventions.

The irony, of course, is that our transcendent God, in the form of his Son, became human. The Word became flesh and dwelt among us, taking on our very form. I trust you know the passage from Philippians 2:

6 Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; 7 rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. 8 And being found in appearance as a human being, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death—even death on a cross!

Listen, too, to a verse from Milton’s “On the Morning of Christ's Nativity”

That glorious Form, that Light unsufferable,  
And that far-beaming blaze of Majesty,  
Wherewith He wont at Heav'n's high council-table  
To sit the midst of Trinal Unity,  
He laid aside; and, here with us to be,  
Forsook the courts of everlasting day,  
And chose with us a darksome house of mortal clay.
Talk about displaced! From heaven’s high council-table to a house of mortal clay, from a throne to a stable. And what’s more, the Philippians passage begins with this instruction: “In your relationships with one another, have the same attitude of mind Christ Jesus had.”

In the remaining minutes, I’d like to offer two suggestions if we are to reflect the same attitude of mind Christ Jesus had. One suggestion is focused on how we ought to relate to displaced persons; the other, focused on how we ought to live as displaced persons.

So, first, how we ought to relate to displaced persons, and I’ll begin with a confession. Just a couple of weeks ago, I walked out of a downtown building and began walking quickly to Union Station to catch the Metra back to campus. Suddenly, I was facing a young woman sitting up against a newspaper stand. She was holding a pink piece of poster board. In large print she had written, “It’s a boy!” Then, in smaller print, she had written about being pregnant and homeless. A displaced person. How should one respond? I didn’t know what to do. My mind raced. A few coins would do so little.

Maybe social services should be alerted. Certainly, homelessness doesn’t offer necessary prenatal care. Maybe there’s a place where she could go and get the care needed for pregnancy. Or maybe she’s a fraud. How should one respond?

Or what about the Katrina refugee mother and her three children that have been staying in a nearby church parsonage the last year and who have been told by the church that they need to vacate in the next few months? Or what about the illegal immigrant who earlier in last month sought refuge in a Methodist church on the west side of town and is still there, using the centuries old concept of sanctuary as she evades immigration officials. Or what about the illegal immigrant who attended our church until a year ago who quietly takes on any restaurant job he can find, living with the awareness that he could be deported if discovered and would have to leave his wife and daughter behind? How should we respond?

One clear instruction is found in Matthew 25:

34 “Then the King will say to those on his right, ’Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world.’ 35 For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, 36 I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.’ 37 “Then the righteous will answer him, ’Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? 38 When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? 39 When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?’ 40 “The King will reply, ’Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.’

For the least of these, I believe “displaced persons” fits into the King’s category of “the least of these.” Of course, as we reach out to the least of these, discernment is needed, and perhaps the best summary is found in the Chinese proverb: Give a man a fish and you feed him for a day. Teach a man to fish and you feed him for a lifetime. So, our challenge is to figure out how to teach the pregnant woman, the Katrina refugee, and the illegal immigrant all how to fish, all in the context of the Trinity Christian College mission statement: those who teach and learn are called to be co-workers with Christ in
subjecting all cultural activities to the reign of God. And let me add that “all cultural activities” would include social services, public policy, and other societal structures—that all will be subjected to the reign of God.

Now, second, how should we--individually and as a college--live as displaced persons? Allow me to give you the short answer first, and then the longer answer. The short answer: We should never be at home anywhere but in the embrace of God’s saving grace. Now the longer answer.

Trinity Christian College is part of the Reformed-Presbyterian branch of the family tree of historic Christianity. The strength of this branch on which we sit is that our tradition seeks engagement in this world. Just a few moments ago, I quoted from our mission statement: those who teach and learn are called to be co-workers with Christ in subjecting all cultural activities to the reign of God. This is not a tradition that flees from the world or fences in the Christian life with legalistic boundaries and regulations. For example, while exploring the worlds of art and science, the goal is to claim it for Christ, not to put up signs claiming certain areas as “off-limits.” Also, chapel is not required here nor are dorm Bible studies, but I certainly hope your gratitude to God leads you to both. So, know our strengths, but also know our strengths can also become our Achilles heel.

Living and learning in this tradition of engagement can lead to sloppy Christianity if we fail to discern our calling. When we forget to subject all to the reign of God and simply slide along, we allow other godless authorities to exercise their reign. In entertainment, our passivity offers carte blanche to the god of promiscuity and hedonism. In our purchases and Christmas lists, our greed and desire offer complete devotion to the god of consumerism. In our lack of political involvement, our apathy and blindness offer free reign to the god of graft and corruption. In short, we make ourselves at home in a world broken and estranged from the Creator.

So what should we do? In this world, broken and estranged from the Creator, we should live steadfastly as displaced persons. We should humble ourselves, take on the nature of servants, and remember not to become too comfortable in this scarred world. Yet remember, being uncomfortable is not the same as being passive. Rather, being uncomfortable—being displaced persons—should propel us into action, into being co-workers with Christ, subjecting all to the reign of God.

Please use your time at Trinity, students, to learn how to best become co-workers with Christ, never feeling at home in this fallen world. That task is as varied as the number of programs and majors here at Trinity.

That’s the individual dimension. But, how should a College live or function steadfastly as a displaced person, never becoming at home in the fallen world? Let me offer three brief directions before closing.

First, the educational program, while often times positioned in an ivory tower, must always have the co-worker goal in mind—how you will ultimately leave or be displaced from the ivory tower and take up residence in society, while never being fully at home in the midst of this broken world. Our goal is the training that ultimately will provide you the union card to participate with Christ in subjecting all to the reign of God.

Second, some times, our education program can actually right now—not just in the future—be involved in subjecting all to the reign of God. Your learning activities—be they service learning, clinical assignments, student teaching, or internships—can be immediate means to our goal. Outside of the classroom and away from the comfort of
your dorm room, you can begin acting now as displaced people—never accepting
falleness and always seeking God’s kingdom. First-year students, think about this as you
reflect on the service learning in which you were involved earlier this week. Staff,
consider the opportunities the College’s service policy provides you. And faculty, keep
traversing the bridge of partnership that makes for immediate as well as eventual co-
worker engagement.

And third, the College should resist the same sloppiness that I’ve encouraged you to
resist. Our decisions about spending precious resources should flee from the god of
consumerism. Instead, in our planning and decisions when constructing buildings,
ordering food, and setting thermostats, we should promote restoration and good
stewardship. Students, keep us, keep me accountable so that together we’re never at home
anywhere but in the arms of God’s saving grace.

So, for all of us at Trinity, let me encourage us to live uncomfortably, always seeking to
be co-workers with Christ in the coming academic year and beyond. May this statement,
from “Our World Belongs to God” and now on the screen be our goal; please say it
together with me: The rule of Jesus Christ covers the whole world. To follow this Lord is
to serve him everywhere, without fitting in, as light in the darkness, as salt in a spoiling
world. Our hope for a new earth is not tied to what humans can do, for we believe that
one day every challenge to God’s rule and every resistance to his will shall be crushed.
Then his kingdom shall come fully, and our Lord shall rule forever.

Blessings to each one of you in the academic year ahead. One God in three we praise
you.