

Chi Alpha College Ministry Calls Students to Become Activists for God

Rallying at a New Year's conference, 2,200 Chi Alpha students gathered to fulfill a dream for global evangelism

During a New Year's Day luncheon at the first World SALT (Student Activist Leadership Training) Conference for Chi Alpha Campus Ministries, convention organizer Curt Harlow asked the gathered students, "How many have had an experience with the Lord here?" Virtually everyone raised their hands.

The five-day conference for the Assemblies of God (AG) university ministry was held in Los Angeles' posh downtown Bonaventure Hotel. Challenged by an unusual composition of "encounter" sessions, 2,200 college students traveled from at least 45 countries for hands-on preparation that included Holy Spirit and Healing encounters, "Ask the Missionary" sessions, and evangelism encounters, which were held on the inner-city streets.

Some 250 of the students boarded buses to the nearby UCLA campus. They went to prayer-walk the perimeter and pray for the huge, upscale university and its new Chi Alpha chapter. Ironically, 50 years earlier the school had become the site of the first chapter of Campus Crusade for Christ International, founded by Bill Bright—one of World SALT's featured speakers.

"Win the campus to Christ today, win the world to Christ tomorrow," Bright, 79, told the attendees.

Dennis Gaylor, national director of the fast-growing ministry of 12,000, compared his members with the students of the 1700s and 1800s who helped usher in great revivals with prayer and fasting.

“We always think that whatever era we’re in is the greatest,” Gaylor said. “But there is a sense that we are now in a moment of time unlike any other, in that [today’s youth] are ready to chart a whole new course.”

Today’s college students are open to the supernatural, have an edge to them and are attracted to interaction and authenticity, Gaylor said. In that vein, the conference included “PowerTools”—interactive multimedia stage presentations of cutting-edge resources equipping students to reach their campuses for Christ.

Next door was a 10,000-square-foot compound called Windows to the World, which depicted such places as China, Morocco and Amsterdam. Inside the rooms, culturally appropriate actors presented the challenges missionaries face in each country. Outside in the courtyard, dramatizations included druggies offering marijuana cigarettes and Middle Eastern beggars falling to their knees and hugging visitors’ shoes.

Encounter sessions produced more profound confrontations. During the healing encounter sessions, students learned not only scriptural authority, but also when and how long to pray, then gained literal hands-on experience.

An outreach leader said that during one Saturday afternoon evangelism outreach, 30 students rode an inner-city church’s lone bus along its route. During stops they spent four hours

knocking on doors, brought four people to Christ and got 16 new families in church the next day. The Holy Spirit encounter sessions reportedly resulted in several baptisms in the Holy Spirit.

“We’re Pentecostal, and that’s what makes us different,” Gaylor said, noting that two-thirds of Chi Alpha members were not raised in AG churches. “There are a lot of campus ministries having an impact, but we are attracting students who are particularly open to the gifts of the Spirit and high-energy worship.”

The ministry traces its roots to the 1940s when J. Robert Ashcroft, father of former U.S. senator and current U.S. attorney general nominee John Ashcroft, urged the AG to start a campus ministry. In 1978, Gaylor, now 51, became the director of Chi Alpha, a name taken from the first two letters of the Greek words Christou Apostoloi, meaning “Christ’s sent ones.”

When the denomination moved it from the youth ministry department to home missions in 1986 it began to grow and “exploded,” Gaylor said, in 1992 when church officials made campus ministers national appointees.

Chi Alpha has grown from six campus missionaries appointed the first year to more than 213 full-time campus missionaries. In less than nine years, chapters have been planted on 49 new college campuses, bringing the total chapters to 215. Traditionally strong in residential, small-town colleges, the ministry now flourishes in Boston, Chicago and at prestigious American and Georgetown universities in the nation’s capital.

Each chapter holds weekly worship services, discipleship and accountability groups, and campus outreach. Gaylor said the purpose is to offer the gospel to students at a crossroads in their lives, before they become settled into marriages and child rearing.

“Today’s students are serious, and they want their lives to count,” he said. “There is a unity among the youth to impact the world. I see connecting. I don’t see denominationalism.

“There is a move of God among our youth today and on the college campuses, and that move is unprecedented.”