

God on Campus

A new spirituality is stirring America's college students. Here's how the Holy Spirit is touching the digital generation. As nightfall descends upon the University of Florida campus, a quiet rumbling of voices morphs into thunderous applause. Hundreds of students—a melting pot of denominations and cultures—have converged to worship and pray at an event that signifies a dynamic shift taking place on college campuses across the nation.

Dubbed Unite Now, the first-time event linked students and spiritual leaders from more than 20 campus ministries and area churches in Gainesville, a college town that recently made history when it won the 2007 national football championship between back-to-back national basketball titles.

But spiritual leaders in Gainesville say championships are just a side note in the face of what they are witnessing—a campus saturated by students hungry for more than the typical Wednesday-night Bible study. “There’s a trend that I’ve noticed of not being satisfied with having one foot in the church and one foot in the world,” says George Dumaine, the college pastor at First Assembly of God in Gainesville, who—with guitar in hand—led worship during Unite Now.

“I am very much on the front lines,” adds Dumaine, a senior at the University of Florida (UF) when he talked with Charisma. “And what I am witnessing is an intense hunger for having pure God encounters.”

UF is not alone. Now more than ever, campuses are reporting a dramatic increase in the number of students seeking

spirituality. According to a recent New York Times article, officials from a slew of prominent secular colleges including Harvard, Colgate, the University of Wisconsin and the University of California-Berkeley are reporting that students today are “drawn to religion and spirituality with more fervor than at any time they can remember.”

Published in May, the article points to a 2004 groundbreaking study on the spiritual lives of college students. Launched by the Higher Education Research Institute at the University of California-Los Angeles (UCLA), the study reports that of the estimated 112,000 freshmen surveyed, almost half were seeking opportunities to grow spiritually in college.

Though skeptics question the figures, saying there is no previous data against which to compare the numbers, prominent campus ministries are reporting the same trend—specifically within the last two years. InterVarsity Christian Fellowship, an interdenominational student-led campus ministry, has experienced “an explosion of student conversions within the last two years,” says its president, Alec Hill. In 65 years of ministry, the organization has grown to include more than 570 campus chapters and an estimated 35,000 student members.

“We’ve had two years unlike we’ve ever had in our history, aside from an event Billy Graham did in 1982,” Hill says. “Apart from that one year, we’ve never had so many new believers.”

Numbers are climbing because students today are “more responsive” to issues of faith, says Terry Erickson, national director of evangelism with InterVarsity, who reports that—in an interesting twist—28 percent of their involved students identify themselves as non-Christian. The statistic, Erickson

says, is refreshing because “though they haven’t made a faith decision yet, they are involved and they are open to being around Christians.”

Chi Alpha Campus Ministries, which is affiliated with the Assemblies of God, has also experienced a recent surge of student growth. “In the last two years, our numbers have doubled,” reports Dennis Gaylor, national director of Chi Alpha.

Leaders at Campus Crusade for Christ (CCC), one of the nation’s largest campus ministries, have studied the trend within their organization. They have found a “broader and deeper interest” in spirituality among college students that has fueled an increase in numbers relating to both conversions and involvement, says Tony Arnold, media relations director of CCC.

Arnold attributes the recent “openness” on campuses to a number of factors. But to understand the trends, he says, one must first understand an entire generation.

A Hungry Generation

They have been dubbed “Millennials,” an overindulged generation of 18- to 25-year-olds with the world at their fingertips—where reality television shows launch unknowns into superstardom in a matter of months; and where information, sex, drugs and relationships are just a mouse click away.

And though inundated with sex and materialism, they are also bombarded by news of a world in turmoil. They are the post-September 11 generation that, with many on the front lines,

recently witnessed the Virginia Tech Massacre, the nation's deadliest shooting in modern U.S. history.

But instead of giving up altogether, Arnold says, they have become a "hungry generation" desperate to change their world. "These students are activists," he says. "Since [Hurricane] Katrina hit, we've seen within our organization about 17,000 college students trek to Mississippi and Louisiana to be involved in relief efforts."

Arnold says CCC first noticed an "activist" trend when the Asian tsunami hit in 2004. "They wanted to give financially, but they also wanted to go," he says.

Gaylor reports the same trend, explaining that students today are intensely globally aware. "Most of our students are wanting to do something more ... wanting to really make a difference."

In a climate where non-Christian students know less about the Bible than students did a generation ago, many Christian students are viewing their campuses as a mission field, says Dean Nelson, national director for Global Outreach Campus Ministries, an organization founded by Bishop Wellington Boone. "I see Christian students who come to campus ... better prepared as young leaders than they were maybe 15 years ago," he says. "They have a very distinct Christian worldview."

Students are evangelizing their campuses by hosting Christian concerts and open-mike events and by leading small-group Bible studies, Nelson says. But across the nation, students are also saturating their campuses in prayer with the hope of seeing a spiritual renewal.

Jaeson Ma, president of Campus Church Networks, a student-led church-planting movement, helped launch the Campus Transformation Network with a simple Web site, [campustransformation .com](http://campustransformation.com), where college students and ministry leaders nationwide could sign up to pray for their campuses. "When we started telling people three years ago about our vision, people thought we were crazy," he says.

But after just one semester, the number of campuses involved grew from 10 to more than 70. For the first time recorded in history there was not one hour of broken prayer for the nation's colleges. Today, roughly 120 campuses have committed to pray.

Across the nation, students and leaders have set up prayer rooms—even prayer tents—where students pray for their campuses and for their world. They pray to end abortion and to stop terrorism, but they also pray for their roommates and family members. Ultimately, they want to see revival on campuses nationwide.

At San Joaquin Delta College in Stockton, California, the members of Carpe Diem Christian Fellowship, a ministry affiliated with Chi Alpha, have been seeing miraculous healings. In 2005, director Matthew Gonzales says he felt God leading him to pray for Jim Yanko, who was then Delta's baseball coach.

In 2003 Yanko underwent an operation for a malignant, grade-four tumor and was again facing surgery for suspicious tumor cells. But when Yanko went in for surgery the day after Gonzales prayed for him, he says the doctors could find no cancerous cells.

Two years later, he says he is still cancer-free. "I am now trying to be as much of an inspiration as I possibly can be to the other people that are going through the same episode I went through, not just the patients themselves, but the family and the loved ones and everything else," Yanko says.

Emboldened by the testimony, Carpe Diem students are now praying for those in their community. At a Wal-Mart, two students prayed for a woman in the candy aisle who was bound to a wheelchair because of a hip injury. Gonzales says after the students laid hands on the woman and prayed for her, she was able to stand up and walk.

"I really don't believe we're doing anything special other than we're just being light in the darkness," Gonzales says. "I think if more Christians would stand up and go to places where there's deep darkness, I believe they will see the miraculous power of Jesus break out, and they will see salvation."

At Arizona State University, prayer-room coordinator Chris Ngai has also seen prayer change lives. He recalls a student who walked into the prayer room late one night, on the verge of committing suicide. A handful of students talked to him—and then they prayed for him. "One minute he was crying, and the next, he was thanking us," Ngai says.

Student response to around-the-clock prayer is no surprise, Ma says. "Prayer has been so attractive because it's not about theology or theory; it's about encountering a living God that you can feel and know and hear," he says. "They're not falling in love with religion; they are falling in love with Jesus."

And through prayer, they are uniting like never before. “We’re seeing students from all fellowships joining hands together for the very first time and realizing that, ‘Hey, we’re all on the same mission; we’re all here for the same goal and the same God,” adds Ma, author of *The Blueprint: A Revolutionary Plan to Plant Missional Communities on Campuses*. “The goal is to equip students in prayer ... to reach every student on every campus for Christ,” he says of the book, published on July 7.

As they unite, students are flocking to events such as TheCall Nashville, where on July 7, young adults filled an entire stadium to pray for revival in the nation. Passion '07, a four-day indoor conference for college students, attracted an estimated 20,000 students from around the world in January. Likewise, the International House of Prayer—a prayer meeting that began in 1999 and continues today—attracts masses of students.

“One of the reasons we have found favor with these young people is the sound of hope,” says TheCall founder Lou Engle, “that through massive fasting and prayer, a nation can turn back to God.”

But while students are flocking to corporate prayer and worship events, they are disappearing from church pews.

Looking for Something Real

Jonathan Rice, campus pastor at Virginia Tech, says today’s college students are looking for authentic experiences. “Students are less concerned about denominations, less concerned about title and more concerned about the kingdom of God ultimately,” he says.

“If they experience it truthfully for themselves, it doesn’t matter what a theologian says or what a pastor says.”

Although Nate Coker of Gainesville grew up in church, as a teen he stepped full force into a world of excess. From where he stood, Coker believed he had it all—popularity, a pocket filled with cash, a slew of girlfriends and an endless supply of cocaine.

But the addiction drained him—after years of use, the drugs were literally eating away at his throat, he says, recalling days he could not speak.

Following a three-day binge, Coker hit bottom. Alone in a seedy hotel room, he realized he had nothing—his sister had died of a drug overdose; his close friend died in a violent fight; and after having to be revived, his brother barely survived an overdose.

“I was going to hell, and I didn’t even care,” he recalls of the day he wanted to “check out” of life.

Instead, he cried out to God for four straight days. There was no response, he says, until the fifth day. “I told Him if He saved me, that I would live for Him for the rest of my life.”

More than one year later, Coker—free from addiction—is actively involved in Chi Alpha and in his Gainesville church. But he says Christianity had to be real, or he didn’t want it.

Like Coker, UF graduate student Mary Strickland simply wants an authentic faith. After years of being deeply involved in

church, she walked away hurt, confused and empty.

"I left because something in my heart knew that it wasn't what it was supposed to be," she says. "If you're going somewhere that's supposed to feed your soul and you always leave hungry, then something is wrong."

More than a year later, she returned to church after finding a congregation that she considered atypical. "There was an openness, and a true desire to put the spotlight all on Jesus," she says of First Assembly of God in Gainesville, the church where she and Coker are now active members.

"Instead of the spotlight being on the pastor or on the choir leader or the pretty building, the spotlight was just on Jesus."

Students such as Coker and Strickland represent what this generation is all about, says First Assembly pastor Mike Patz. "This generation clearly wants authenticity," says Patz, who became lead pastor of the church three years ago when just a handful of students attended. Today, an estimated 500 students account for more than half the congregation.

He takes no credit for the overflow, saying he has simply built on the foundation previous leaders laid. His message to students is one of relationship, not of religion. On a muggy Sunday afternoon, he spoke to a congregation crammed with college students.

"I don't know what we've done with organized religion," he says. "Organization can be a good thing, but you can't organize a relationship."

The Heart of Leadership

As ministry leaders scramble to engage a generation walking away from the typical church scene, they want to know how to respond as the door bursts open on campuses. The answer lies in the leadership not just of campus ministries, but also of local churches, stresses Kent Murawski, executive director of BASIC (Brothers and Sister in Christ), whose mission is to equip local churches to reach college students.

“From what I’m seeing, the body of Christ has abandoned the college campus as a mission field,” he says, adding that many are “intimidated by this generation and do not know how to relate to them.”

“Overall, there are not a lot of local churches heavily involved in college ministry,” he adds. “[BASIC is] successful because the local church has abandoned them. We need to see resurgence in churches, not just campuses.”

With more than 16 million college students piling onto U.S. campuses every year, the ministry opportunity is enormous, Murawski says. But leaders must be prepared. “If the door opens up for spirituality, then the door opens up for us.”

Jeremy Story, president of Campus Renewal Ministries, whose mission is to unite students and college pastors through prayer and action, says in order to engage students, leaders must unite. In recent years, he says, that has been happening more and more.

“An increasing number of churches on college campuses across

America very intentionally are praying together and are seeking the Lord together," he says. "That was an unheard-of concept. There is no history of that occurring to this degree of a significant level in prior years of campus ministry in our country, so it's huge."

From where he stands—on the forefront of a church and campus exploding with college students eager to change their world by first changing their campuses—Patz says the spiritual climate is "heating up." But those in leadership must not get in the way, he stresses.

"If the leaders can keep their heads screwed on straight and not freak out or do some goofy things and get power hungry, I think it can be fabulous," he says. "If the spiritual leaders don't blow it, we're going to see a pretty big harvest."

"I think God is up to something," he adds. "And I think the campuses and the young people are going to be right at the center of it."

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