

The Day the Earth Stood Still

More than 30,000 college students from across the country recently gathered to worship. Charisma captured the moment.

Storm clouds hovered over Shelby Farms Park in Memphis, Tennessee, as thousands of college students searched for vacant patches of grass to sit on. Many had driven all night just to set up a tent in this park and spend the day worshipping God.

As a gentle mist broke through the clouds, the students were reminded of how God's glory once filled the temple. Some believed the rain and haze were signs that His glory was falling again.

"It was almost like God's glory was all around us," says Cheri Pastor, a 19-year-old junior from the University of Central Florida. "There was such a reverence."

Dressed mostly in T-shirts and jeans, some with long hair, piercings and tattoos, 30,000 college students from across the country convened May 19-21 for the fourth annual Passion Conference. The main event May 20, dubbed one day, was marked by eight hours of nonstop worship and prayer—for their schools and for the world.

A sense of abandon permeated the crowd, with some participants standing in their bare feet, lifting their hands in praise. Others knelt with their faces in the wet grass as

singers and speakers on the platform urged them to "just release control and say yes to whatever God has planned."

Birthered in 1995 by Louie Giglio, director of Passion Conferences—a division of Choice Ministries in Atlanta—the OneDay 2000 event saw the biggest attendance since Passion started hosting the praise gatherings in 1997. “Road reps” traveled to 100 college campuses nationwide urging students to come to pray and seek the face of God.

In the last three years, students have flocked to locations in Texas to attend annual Passion conferences and lay the foundation for OneDay. Large regional gatherings were held nationwide, from Atlanta to Seattle, as previews.

Between sessions of praise and worship, students prayed for their schools, families and national leaders. A OneDay event also was held in Taiwan, organized entirely by Taiwanese students. The crowd prayed for the participants, as well as for missionaries around the world.

The night before the event in Memphis, students read the Bible all night and prayed to prepare the atmosphere. And before the students even arrived, volunteers had spent 48 hours praying specifically over the 4,500 acre field.

The field lay in the center of Shelby Farms Park, east of the Memphis metropolitan area, near the geographical center of the United States. Passion Conferences challenged students to become the heart of a new, fresh movement of witness on the nation’s college campuses.

Volunteers met each car as students arrived for registration, asking to pray with participants before their feet ever touched the ground. Many were moved to tears just by seeing thousands of other people their own age, all seeking the Lord.

“A girl in one car told me she and her friend were the only Christians they knew of on their entire college campus,” said Lisa Calvert, a volunteer from Houston. “She struggled not to cry, and told me: ‘This is so awesome to be around this many Christians. I’m not alone!’”

Volunteers uniformly dressed in yellow shirts joined in the worship, ready to pray and counsel with any student. A prayer tent stood near the field; its walls were decorated with maps and small cards upon which students poured out their hearts. Many asked for

prayers for their campuses, for unsaved friends and for divorcing parents.

Throughout the day, students entered and quietly walked around the tent, touching places on the maps, praying silently. A prayer journal lay open on a table, and its pages soon filled with handwritten praise and pleas.

Silently, at the edge of the field, an occasional volunteer or student knelt or lay facedown in the damp grass. Occasionally, small groups of students made their way back to the campsites to read the Bible and pray together.

“I see a new brokenness,” said Tammy Becker of Southwest Texas State University. “People [are] giving everything to God, giving their whole lives to God, just allowing Him to do whatever He wants to do in their lives. Just trusting.”

A Jesus Generation

Part of the vision of OneDay is to empower youth to be

missionaries on their campuses. As a result of the Memphis event, the Passion staff hopes to see 100 people saved for each person who attended.

Organizers believe a new spiritual fervor is emerging among college-age adults—a group often seen as disaffected and disenchanted.

“What we see is a hunger and a desire that it’s no longer worth it just to live for themselves,” said Matt Morris, events director for Passion Conferences. “They come from a generation of parents who seem to be classified as a ‘me-centered’ ‘re seeking spirituality in all different avenues, but they’re not seeking Christ.

“Those who know Christ [believe it is] their assignment to share with their friends and to share with their campus and make God’s name great on their campuses again. [It] has been incredible.”

A recent study cited in Newsweek reported that a higher percentage of high-schoolers and college-age individuals are reaching out for some form of religion or spirituality, though it’s not always Christianity. The magazine quotes a 1999 poll of teen-agers by religious researcher George Barna in which more than half agreed with the statement, “All religious faiths teach equally valid truths.”

The Internet also acts as a “spiritual supermarket” to many teens, who pick and choose whatever mixture of beliefs happen to suit them, Newsweek said.

Many students at OneDay echoed

the reports' findings, adding that unsaved students don't necessarily frown on Christianity—but neither do they take it seriously. A rise in New Age spirituality has brought a new openness for dialogue, they say, but it also has reduced Christianity to just another option in “finding truth” alongside everything else.

Giglio urged the crowd not to fall into that trap. He believes this is the “26:8 Generation,” a reference to Isaiah 26:8: “Yes, in the way of Your judgments, O Lord, we have waited for You; the desire of our soul is for Your name and for the remembrance of You” (NKJV).

Giglio says the 26:8 Generation is made up of people who have committed to live for the glory of God. He encouraged each participant to proclaim the “26:8 Declaration”—through which students commit to make knowing God the “passionate pursuit” of their lives, serve the local church, commit to prayer and evangelism, and participate in

God's global purpose for their generation.

John Piper, senior pastor of Bethlehem Baptist Church in Minneapolis, challenged students not to buy into the popular version of the American dream: to grow up, make a lot of money, retire early, buy a boat and collect seashells.

“Make your life count for something,” he told them. “Make it count for eternity.”

Over and over, students used the word “awesome” as they struggled to explain the powerful presence of God they felt during the event. One student called it a “burning bush experience.”

"This is awesome," said Emily Wooldridge, a student at Texas A&M University. "When I hear stuff that people say about atheism and agnosticism, it seems so empty and depressing. I'm so blessed to be a Christian, not just for normal reasons, but because the light is not anything to be ashamed of."

"I've experienced a cure," Becker added. "I feel I can go back, and I can talk to people now, people who don't know God, and not be scared of what they're going to be thinking of me. Because that doesn't matter."

When OneDay ended around 6 p.m. on Saturday, participants just stood still for about 10 minutes, Pastor said.

That's partly what Giglio hoped would result from the meeting: that a generation of college students would know how it feels to be captivated by the glory of God. In his journal at OneDay's Web site at www.oneyday.org, Giglio writes:

"As one of our worship leaders so clearly put know what it means to know Jesus as friend, but we have no idea what it means to stand utterly amazed and in awe of His awesome glory.

"I couldn't help but think about what followed Solomon's prayer dedicating the new temple [in 2 Chr. 7:1-3]:

"'When Solomon had finished praying, fire came down from heaven and consumed the burnt offering and the sacrifices; and the glory of the Lord filled the temple.

"'And the priests could not enter the house of the Lord,

because the glory of the Lord had filled the Lord's house.

"When all the children of Israel saw how the fire came down, and the glory of the Lord on the temple, they bowed their faces to the ground on the pavement, and worshiped and praised."

Perhaps as a result of OneDay, that posture will begin to mark this generation. Organizers also hoped students would leave with a new courage to become missionaries at home.

"I think a major part of what the results will be is going back to campuses," said John Mark Seelig, a OneDay road recruiter. "College students can go on missions trips and go for a couple of weeks on a missions trip to other nations, but they won't share across the dorm to another guy who's lost."

OneDay organizers hope students touched by God that day on the grassy field will change that forever by sharing the gospel boldly.

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