

The Gathering

of the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship of North Carolina

Bringing Baptists of North Carolina Together for Christ-Centered Ministry

Common Threads in Successful Church-Based Collegiate Ministry

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When we met for the third annual college ministry discussion at FBC Greensboro in August, there seemed to be some common threads that connected churches that are engaged in effective ministry with college students. First and foremost, there is an understanding that college ministry is all about relationships.

It is more than just having some programs for college students to join. Effective ministry must truly be about developing a relationship. Words like mentoring, patience and trust enriched the concept of how to form relationships. These concepts are true for everyone but particularly for people under thirty.

Another theme that was explored in our discussion was the idea that collegiate ministry must be seen as a mission opportunity and not simply an extension of the church's internal ministry. The days of just opening the doors and thinking students will come to us is gone. Thinking that it should be true simply does not make it true. Students need more intentional acts of invitation and hospitality, and we must be willing and able to offer them.

"College students intuitively know whether they are wanted and respond with their feet when they feel un-welcomed."

An additional issue that must be understood in a successful ministry to and with college students is that the ministry must be part of the church's overall culture: it cannot be the pet project of just a few people within the church. Students intuitively know whether they are wanted and respond with their feet when they feel un-welcomed.



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Finally, an engaging college ministry celebrates and affirms the whole ministry to and with college students, rather than angst over what the church is doing and how it is being received. Finding a way of connecting with young adults is essential and not merely an option for the church. However, it is not as mysterious and daunting as we have been told. It is about offering Christ to a group of people who want to know that they are loved and who desire the tools to know how to love others. Where better than the church for this to take place?

Then why do we find college ministry so difficult?

First, churches are notorious for lingering so long in the past that the future passes us by. Christ is the constant, not people. People and cultures change, and we have to acknowledge and adjust not the message but the vehicle by which we deliver the message. There is absolutely nothing wrong with remembering when students filled our pews and volunteered to work in our churches.

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Wanda Kidd

However, if that memory is informing how you think college ministry must or even can be done today, your ministry with them will fail. Today's students were not taken to church every time the doors opened; they do not know much about the biblical story, and they are not deeply connected to any institution. Therefore, we have to know, love and value them personally to

be able to teach them an appreciation of the things that we believe are important. They will not tell you what they are feeling immediately. That takes time. They will smile politely, and they will act like they are listening, but inside their internal monologue is, "That might be what you think, but that is not what I think. And I will just keep looking until I find a place that thinks like I think even though I have never told you what I think." DO NOT be afraid of that internal discourse; just smile back at them and say, "What do you think?" Give them space to tell you. There is a good chance they will not tell you immediately, but they will remember that you asked. Trust issues are a major barrier in this generation's life, and we must keep loving them and asking them their

opinions and then incorporate some of their thoughts into our worship, our mission activities and committees.

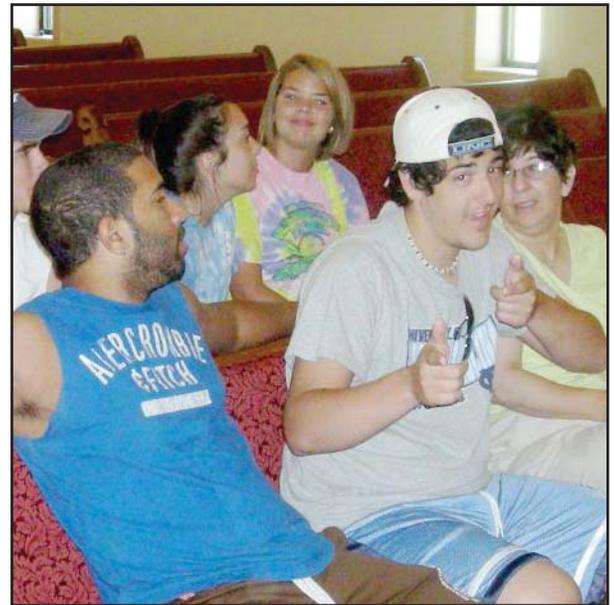
The chairman of the college committee at Mars Hill Church in Mars Hill, NC, is a young man who is under 25. The committee however, is made up of total representation of the congregation. Some are students, some are people with a relationship to the college, some are young adults and some are retired, but all have made a commitment to invest in the college students that are their closest neighbors, and it is working. Mars Hill church's pews are not full of students, but they are adopting college sports teams and showing up at their games and feeding them.

We heard similar stories at the college discussion from FBC Smithville, who invests in their home-grown students with letters and visits and a sense that their young people are not forgotten when they leave home. They are prayed for and sent care packages, and their opinion on issues count and are taken into consideration

even when they are not present. Most of their college committee could not be at the discussion because it was their back-to-school cook-out for students, and they had to stay home to make it just right.

FBC Elon has empowered their pastor to be the volunteer Baptist Student Minister at Elon. It takes up a good bit of his time, but they encourage him to minister to students because they feel called to represent Christ on that campus. FBC feeds the group regularly, but more importantly, they provide authentic hospitality by providing a welcoming place that offers no expectations until the guest decides to join with them on their journey. By giving students time to develop trust and explore their gifts, some students have joined them in working with the youth and children. However, it took time.

This is a generation who grew up with the mantra of "Do not trust strangers. Do not talk to strangers, and certainly do not let them feed you or touch you." Yet the majority of our student ministry



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revolves around politely speaking to them, hugging them at the passing of the peace, and offering them free food. These are effective techniques, but they have to trust us, and we must be trustworthy. So if you try these things, and they don't respond immediately, do not lose heart. We must speak to them week after week and learn their names, we must keep asking them if we can hug them, and when we feed them, please sit and talk to them.

Ministry with college students is life-giving to a congregation that understands that this is a calling and a mission. Conversely, churches that do not understand that young adults are the future of the church are cutting themselves off from tomorrow.

So, how do we do ministry to college students? The same way we do any ministry:

- We build relationships,
- We build trust among each other and the world beyond,
- We develop a church culture that says that this ministry is important and informs all that we do,
- We keep on, even when it is not cost-effective or fun,
- We celebrate our successes,
- We encourage young adults to seek Christ in all that they do, and
- Then we celebrate when that happens!

If you want to know if you are doing ministry to student, well, ask them. If they trust you, they will tell you. If you love them, you will listen.

To learn more about CBFNC's Ministry to College Students, visit www.cbfnc.org.