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These students who pray together stay together

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On a recent Friday evening, in a nearly empty room in the Student Life Center at the University of Illinois Springfield, Todd Magruder reflects on the early days of the Christian Student Fellowship on campus.

Before UIS became a four-year university, the fellowship catered to upperclassmen and graduate students at what was then known as Sangamon State University.

"One change we've seen over the years," Magruder says, "is the reception of our group. I think it took awhile for the university to warm up to us.

"On the other hand, it is the best environment to come into."

Magruder, one of two campus ministers, then mentions the apostle Paul's speech at Areopagus, which is detailed in the Acts of the Apostles. Areopagus, in Greece, was where the great thinkers gathered and discussed the latest ideas, Magruder explains, much like the university.

He notes that some were contemptible toward Paul's message, while others joined him in the nascent Christian movement and became believers.

"The university," Magruder says, "is supposed to be a place where different ideas are discussed and chewed on and debated, and we feel like it's the perfect environment for the person of Jesus to be discussed and thought about. We know not everyone at UIS is going to decide to follow Jesus, but one of the things we want to do is to give every student an opportunity to wrestle with the ideas of who Jesus said he was.

"Too often, issues of faith are completely dismissed in the academic setting, and our hope is that every student would have an opportunity to at least consider the claims of Christ for himself or herself, not what a professor tells them or what they hear their friends say, but to give Jesus a fair shake before they leave the university."

Like Paul at Areopagus, Christian Student Fellowship has its share of followers. Its Friday night services, which include praise and worship and a sermon, typically draw 50 to 60 students from the UIS campus and neighboring Lincoln Land Community College, from a variety of faith backgrounds.

They also run the gamut in their faith experience. Some students were active in youth groups. Others were "under-churched." And others are seeking some kind of spirituality, Magruder says.

Students can take part in smaller Bible study classes and mission outreaches — both locally, at Washington Street Mission and Inner City Mission, and out of the country.

Students have built houses in Juarez, Mexico, and worked at an orphanage in Nairobi, Kenya.

Magruder says that while the CSF staff encourages students to find their own church homes on Sundays, he acknowledges that for many students, the Friday service "is their church experience."

"Bigger than themselves"

Like many students, Debra Tudor was invited to a CSF service by friends. She admits she didn't know what to expect.

The junior social work major from Bunker Hill says she attended church with her family before coming to UIS, but "wasn't sure how to carry that into my college life."

For Rachel Kortkamp, there was a bit of angst about what the college experience might mean regarding her faith.

"I wanted to make sure I maintained my relationship with God (after leaving home)," says Kortkamp, a sophomore at Lincoln Land who is from Alton. "I was worried about that."

With new people and new surroundings, Kortkamp felt "I would follow the crowd and leave God behind. There's a lot more temptation in college. I wanted to stay with God. I had that motivation."

Kortkamp got involved with a CSF Bible study at Lincoln Land and then started attending the services at UIS.

She says she has friends who support her involvement with CSF and her local church, Lakeside Christian, and others who don't.

"I prayed a whole lot to keep that faith with God," says Kortkamp, who plans to transfer to Murray State University in the fall.

David Lasley, a CSF campus minister and one of the song leaders at its worship services, says some students can come to college with a negative view of church, usually from a bad personal experience.

"For them, it's hard to believe there's a group whose primary goal isn't to make everybody feel bad," Lasley says. "They desire an authentic relationship. They want to be part of something bigger than themselves.

"They come (here) because they begin to realize that other answers aren't meaningful."

Emily Welch says she's talked to students outside of CSF who have shown a spiritual side, but "they don't want to act out on it. They make up their own religion that revolves around their own desires and wants."

Welch, a senior visual arts major from Barry, says her faith is more active through CSF and being involved with its leadership team, small group studies and mission trips.

That experience has also made Welch decide to pursue a career in some phase of ministry.

Debra Tudor says CSF originally settled on Friday night services because of class scheduling.

But students at church on a Friday night?

"To see college students give up their Friday nights to worship Jesus is encouraging," Tudor says. "You know God is present at this campus when you see 50 college kids give their Friday night to him."

Hope for something more

Todd Magruder says he's as excited about campus ministry now as he was when he helped start CSF in 1993.

Back then, Sangamon State was an upper division university for juniors and seniors and graduate students. Now, as part of the University of Illinois system, it's a four-year university with dorms for undergraduate students.

"When we started, it was a whole different ballgame," Magruder says. "At first, you had this feeling that administration was wondering 'Who are these guys? What are they doing here?'"

"Now that it's a four-year university, there is more of a sense of a real college, with a real on-campus community."

Not that Magruder and Lasley haven't had to work for students. CSF is a recognized student club and has the university's approval to do mailings. The group participates in Club Day and helps students move into their dorms.

"We try to make the first week a lot of fun, with cookouts and ice cream," Magruder says. "Food is always good for college students."

Along the way, Magruder and his staff try to help students nurture a relationship with Christ.

"College is where students become their own person, start owning their own values," Magruder says. "We hold out Jesus as a viable option for them.

"For some students, we hold out the hope that he will be more than that."

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Christian Student Fellowship (CSF)

Where: on the campus of the University of Illinois Springfield

Founded: 1993

Staff: Todd Magruder and David Lasley (Gretchen Magruder and Lindsey Lasley are volunteers)

Support: CSF is an officially recognized club at UIS. Salaries for Todd Magruder and David Lasley come from a consortium of Springfield area churches.