

## How to Start a Campus Ministry

Jesus commanded, “As you are going, make disciples of all nations...” There are few places where you can reach “all nations” in one setting as in the university setting.

Are you deliberating starting a campus ministry? There are many things to consider. In this article, you will read the brutal truth of what it takes to start a campus ministry, I will share how God worked through this process to start a campus ministry at Penn State University and a highlight that was possible because of God.

### What it will take: **Prayer.**

First and foremost, nothing will get started in God’s kingdom without God leading. Campus ministry is not an exception. Starting a campus ministry is extremely time consuming and wearisome. For every one thing you can celebrate, there will be a few things that bring you back down to reality. For this reason, prayer is vital to any launch.

At Penn State, I prayed in the sanctuary, at home, and as I walked the campus. I had a team of people designated to pray for the start of a campus ministry. As I remind God’s people: prayer is not the least we can do, it is the best thing we can do.

### What it will take: **Understanding.**

Starting a campus ministry is introducing change in the life at the university, congregation, and all those involved. It is not wise to change something you don’t know. So, what do you need to know? This was my approach at Penn State:

*University* – As I did my prayer walk across the campus, I got a feel for the atmosphere. Who hung out where? When did people walk what areas? And so on... I also talked to the appropriate administrations to understand the requirements of establishing a new spiritual organization. Many universities have websites to guide you. At Penn State, there is a specific “Office of Student Activities” that I spoke with. The title of the office may vary, such as Student Affairs, Student Life, Student Involvement, and the like. The staff want to work with you, because the more students they can list as involved with groups, the better the university looks.

*Congregation* – The local congregation, Good Shepherd Lutheran Church, was 3.1 miles from the center of campus. At the time, the congregation was mostly white with a mix of blue- and white-collar workers. The average member age was roughly 40, making it a relatively young congregation. Good Shepherd is situated in a town that doubles in population when Penn State is in session, making it a university town. Since the church building was not within walking distance, my wife and I rented an apartment a couple of blocks south of campus to have a place for students to gather.

*Students* – Only two students from Penn State attended worship at Good Shepherd before attempting to launch a campus ministry. To understand the students, I needed to “become” one of the students. I toured the campus with students, listened to protesters and observed the students, found out the most walked paths to classes, and anything else that would open up doors to conversations and relationships.

### What will it take: **Recruitment.**

You are not in this alone! Most likely, there are many LCMS students already attending the university God is leading you to start a campus ministry on. Most congregations in our Synod know where their students are attending. Ask! Ask the congregations and ask the university if you will be allowed to see what students marked “Lutheran” as religious preference.

Penn State is in Pennsylvania, which is mainly Eastern District. I composed a letter and sent it to every congregation in the Eastern District via snail mail and email. I also picked up the phone and called those congregations asking if they had any students attending Penn State. I was connected to a handful of students. I met with each student individually to cast the vision and encourage success by mentioning the other students I was already meeting with. Oh, and I bought them coffee, ice cream, or some other kind of treat for meeting with me.

What was the vision? Simple. A place to meet with other students who are curious about God, learning through God's Word, and asking other students to do the same.

From that, God gathered 5 students even before the first day of classes!

In addition, I personally talked with students on campus as I walked around, used Facebook as a resource to build relationships (this was the main social media then), and continually talked with each college student who walked into the church on Sunday mornings.

#### What will it take: **Relationships.**

A few questions to keep in mind to develop relationships:

- *Where can you meet for students to feel comfortable?* We began by meeting in a Starbucks.
- *How can you set the tone, so the students know what the campus ministry is all about?* I wanted the students to connect to each other and God. When we met, before we studied God's Word, we introduced ourselves (name, major, year in school, hometown, and favorite hobby [any question to create connection]). After studying God's Word, we would play a game (Cards, Settlers of Catan, Spoons, etc.).
- *How do you get more students?* Challenge the students. Invite one student to the next event. We only had one event, a weekly Bible study. I followed up with the students 2-3 times during that week as reminders. I also helped in what to say. The group grew quickly! By the end of the year, there were 10 students active weekly, and a total of 25 students involved in some way. The greatest highlight was one student who became a Christian through the campus ministry. I was honored in giving him his first Bible, along with two Mandarin/English Bibles so he can witness to his parents. A little over a year after that interaction, his family (and extended) of almost 20 people were baptized into the family of God!

#### What will it take: **Starting the Organization.**

Each university has their own way of starting an organization. You will need to discover this through the campus administration (guidelines above). This part is the least fun but is necessary to gain all the benefits of a recognized organization on campus. Sharing the progress with the students creates excitement, which fuels outreach.

There are other questions that are needed to sort through before launching a campus ministry. There are many resources, but the best are your fellow campus leaders. I was in contact with Pastor Marty Marks from Northern Illinois University, Pastor Greg Fairrow, Pastor Dave Dressel from Michigan State University, Pastor Mark Couch from Western Michigan University, and Pastor Jay Winters from Florida State University (also the LSF pastoral advisor at the time). Positions may have changed since, but their help and prayers were the extra encouragement I needed. Get connected with LCMS-U and Lutheran Campus Mission Association (LCMA) Remember, you are not alone, and these organizations provide resources for you and your campus ministry, while connecting you to the wider campus ministry network.

Lastly, we promise to offer the best thing we can to you: Prayer.



#### About the Contributor

Pastor Brad Urlaub is the president of Lutheran Campus Mission Association and is now serving St. Mark Lutheran Church in Janesville, WI. He is beginning to launch a new campus ministry at University of Wisconsin-Whitewater campus. He is a certified trainer through Dynamic Church Planting International (DCPI) in Church Planting Essentials, Churches Planting Churches, and Structured for Missions. Pastor Brad is married to Sabrina since 2007. They and their daughter make their home in Janesville, WI.