

Is campus ministry worth the effort?

I remember when I was a college student in 1958. I attended a school in central Michigan, which was four or five hours away from my family home. Going to college was a huge adventure for me. I worked for my room and board by living with a family and helping out with the housework. Sixty-three years later I can still recall my excitement and my fear.

A Lutheran Church was not far from campus. I decided to attend a welcome party and church worship. At that time in my life I had a lot of questions about my Christian faith. I had even more questions after my sociology professor ridiculed the notion that a teenager could be the mother of God. He said the whole idea was “bourgeois.” I wanted to talk about my questions and doubts with the pastor, but he was too tired to answer. He simply told me to believe because he believed. I don’t blame him. He was too overwhelmed to have the energy to talk to a college student.

Two years later I transferred to the University of Iowa in Iowa City, Iowa. I wanted to see if I could survive in a big school. Again I decided to attend worship. I went to St. Paul’s Lutheran Chapel, a campus ministry church close to campus. At first I tried choir, but since I don’t have a good singing voice, I tried the Sunday morning college Bible class led by Rev. John Constable. You cannot imagine my joy when Pastor Constable patiently answered all my questions. I’ll never forget what it meant to find a campus ministry where someone had enough time to share God’s Word so caringly. It made a major difference in my life! Not only did I find answers, I also met my husband, Jim, in Bible class. His best friend, who attended St. Paul’s, introduced us. Sixty years later we both remember this meeting at the chapel.

I never expected to be able to give back what God gave me through Pastor Constable’s campus ministry, but God did. Jim and I started a Bible study for college students in 1984. A significant number of international students attended, and working with internationals (most of whom were not Christians) became our main emphasis. By 1992 the then English District President, the Rev. Dr. Roger Pittelko, asked me to be parish administrator and campus ministry director at All Saints. At that time we could not afford a full-time pastor, but my brother, Rev. Allan E. Opper, served as our pastor as if we were his only congregation. He gave his whole heart to this grateful congregation. I gladly worked under his shepherding. This was a wonderful opportunity because All Saints was able to continue our outreach to both campus and community.

Although I’d been a substitute teacher in the public schools, with my husband’s full support, I accepted the Bishop’s invitation. As a result, I have had the best job in the world for the last thirty-five years. I get to share faith and friendship with students. I get to love them too, and, because they are far from home, to encourage them and guide them in their daily lives. Years later they still call me to talk about their lives because campus ministry has had the time and energy to answer their questions.

Today, more than ever, campus ministry needs to be on our campuses. The world has always assaulted faith and always will, but the assault is stronger than ever today. More “no religion” students are on campus, and more students who used to go to church with their families know nothing about Jesus today. Many actually believe that Easter is a kid’s holiday in which the main activity is receiving chocolate bunnies from parents.

Yes, the mission field is Africa, Southeast Asia, and Germany, but the mission field should also include our American college campuses. Kenzeburo from Japan came to know what Easter is really all about; so did Shannon from China.

This month our dear pastor, Rev. Larry Loree Jr., leaves campus ministry at ASLC. We thank God for this pastor who was on loan from God. We pray that God will send a new pastor who will also want to share the Gospel with college students just the way he did. He gave the students the answers they needed. Thank you, Reverend Loree! God bless you.

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