

## Why a soccer game matters

All Saints' first student meal of the school year was on Labor Day. We were elated that Slippery Rock University students had seen our posters and signs inviting them to a free, homemade Korean meal.

The students who came included several SRU soccer players. They had spotted the sign outside of our church and student center. They quickly agreed to come for the meal. Foremost it was their first meal at All Saints. They felt very welcome, and very pleased with Jo Dublin's excellent cooking. They smiled with pleasure.



Before leaving the meal, the students were offered boxes of leftovers to carry back to their dorms. We told them our door was always open to them. We let them know we would be calling them soon. They were so enthusiastic about All Saints' friendly welcome that they called out as they left an invitation to me saying: "Mrs. Mennell, come to our soccer game Wednesday."

All Saints campus ministry is always looking for ways to get to know the students. This is why the soccer players' invitation to the game meant so much. My husband and I did go to the game so they could see that All Saints wants to be a family away from home for them.

Getting to meet and know students is crucial to reaching out with faith. We need a chance to meet as friends in order to hear what they believe and to tell them what we Christians believe. The Labor Day meal gave us the chance to go to a soccer game, but more importantly to have the opportunity to win the students' trust so they would give us their phone numbers.

It is very important to get students' phone numbers. Having those numbers allows us to call them. When I called the soccer players I immediately identified myself telling students that I was "the lady they talked to at the Labor Day meal." That's all it took. Hearing this they relaxed. They listened to the invitation to have lunch, a free lunch at a local restaurant students enjoy.

The students were pleased to have a call and this includes all who came to the dinner, not just soccer players. Some were ready to set a date for lunch. Others asked me to call back so they'd have time to work it into their schedule. They were interested in our invitation.

Getting the opportunity to know students takes a lot of time and may seem pointless, but it is not. The Holy Spirit may use these times to plant and grow seeds of spiritual understanding. There is no magic in inviting students to lunches, trips to see the Amish, rides to Walmart.

I met my first Egyptian student when I called him shortly after the Korean meal. It was like meeting an old friend. He met me at the Lutheran student center so that we could walk into town for lunch. He got to see our sanctuary, meet Rev. Jacob Deal and church member Peter Rigney. He chose to eat at Ginger Hill restaurant and we walked there together.

The time we spent together was so easy. He told me about being born in Egypt, being taught Arabic by his loving parents, and about his passion for soccer. We talked about how he feels like a citizen of two countries, believes Islam and Christianity are similar, and told of his desire to make his family proud of him. I shared that I would welcome the time to talk more with him. I said there might be similarities in our faiths, but that I would enjoy telling him of the differences.

We enjoyed our conversation about his life. He will try to attend another student meal. Since next Sunday Pastor Deal will be taking college students out for lunch after church, I suggested that he might consider coming to see how we worship and then go out to eat lunch with the other students.

As we walked back to campus, he told me the next soccer game would be a conference game, and would we come? And yes, Jim and I did go to the game! This friendship could grow.

Even if a student rejects our invitation, it is still worth making the invitation. Recently a student returned campus ministry's call. She said she just did not have time to have lunch because she was working herself through college, and therefore had no time for lunch. She described how she volunteers as a mentor to new students on campus and how she is helping support a food pantry for students who needed food. I immediately told her I'd like to learn about these two activities from her, even if she had only ten or fifteen minutes to give me.

Besides telling me of her heavy schedule, she described herself as "agnostic." She said her parents were religious and wanted her to be, but she could not be. I answered that I would like to learn about why she cannot believe. I would listen and share any time she would like to talk. She did not slam the door shut. She hung up feeling that she is still valued and would still be taken out for lunch – faith or no faith.

This call may seem useless, but it's not. She'll always remember that she was called by Christians who care. All Saints will pray for her and for all the students we get to meet. What a great opportunity God gives to campus ministry.

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