

# Faith in the Field

## An hour before Sunday worship begins

at Pres House, on the campus of the University of Wisconsin-Madison, fifth-year senior Chelsea Cornelius is busy rearranging the furniture. "We don't sit in rows," she explains. "It's too easy to become passive if you're sitting on a pew in the back of the room. We create clusters of four or five chairs, with little tables in the middle." Sometimes she puts props on the tables – pens, notecards, pictures – that invite participants to respond to questions the preacher asks as part of the weekly message. "Worship isn't a performance here. It's something we all do together."

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Weekly worship at Pres House in Madison, Wisconsin (below) and at St. Thomas Aquinas Catholic Church in West Lafayette, Indiana (above) is just one part of multi-dimensional approaches to campus ministry.



Cornelius and her fellow students have found at Pres House not only a vibrant worshipping community but also an active place to discover how God is calling them to live their deepest commitments in the classroom and beyond graduation. Pres House is one of more than 50 Christian

organizations around the nation participating in Lilly Endowment's Campus Ministry Theological Exploration of Vocation initiative (CMTEV). They are inviting students at some of the biggest public universities to question, reflect and engage. Along the way these young people are becoming a new generation of Christian leaders.

Cornelius stumbled upon Pres House three years ago when she was looking for a place where she could ask questions about faith. She hadn't grown up belonging to a church, yet after spending one summer at a Christian camp she had become a believer, but one with "a lot of big questions about God," she recalls. "Pres House struck me as a place that invited questions and would listen to me even when I didn't have everything figured out."

**After moving into the Pres House apartment building** that adjoins the church, she became part of the campus ministry's leadership team, serving as an intern. She credits the experience with helping prepare her for the future, which likely includes attending seminary and pursuing ordination in the Presbyterian

Church. "We talk about large schools such as the University of Wisconsin as being so secular," she says. "But that's a bad rap. I think God is alive and well on this campus."

## Discerning a call to serve

Others agree, and they detect new interest among 21st century students in exploring the connection between faith and fields of study. "I don't know when it began," says the Rev. Patrick Baikuskas, O.P., pastor and director of campus ministry at St. Thomas



Aquinas – The Catholic Center at Purdue in West Lafayette, Indiana. Known affectionately as St. Tom’s, the parish serves some 13,000 Catholic students. “We’ve always preached about the importance of students asking themselves, ‘Where is God calling me to be?’ But now that question seems to be resonating with them in different ways.”

To encourage growth among faith-based organizations such as Pres House and St. Tom’s, Lilly Endowment launched the CMTEV initiative in 2012. What began with grants to faith groups serving students at five public universities grew to 21 programs in 2013. In 2014, a total of 52 ministries were working in 27 states nationwide, reflecting a diversity of Christian traditions – Baptist, Catholic, Lutheran, Presbyterian, Reform and United Methodist. The grants of up to \$100,000 each are helping religious groups build their capacities to identify and nurture future leaders for the church and society. The hope is that some students will experience a call to pastoral ministry and that many others will discern God’s call to a variety of professions where their actions, on and off the job, will reflect their faith.

“Someone described millennials as a generation that wants to become millionaires and also save the world,” says Mark Elsdon, executive director of Pres House, a ministry of the Presbyterian Church USA. “There’s a lot of truth in that. Young people today want to succeed financially, and they want their work to have a positive impact on others. They don’t see the two things in conflict. But they need encouragement to find their way.”

Recent scholarly research about college students confirms this insight, says Barbara Wheeler, former president of Auburn Theological Seminary in New

York and director of Pathways to Seminary, a project that explored the factors that inspire young people to consider religious leadership.

Funded by the Endowment, Wheeler and her Pathways to Seminary research team learned that strong faith communities that tend to the lives of college students are instrumental in forming new leaders. “Students who find resources to sustain their faith during the college years have a distinctive profile,” says Wheeler. “They are more likely than others seriously to consider seminary and ministry or to choose some other helping profession that they define as a faith-based call. Often, they find the resources to help them make these serious, sometimes sacrificial, choices in campus ministry programs that offer role models, mentors, theological grounding and – very importantly – peers with similar commitments who support and encourage them.”

### From landing place to launching pad

Campus ministers are seeing the research play out first-hand. Working with students at the University of Virginia, the Center for Christian Study is strengthening its intimate afternoon study groups that blend faith and vocation. With funds

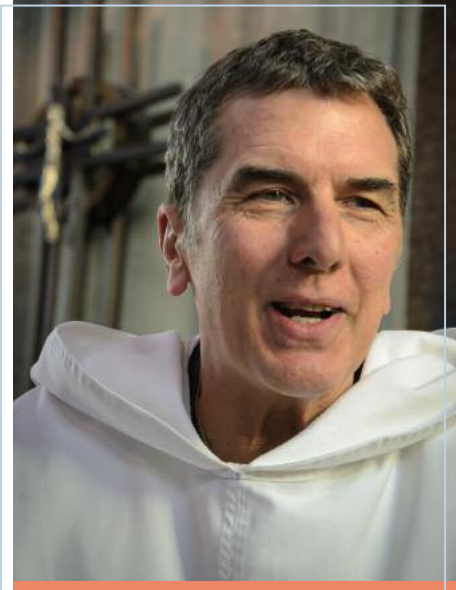


from the Endowment, the Center is nurturing small-group discussions on the Charlottesville campus. Sessions focus on specific academic fields: “Faith, Reason and Science;” “Politics and Theology;” and “Faith, Economics and the Environment.” The vibe is casual in the Center, a converted house near campus. Snack



Michael Kuhn, a Purdue University student (above), takes part in a small-group discussion at St. Thomas Aquinas’ campus ministry in West Lafayette, Indiana. Mallory Chua (below), a Purdue student, attends mass at St. Thomas Aquinas.





breaks invite interaction among participants from different groups.

"There's a kind of hum in the study center with people talking about important things in a variety of rooms in the house," says Bill Wilder, executive director of the Center. "We schedule these meetings on Friday, when students are coming off a week of classes but haven't gotten into full relaxation mode yet. It's a nice tail end to the academic week."

More random are the weekly teas at the University of Wisconsin's Pres House. Ginger Morgan, director of residential community, hosts the afternoon events and invites any of the apartment building's 250 residents to stop by for refreshments and conversation that she describes as "totally unprogrammed." With a clientele that is culturally, religiously and ethnically diverse, she facilitates discussions that range from the superficial to the intense. "We walk alongside students as they wrestle with everything from nitty-gritty daily stuff to

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There's new energy among students to discover how God is calling them to live, study, work and serve, says the Rev. Patrick Baikauskas (above), campus minister at St. Thomas Aquinas.

bigger questions about what to do with the rest of their lives," says Morgan. "One of the appealing pieces of being at a large state university like this is that we offer a place apart from the secular classroom where students can have those important, faith-related conversations. We give them a place to land."

Sometimes the landing place becomes a launching pad that takes students to unexpected destinations. When Joe Robaidek, a senior at the University of Wisconsin, was looking for an apartment last year he chose Pres House simply because some of its residents had a spare room to rent. An email from Morgan introduced him to the opportunity of an internship at a nearby church. He decided the internship would be a welcome distraction from the grind of classes and resume-building activities.

But the assignment – helping immigrants transition into American society – has proven to be life-changing for this microbiology major. Robaidek is rethinking life after graduation. Ministry is on the table; missionary work is a possibility; lay leadership in a local congregation is highly likely. "I want to explore my options," he says.

Regardless of whether or not a student discerns a call to full-time religious work, the message from the campus experience is clear: ministry is no spectator sport; it can play out in any field. Indeed, the future of the church depends on a new generation of young leaders bringing diverse perspectives and gifts, creative commitment and innovation to faith communities.

### Breaking through the chatter

These are lessons that the CMTEV initiative is exploring further as it builds on the Endowment's earlier initiative, Programs for the Theological Exploration of Voca-

tion. Launched in 2000, it provided grants to 88 church-related colleges and universities to help their campuses become places where students discover faith-filled lives of purpose and meaning. Out of that initiative, the national Network for Vocation in Undergraduate Education emerged in 2009. The network of 187 private colleges and universities links like-minded campus ministries, professors and administrators in the ongoing work of exploring faith and calling at their schools.

Like these earlier efforts, CMTEV is supporting programs that keep students in touch with their faith during the pivotal undergraduate years. The projects are providing mentors, hosting retreats, creating living communities and offering internships for exploring careers in churches and other faith-based settings. "It's very difficult for students to take steps toward ministry or faith-based nonprofit work if they've never been able to try it," says Elsdon.

Because public institutions tend to have large enrollments, the number and variety of activities vying for attention on these campuses are daunting. This translates into a major challenge for campus ministries that must break through the chatter and ignite interest. "We have to be constantly on our toes looking for new ways to engage students," says Baikauskas, who estimates the number of Purdue's clubs and organizations at 600. "Our programming can't be static because the situation is so dynamic."

Ministry staffs also need to be flexible enough to retool programs that aren't working. For example, St. Tom's used a portion of its Endowment grant to restructure a series called "Exploring Faith" that had been minimally successful. The funds enabled the ministry to bring in a nationally known speaker who laid the foundation for "Show Me the



Way,” an eight-week series of gatherings that links scripture and vocational reflection. “It turned into a wonderful conversation,” says Dee Bernhardt, assistant director of campus ministry. “We’ve learned that the more personal we can make the conversations, the more successful they are.”

There’s a powerful opportunity here for congregations, parishes and other faith communities to learn what it means to be a Christian community today. But just as importantly, this generation of young people needs to step in and lead transformation for the sake of the church’s future, says Baikauskas.

“What makes me sad is when a former student calls me after graduation to say that he’s settled in his first job but he can’t find a church as welcoming as St. Tom’s,” he says. “My response is: ‘Then make it like St. Tom’s! Don’t sit in the back pew and do nothing. Take the experiences that you’ve had on campus and put them into practice wherever you are. That’s what you are called to do.’”



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Pres House, a ministry serving University of Wisconsin students in Madison, is rooted in an apartment complex that builds community around conversation, faith and service.

## To Be Continued: The Religious Lives of Young People



For more than a decade, University of Notre Dame sociologist Christian Smith (left) has been following American

millennials. His mission: to chart the landscape of their religious lives and offer insights to church leaders who must reach and engage them to keep their communities vibrant in the decades to come.

**The National Study of Youth and Religion (NSYR)** began in 2002 when Smith led a team of sociologists in surveying and interviewing adolescents (ages 13 to 17) and their parents. They followed up with the same cohort in late adolescence (ages 16 to 20) and again when the young people were entering early adulthood (ages 18 to 23). In 2013 Smith and his team wrapped up field work with those men and women in their mid- and late-20s, an age when people have historically moved into careers and formed families of their own. In 2014 the team began analyzing the results of this fourth and final wave of surveys and interviews, and in 2015 researchers plan to release results.

“In this fourth wave, a major focus of ours is on understanding how family formation – settling into a career, having children, etc. – affects their religious faith and practice,” Smith says. “We want to learn whether or not transitioning from emerging adulthood into ‘real’ adulthood is accompanied by greater religious commitment and practice. In short, can communities of faith count on young people returning for greater involvement when they begin to settle down or not?”