

# **CAMPUS RELIGIOUS ACTIVITIES, CHURCH PARTICIPATION AND STATUS-PRESTIGE FACTORS**

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Are students interested in campus religious groups of the type that have usually been provided by campus ministries? Does their present participation, or lack of participation, relate to their past involvements in the church? Do their current behavior patterns relate in any way to the over-all status and prestige-granting patterns among their student peers?

These were among the questions I sought to answer through a sociological survey of the total student body at the University of Wyoming, Laramie, in March, 1971. The study was undertaken in a graduate class in social research methods with some financial assistance from United Ministries in Higher Education, Rocky Mountain Region, and the University Common Ministry in Laramie, where I was a staff member at the time.

The University of Wyoming has around 8,000 students and is a fairly typical residential state university with a rather comprehensive curriculum for its small size. In some ways it may be more parochial than most, but it does represent the type of university where historically the bulk of the church's campus ministries have operated.

The study was a random sample survey of the entire University of Wyoming (UW) student body from the Fall, 1970 student directory for its universe. Out of 105 questionnaires mailed out, 62.8% (66) were returned. This was approximately a 1% sample of the student body. Using a Z test for statistical significance, it was found that the sample was representative at the .05 level. In other words the responses of the sample students represent the total student body at least 95% of the time as of October, 1970.

## **CAMPUS PARTICIPATION**

At the time of the survey, only 13.6% of the students were participating in any student religious fellowship. Of the 86.4% not participating, 27.3% of the sample expressed an interest in such groups, but indicated that lack of time was the major reason they had not gotten involved. In other words, 40.9% of the student body were involved or at least had some interest in such activities if other factors had not prevented their participation.

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Of the small minority who were active in campus religious activities, they were most likely to be 18-22 years old, female, single, lower-classmen, education or science majors, live in the dormitories, and be from a small Wyoming town. Almost all those who were active were Roman Catholics, Latter Day Saints or conservative to fundamentalist Protestant. Those who made up the interested, but not participating, group were largely from six "mainline" Protestant denominations other than Lutheran. One factor in the low participation for this group was the fact that the campus ministry agency at UW related to this constituency was not operating in a style that provided a traditional student "membership" group. There is no way to evaluate how strong their interest was or whether the absence of such a group for them was any major factor in their non-participation. Past attendance patterns when such a group was offered did not indicate that their interest was strong enough to generate participation.

Students who were either participating or expressing some interest in traditional religious fellowships were asked to rank various functions such groups provide by their personal interest. The most preferred activities of campus religious groups were ranked by these students in order of preference as:

worship

programs (speakers, discussions, films, etc.)

friendships, fellowship, recreation

encounter and sensitivity groups.

The activities which the students ranked least in their interest were evangelism, conferences, encounter and sensitivity groups (apparently students are either strongly for or against such groups) and study groups or classes.

Freshmen make up the largest group already involved in religious fellowships, but there is not much interest among freshmen beyond those already involved. As you move up the class level, the actual participation goes down but the amount of interest goes up sharply until you hit the senior and graduate level where the interest is almost as low as the participation. This corresponds with the statement of a student leader who said, "The freshmen come down here to party. As they become sophomores and juniors, the parties got old-hat and some do get interested in other involvements." If there is any potential for expansion of traditional religious groups, it would seem it lies in the sophomore and junior years.

## OTHER RELIGIOUS PATTERNS

While religious *activity* at the university is minimal, the study indicated that most students are not anti-religious. In labeling themselves as to theological position, the students perceived themselves to be:

48% — conservative-orthodox-fundamentalist

32% — liberal

15% — agnostic

3% — atheist

Half of the first category (24%) were students who chose another option that "they did not understand the categories or labels." Since almost all of this group were either Catholic or Mormon, they have been included in the orthodox group on the assumption that such labels are irrelevant to the normal experience of members of those groups. Relative to national student surveys on religious positions, this study indicates that UW is more religiously conservative than the average university, but this makes the low participation in campus religious groups even more difficult to explain.

The survey also asked students how they perceived the influence of religion to have changed in their own lives since entering college. Twenty-nine percent said the influence of religion had increased, another 29% said it had decreased, and 40% saw no change.

A more complicated question asked the students to choose from a list of seven possible consequences of losing one's faith. Less than a third, 27.3% said that loss of faith was unimportant since faith is not a crucial factor in life. The largest group, 42.4% chose the reply that a loss of faith was serious because faith is a prime way of coping with life meaningfully. Then 7.6% said a loss of faith jeopardized personal salvation. Three options that students could have chosen related faith and the consequences of loss of faith to intellectual maturity and theological growth in understanding. Only 9% chose one of the options indicating they felt a loss of faith somehow would be a disadvantage in intellectual growth.

It would appear that the largest group of students saw the importance of religious faith in their life to be "instrumental" or functional in particular ways, and the next largest group seemed to be indifferent to the role of faith in their lives. Neither of these positions would be supportive of an ongoing, active involvement in religious activities.

## CHURCH PARTICIPATION

Participation in congregational worship services had the following patterns:

CHURCH WORSHIP ATTENDANCE		
	Percent While Growing Up	Percent Now
Once a week or more	54.5	18.2
2 or 3 times monthly	15.2	7.6
Once a month	7.6	15.2
Several times yearly	7.6	15.2
Hardly ever	10.6	21.2
Never	4.5	22.7

While a surprising 41% of the students still attend church at least once a month, the larger share of students attend only casually or not at all in a reversal of their childhood patterns. It was also found that those participating strongly in campus religious fellowships also attended church most regularly.

A significant item was that 18% of the students were involved in a non-campus church in the community but not in campus religious activities. Another 4.5% had no religious involvement but indicated some contact with campus ministers. This would indicate that about one fourth of the student body were being reached by local churches or through informal campus ministry efforts rather than through the student center program.

In the local church, the junior and senior high youth fellowship are the closest counterpart to the traditional campus ministry student fellowship or center. So the pattern of past involvements in those fellowships was examined:

PAST YOUTH GROUP ATTENDANCE		
	Junior Hi Percent	Senior Hi Percent
Once a week or more	27.3	22.7
2 or 3 times monthly	16.7	10.6
Once a month	4.5	4.5
Several times yearly	6.1	6.1
Hardly ever	12.1	16.7
Never	27.3	34.8
No group provided	6.1	4.5

Though the above pattern was based on what the students re-

ported rather than hard data, the pattern is as most pastors find it — a steady drop-off in youth participation. Of those who reach the university, 48.5% were active at least once a month in junior high groups, 37.8% were still that active in senior high groups, but only 13.6% of the UW college student body were participating in what would be the rough equivalent on the campus, though many are still participating in religious worship elsewhere.

The relationship between current religious activities of students and their past participation in church youth activities seem to be one way only. Those who are active in campus religion now, were active in the past, but most of those formerly active are no longer participating in traditional religious activities provided by campus ministries.

Students were also asked to indicate the types of contacts they had with any kind of organized religion in Laramie. In general approximate figures, it was found that 10% of the students were highly involved, another 15% dabble in campus religion without much ongoing involvement, another 20% were involved in off-campus churches, and the remaining 55% did not indicate any contact at all.

#### PEER GROUP MILIEU

It seems clear that students are not participating in campus religious groups to any degree at all, yet the larger share of them were active in church affairs while growing up. Neither do they show any real hostility toward religion or occasional participation in worship. The study turned to another area — the peer group milieu of the student — to find other factors that might begin to account for this lack of collegiate participation.

The student comes to college from a diverse cultural milieu where the pressures for and against church participation are mixed. While there has been some decline in the place of religion in many communities, church participation is still generally seen as a positive behavior pattern. In addition for the college-bound youth, youth fellowship participation is evaluated as a plus on scholarship application — especially if he has shown some leadership ability in the group. While his high school peers may give a negative evaluation to youth fellowship participation, thereby accounting for some of the drop-off from junior high age, it is also true in many smaller communities that the church youth fellowship is one important area of social life in the youth culture. Parental pressure to participate in youth fellowship can also be strong. In other words, before college the student's role-definitions and pressures from his milieu are often very positive toward church participation including youth fellowship.

But the college student, especially at a residential university, enters a different peer group milieu. He learns very fast that there are whole new sets of role-definitions, pressures, and behavior patterns to try out.

One obvious reason for the Christian or religious student's conspicuous absence from his religious center is that he may feel the need to experience his new freedom in a kind of absolute manner, which means rejecting many of the habit patterns of his previous life. While, however, on the one hand he needs to be free, on the other, he needs to conform to the expressed or implicit expectations of the campus culture. Nowadays this culture reflects a general indifference to religion and therefore an unconcern for campus religious centers.<sup>1</sup>

The student's basic orientation and interest in religion may or may not change, but one cannot tell this from a radical shift in his behavior on entering college. A sudden falling away from church activities tells us very little about where a student is in his own religious life. Parents and pastors would not be so surprised and upset by these sudden changes if they could understand the dynamics of the student-campus culture:

A sociological assumption is that new interaction patterns will prevail over older personality structures *if* the new patterns exist in a highly integrated and functional social system. It is the suggestion of this study that the 'undergraduate culture' commonly found on college campuses is such a highly integrated and functional system. We could expect little direct relationship between value systems developed in other surroundings and actual behavior exhibited by students on campuses.<sup>2</sup>

In the individual student the reasons for non-participation are probably complex and numerous. One perception, lack of time, was already identified by the students in the questions reported above. Other individual comments revealed reasons such as unfriendly or "closed" religious groups, hypocrisy by religious group members, or "I think the student groups are a 'spoon-feeding' process. I was just never interested in them." To say that the role-definition of the student culture is the main factor in student non-participation would be simplistic. But in seeking to understand why the youth fellowship

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<sup>1</sup>Louis Stoltenberg quoted in Speier, Lamar P., "A Study of Values as Related to Church Attendance Among Episcopal Students." Laramie, University of Wyoming, Unpublished MA Thesis, Department of Sociology, 1968, p. 25f

<sup>2</sup>*Ibid.*: p. 4.

president or church scholarship winner is never seen around the college "church home away from home," we should take seriously the Danforth Foundation Study of Campus Ministry when it said: "The churches and ministers need to face the fact that what most students actually hold in highest regard in their university life is their peer-group culture. . . . The denominational centers . . . have had little effect on the peer cultures of a large campus. They cannot and do not supply the peer culture base for most students and should not entertain the illusions of doing so in the future. Most of them merely isolate religiously oriented students further from the world of campus."<sup>3</sup>

### STATUS-PRESTIGE FACTORS

In seeking the role-relationship expectations of the student cultural milieu, the relative standing of religious groups in regard to their ability to grant status and prestige to the individual — as perceived by the students themselves — was examined. Various questions were asked in this area.

They were first asked to report how they felt the entire student body preceived religious groups by ranking twelve types of student organizations in their status-prestige conferring power on the campus. They were asked to place the most prestigious organization first, the least prestigious last, and the rest on a relative scale in between. Out of the twelve groups, religious groups received a mean rank of 9.5.

They were then asked how they personally saw the ranking. They reported their own feelings to be a bit higher with a mean rank of 7.9 out of 12. This question was also asked of a non-representative group of conservative Lutheran students who were active in a religious group. They felt the student body rank would be 8.6 out of 12 which is only slightly higher than the sample, but their own personal ranking was 3.6 indicating their own commitments. An earlier study of the total student body at the University of Wyoming in 1969 found a ranking of 8.5 out of 12, one rank higher than a year later in 1970.

In other words, campus religious groups were seen to rank fairly low in terms of activities that would be of value to the student in relating to his peers — especially in terms of prestige and status. Even if the largest share of students are rather uninterested in prestige and status, it seems probable that they all would be generally aware of this "pecking order," and that this shared evaluation of religious participation would be a negative definition influencing the choice of organizational involvements.

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<sup>3</sup>Underwood, Kenneth, *The Church, The University and Social Policy* (2 volumes). Middletown, Conn., Wesleyan University Press, 1969, p. 134.

In order to examine these influences a little further, the sample was asked to relate "being religious" to what it means to "conform" in the campus culture.

CONFORMITY ON CAMPUS MEANS . . .	PERCENT CHOOSING ANSWER
Declaring oneself religious,	24.2
Declaring oneself unconcerned about religion,	60.6
Declaring oneself irreligious	6.1
No answer	7.6

In light of the low participation in religious groups, it was surprising that almost one-fourth of the students felt being religious went with campus conformity. Some of this might mean a varying interpretation of that question in relation to the individual. Significantly, 60% of the students reflected the pattern that unconcern and non-involvement in religion is the "norm" of the student cultural milieu.

The students were also asked to report the number of their close friends who were active in religious groups on campus. This was an attempt to see if there were many friendship associations that might offset this general campus pattern of unconcern. It is also known that recruitment into religious groups is often done through friendship patterns. It was found that 57.6% had no close friends active in such groups and another 27.3% knew only one or two people who attended center programs. Only 13.6%, about the number actually participating, knew three or more persons in religious groups on campus.

What emerges is a picture of a student milieu which defines religious behavior as vast indifference toward conventional religious activity. However, one should not over-emphasize this point.

The criticism was made by some of the respondents themselves that status-prestige concerns say nothing about their religious faith nor does it affect their participation. The first part of that is true: behavior does not necessarily relate directly to belief, interest or commitment. The seeming indifference of the student does not necessarily indicate his inner feelings about religion nor can it predict future behavior. Even if religious groups had ranked first in their power to grant prestige, this would not mean that other reasons for involvement such as belief, commitment, interest and other factors would not be even more important. This is simply to say that the student peer group role-definition of indifference toward religious participation is only one negative re-enforcement in a range of factors such as time available, interests, etc. If one were to explain what is happening religiously on campus, the relative place of religious groups in the "pecking order" of campus groups as perceived by students would be only one important factor to examine.



It should also be noted that there seems to be a "religious revival" on campus through the "Jesus Movement" and more organized, independent conservative and fundamentalist groups. But even these groups are anti-institutional in nature and mainly provide a program for the "true believer." As important as this phenomenon might be, its growth would not seem to negate the general findings of this study.

In light of this study, along with many others, it would seem the barriers to running a student religious center program are formidable. In terms of priorities, the question should be raised whether this is even "where the action is?"

. . . The campus religious organizations are bastions of orthodoxy. The students most involved are also most conservative in religious belief and social academic attitude. . . This gives an idea of the mind-set of the students who are the most ready volunteers for work in the general run of student religious activities. The issue in policy terms is whether they are going to set the day-to-day tone of student religious affairs, determine the allocations of funds for programs, and choose leaders to run them. . . The (campus) clergy's views are considerably different. They hide by their illusions the fact that their time and energies are captured by a minority of students, many of whom would probably find religious homes in existing parish organizations in the city if the campus religious organizations were not around.<sup>4</sup>

One indication of this study is that a more creative sharing of tasks between campus ministries and college community churches could serve a significant portion of the student body better than the center pattern. Almost one-fifth of the students were already being served by local churches. The meeting of pastoral and priestly needs of students seems to make more sense in a church fellowship rather than in a separate student work institution. One direction for campus ministry would seem to lie in this church-centered direction.

Another direction is indicated by the current literature of campus ministry. This calls for the church to take the *university itself* as the focus for its ministry to higher education rather than the students the church sends to the campus. This means total over-all involvement with students, faculty and staff in relation to what they are doing in the university itself rather than in an isolated pigeon-hole labeled "religion." This means a ministry involved in issues, structures and movements already on campus. There is no space here to outline what

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<sup>4</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 167-170

these directions imply, but the Danforth Study of Campus Ministry by Kenneth Underwood is highly recommended as the place to start in understanding the vastly enlarged potential for ministry in higher education.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup>*Ibid.*

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