What are challenges for campus ministry in the new millennium? Are students connecting or staying connected to Christ and His Church while they attend college? Are there ways to help young people grow in faith while in school? How receptive are people on campus to learning about the love of Christ and Christian ideals? What does this new Millennial Generation look like? Is the church prepared to respond to their search for meaning? Are we ready to reach out to the largest number of young people and most diverse generation ever to attend college in the history of our country?

These young adults have been shaped by experiences of unparalleled terror and crisis in their country in the shadow of the crumbling Twin Towers. At the same time they are quite comfortable in finding new pathways to a whole new world in cyberspace. Through an array of technology and tech gadgets, they correspond with people in places and about things they may have never experienced before via a worldwide web that reaches far beyond the local mall and borders of their community. All this is in response to what Gary McIntosh in his book, One Church, Four Generations (2002), calls “wanting to be connected.” This generation doesn’t ask, “What does your father do?” Rather, they ask, “Does your dad live with you?” This can be a startling reminder that things are not as they used to be.

Today, campus ministries provide more than Bible study, worship opportunities and spiritual support. They offer opportunities and environments to build relationships through ministry events like midnight painting parties, alternative spring break, sports ministry, coffeehouse outreach, finals week food frenzy, freshman survival kits, and other creative events. These are not ordinary evangelism modes of the past. Like the words of a popular Bob Dylan song, “Times, they are a changin’.”

To understand this huge mission field on college campuses, one must also understand...
The first members of this generation were born in 1982 and then graduated from high school in 2000. The last members of this generation were born at the end of the previous century. Although the perimeter years vary slightly from study to study, all agree that the youth boom of this generation is now—2006—and it is generally characterized as the generation being shaped by the transition between centuries and coming of age in the new Millennium. In their book, Millennials Rising: The Next Great Generation (2000), Neil Howe and William Strauss cite an ABC poll which found that the preferred name for this generation is “Millennials.” Regardless of what we call these young adults, their coming of age has already been likened to “… a revolution … a good news revolution” (Howe & Strauss, 2000, 7). What great news for those interested in sharing the real Good News!

The flood of students entering colleges and universities is under way. This generation squeezed its way through the elementary and secondary school system and left in its wake a need for more space and more teachers. More than 16 million college students were enrolled in 2002, and it is estimated that more than 17 million students enrolled in 2005 (National Center for Education Statistics, NCES, 2005). With little deviation, our nation’s elementary and secondary school enrollments have demonstrated a trend showing an increase for much of the last two decades. This increase will naturally feed colleges with more students enrolling after high school graduation. There appears to be no end to this trend in the near future. It is estimated that student enrollment in our nation’s colleges and universities may reach near 20 million by 2014 (NCES, 2004).

While many studies categorize and quantify the impact of the new generation of Millennials, it is still difficult to determine the full extent of its impact because many in this group are still coming of age. It is prudent to note two substantial subgroups overshadowed by the rising tide of the Millennials that should be considered when planning for campus outreach. First, there are approximately 720,000 international students arriving with these international students as they attend college in the United States (International Student Ministry, Inc., 2005). Second, as the student population grows, colleges and universities will need to employ additional faculty and staff. Approximately 3.2 million people were employed in colleges and universities in 2003 (NCES, 2004). These groups often can be missed opportunities by narrowing the focus of “campus mission.”

In their book, Making God Real for A New Generation (2003), Craig Kenneth Miller and Maryjane Pierce Norton suggest seven characteristics that are keys to reaching and understanding the Millennial Generation. First, their numbers are staggering. With more than 76,345,410 young people, ages four to 21 in 2003, this is the largest generation in our country. The current decade will see a 16 percent increase in the number of students on the nation’s campuses, with the number of full-time students increasing by a projected 19 percent over the same period. Ninety-one percent of Millennials in high school say they plan to attend college after they graduate (Miller & Norton, 2003, 16).

Along with more student enrollment comes an increased level of stress related to competition. The drive to excel begins at a very young age. Children are encouraged to start early in any number of extra-curricular pursuits, ranging from soccer and martial arts for toddlers to advanced traveling teams, competitive performances, and clubs for teens outside those offered at school. This competition will only increase with limited funds and space for college students. In
addition to the added stress of competition to enter desired schools and maintain status, there is a new expanding gender gap. Before 1979, the majority of college students were men. Since 1979, women have been the majority, with men making up only 44 percent of the student population in 2000 (Miller & Norton, 2003, 183).

Another key to understanding this generation is the importance of experience. One cannot talk about Millennials without talking about the “experiential world view.” For this generation, experience is the basis of truth. One cannot fully appreciate truth unless there is an experience to go along with it. What one thinks about something is not nearly as important as how it makes one feel. This quest for experiential learning helps a generation that interacts with many more cultures than the preceding generations. Millennials make up the most diverse generation in the history of the United States. Increased immigration and an increasingly multicultural society foster this distinction. As mentioned earlier, this generation has seen the first attack on the continental United States. It has experienced increased high school violence, other terrorist attacks and foreign wars. These factor into a realization that any day could be their last.

The vivid reality of mortality makes relationships even more precious to this generation. Relationships are the key. Alicia Mosier offered these remarks in Millennials Floating (2001): “Millennials are the most coddled, most moneyed, most respectful, most morally traditional, most conformist, most team oriented, most ambitious, most optimistic, and all around sweetest group of young people to come along in a very long while.” There are studies and researchers suggesting that this Millennials Generation is the next great generation, reflecting characteristics similar to the upbringing and ideals of the G. I. Generation, who fought in World War II. Millennials may be considered to be a modern Band of Brothers.

**Mission Potential**

**So how do these Millennials characteristics impact the mission field and outreach potential on college campuses?** Two ground-breaking studies have emerged to shed light on the spirituality of college students. The first study was conducted by the Higher Education Research Institute (HERI) at UCLA. The National Study of College Students’ Search for Meaning and Purpose, The Spiritual Life of College Students. The second study, OMFU How Generation Y is Rediscovering Faith in the Post-Era was sponsored by the independent organization Reboot. These studies highlight valuable information about the Millennials, such as “…young Americans are actively engaged in spiritual questions, two new surveys indicate, even if they may not be exploring them in traditional ways. One of the surveys based on more than 100,000 freshmen who started college last fall found four in five reporting an interest in spirituality, with three of four searching for meaning or purpose in life, and the same proportion discussing the meaning of life with friends” (AF, 2005).

Another report concluded that “Today’s college students have very high levels of spiritual interest and involvement. Many are actively engaged in a spiritual quest and are exploring the meaning and purpose of life. They also display high levels of religious commitment and involvement” (HERRI, 2003). The HERI project is a multi-year project surveying more than 100,000 first-year students across the nation at 236 schools in 2004. The project team will conduct follow-up surveys with this class in 2007 (HERI, 2005). The first phase findings indicated a revitalized spirituality on campus. The study revealed that today’s college students have very high levels of spiritual involvement, are actively engaged in a spiritual quest, and are exploring the meaning of life. Another finding is that there is a direct correlation between spiritual and religious beliefs and students’ physical and physiological health.

Today’s entering college students report high levels of spiritual interest and involvement. Nearly half reported that they consider it essential or very important to seek opportunities to grow spiritually. The entering freshmen show high degrees of involvement in religious activities. Over half of the students with a strong spiritual orientation are frequently able to find meaning during difficult times (HERI, 2005, 14). In other words, spiritually inclined students will have a greater capacity to discover meaning and peace of mind even under difficult circumstances. The research also shows that religious commitment and engagement (a.k.a. connecting with a church and participating in the life of the community) promote a pattern of mental, emotional and physical health.

The study conducted by Reboot acknowledges that this generation is by far the most intertwined generation ever. Respect for differences and diversity is a core value, suggesting that students are more open minded to hearing Christian truth, especially because it offers purpose and meaning to life. “The good news is that the survey paints a composite picture of a generation who are seekers more than they are drifters—a world away from their portrayal as stereotypical automata we so often imagine as receiving their values directly from Paris Hilton or Justin Timberlake’s PR spokesperson. They are actively considering questions of identity, community, and meaning—negotiating how important their religious identities will ultimately be—but doing so with their own friends, in their own homes, and in their own ways” (Reboot, 2005). The research team was fascinated by the majority who indicated a hunger for episodic religious experiences, preferring the informal and expressive to the ritualistic and institutional.

This generation presents a remarkable opportunity for religious denominations, organizations, and projects to contemplate. “The demand for ritual, learning, value, and spiritual identity is there. Whether this turns out to be a time of loss or a time of creative re-invention may ultimately be decided by the energies we place in providing innovative messages, mechanisms, and mechanisms that offer meaning and community on Generation Y’s terms” (Reboot, 2005, 4). The study further indicates that “religion remains a core component of young people’s lives.” In addition, religious youth approach life more connected to family and community, have higher self-esteem, and hold more traditional roles of family, sex and marriage. There is a strong relationship between religiosity and volunteer activity.
Volunteer activity is on the rise throughout this country and among college students. Servant events have been filled to overflowing in past LCMS National Youth Gatherings. According to the LCMS District and Congregational Service Web page, “Tens of thousands have participated in LCMS Servant Events. Greg is a director of Christian education and has been the servant event project coordinator for Fixin’ Up the Thumb held in Michigan for the past ten years. Greg notes, ‘Taking youth to a Servant Event can be powerful. Hosting a project brings God to your front door. The number one reason our congregation sponsors the Fixin’ Up the Thumb servant event is because of the spiritual growth that occurs in high school students. In my ministry, I’m not here to be a俎A. I can’t compete with MTV. Yet, the youth continue to come because they are getting something they can’t get out there. We’re providing a place for the faith to be engaged. I haven’t found anything that encourages spiritual growth like a servant event’” (www.lcms.org/ca/dcs/supportiveevents/supportsevents.asp, 2005).

Teens seem to be taking their service attitude to college. A 20-year trend of increasing involvement in service continues as formal academic and co-curricular service learning programs have blossomed on thousands of college campuses throughout the country. “As a result a multitude of young adults are discovering a passion for service, justice work, the awareness that each year, millions of college students attain moments of great clarity through service learning programs gives me tremendous hope that a generation of young people will be able to more fully address the intractable social and environmental challenges of our era” (Koth, 2005). By offering service learning experiences which include critical reflection and spiritual exploration, university and college ministries can help students develop a lifetime commitment to service. Here is where the church and university can serve as partners in ministry.

Leadership Roles

Some of the ways students are connecting to Christ and the church through campus ministry beyond service work is through leadership roles in the many campus ministries that dot the nation’s universities and colleges. Breakaway Ministries is one of the nation’s largest non-denominational campus ministries. It is a weekly Bible study with a mission to give students an opportunity to meet Jesus Christ and grow in a relationship with Him. This is accomplished through praise and worship, hearing God’s Word, and Christian fellowship. While not affiliated with any one denomination, this organization encourages students’ involvement in local Bible-believing churches and seeks to cooperate with these churches in ministry (www.breakawayministries.org). This ministry lists all local, Bible-believing churches on its Web site and identifies more than 100 students who assist with this ministry by helping reach out to more than 4,000 students each week in study and praise.

Other ministries are doing similar things on varying scales. Carrie A. Moore of the Detroit Morning News (2005) tells of a campus ministry organizing Web-page profiles for ministry members to connect with others in ministry. A student was quoted as saying, “Last year I was a peer minister and grew so much in my faith …. Now it’s a main support group for me, my home-away-from-home. It feels like family with the parishioners here.” Other ministries connect new students to congregation families through student adoption programs intentionally encouraging a relationship with families of the community. Some students take on roles as peer ministers or other leadership positions helping support fellow students and facilitating ministry with peers in mini forms of small group ministries are gaining ground as students gather for smaller groups of support and learning while developing leadership skills.

Connecting

In her article, Anguish and Assurance on Campus (2005), Kim Krull pinpoints the impact campus ministry can have in connecting students to Christ through communities such as Lutheran campus ministries. She highlights the importance of ministry connections which provide support, healing and leadership development for students. These relationships are among the greatest opportunities campus ministry has with students engaged in a quest for meaning in life. Campus ministries provide a place to be in supportive relationships that are accepting, bring growth and healing, and provide opportunity to receive validation by putting current skills to work while developing new ones. Universities are beginning to take notice of the significance of spiritual connections. Although this may not be anything new to students who rely on their faith to manage the daily life on campus, the academy is taking note and making some changes. The Journal of College Character (2004) featured an article listing recommendations for student affairs practitioners to support students’ spiritual growth. The authors urge university leaders to recommit themselves to spirituality and faith development as important aspects of their mission to promote students’ holistic development. Student affairs organizations need to address advocating a place for spirituality in the mission and culture of higher education; providing space on campus for spiritual development and practice; publicizing, especially to new students, the spiritual resources and activities of the campus, including religious organizations and student groups; and strengthening collaboration with campus ministers and local clergy to support student opportunities for college activities (Chickering, Dalton & Stamm, 2004). Dr. Elizabeth J. Tisdell has written an entire book dedicated to this new development, Exploring Spirituality and Culture in Higher Education. More national conferences are including dimensions of student values, spirituality on campus, and holistic approaches to education. This trend will further encourage administrators and college faculty to seek out spiritual resources, opening more doors for outreach in this mission field. Although this trend will embrace all avenues considered to be spiritual, it is certain to create new opportunities to share the Good News in an environment which, until recently, often has labeled faith talk as taboo or even has reacted in hostility to the Christian faith. The significance of today’s campuses as a huge mission field is reflected in this observation: “As a group, Millennials are unlike any other youth generation in living
memory. They are more numerous, more affluent, better educated, and more ethnically diverse. More importantly, they are beginning to manifest a wide array of positive social habits that older Americans no longer associate with youth, including a new focus on teamwork, achievement, modesty and good conduct. Only a few years from now, this can-do youth revolution will overwhelm the cynics and pessimists. Over the next decade, the Millennial Generation will entirely recast the image of youth from downbeat and alienated to upbeat and engaged—with potentially seismic consequences for America” (Howe and Strauss, 2000, 4).

Some may think that it’s a strange new world out there. Yes, the culture is changing. But many think that many changes seen in this generation are for the better. As God calls us into relationship with Him, He also compels us to be in relationship with others as we share the Good News of the Gospel. We are called to reach out to this “strange new world.” God proclaims the message of hope and new life through His ambassadors, “... as if Christ were making His appeal through us ...” (2 Corinthians 5:20). The Millennials are here and offer a giant opportunity for ministry. The Millennials are ready. The university seems to be ready. The question is “Are we ready?”

References