

Connecting Students With GOD

Alternative Worship Service Captivates College Students

BY HEIDI BRENNER

Alternative worship service called Connections, produced by and for college students, has operated successfully for more than a year at Pacific Union College, Angwin, California.

The idea for Connections originated during the 1991-1992 school year, when students Marc Judd, Dan Savino, and Walter Thomas looked around and noticed few college students at a regular PUC church service.

"We realized that the church service wasn't meeting the needs of the students," says Thomas, a senior business/pre-med major.

Judd and Savino formulated an idea for an alternative worship service and presented it to College Chaplain Mike Dunn. They decided to take a campus survey to find out whether current worship services ministered to the students' needs. Of the nearly 500 students surveyed, 84 percent viewed the current worship service as traditional, while 73 percent preferred a more spontaneous approach. Of the total sample, 72 percent said they believed an alternative program was needed, and 64 per-

cent said that such a program would increase their attendance. The survey also showed that the students wanted more upbeat, contemporary music, heightened worshiper involvement, and a more joyful and contagious worship atmosphere.

When Dunn, Judd, and Savino met with Senior Pastor Lou Venden, the church elders, and the elders council to voice their concerns, they received tremendous affirmation and encouragement. According to Venden, the college church pastors and elders had voiced anxiety about college students' church attendance. Despite the inclusion of contemporary features such as a slight change in music and more student involvement in the second service, little improvement had occurred. They welcomed the idea of targeting a new service specifically to students who did not normally attend church. Several meetings produced a strong commitment by both students and church leaders to maintaining one congregation that worshiped in separate places.

"I was impressed with the amount of 'we-ness' shown on the part of the student leaders,"

Picture
Removed

Mike Mesnard performs special music.

stated Venden. He continued, "Our goal was to continue as a united church family in the worship of God."

Planners had difficulty finding a time for the alternative service to meet. After discussion and prayer, they concluded that most college students would not attend an early service, so it would be best to meet at 11:20 a.m., the same time the second service met in the church sanctuary.

Following much hard work, planning, and prayer, the first Connections service took place January 25, 1992, in Paulin Hall. It had an astounding attendance of 550.

Features of the Connections Service

Completely produced by students, each Connections service begins with an uplifting, contemporary song service. Words to the songs are displayed on a screen in the front, which allows everyone to participate, whether or not they recognize the songs. Four students lead the singing, backed up by piano, keyboard, electric guitar, and a percussion set.

"By having the words displayed on

screen, everyone is looking up and their voices are projected outward, instead of looking down at a hymnal, with all the sound thrown into the next pew. The result is incredible!" says Judd.

An offering follows the song service. Students have the opportunity to write special prayer requests on cards and place them in the offering buckets. The offering and prayer request cards are sorted in time for the requests to be read before the prayer.

The "Reel to Real" video presentation, prepared during the previous week, focuses on a single question asked of students around campus. Since people have to answer the question on the spot, the results are often quite humorous.

Lastly comes the sermon, usually given by a guest speaker. The messages are upbeat and energetic and pertain directly to the questions and dreams of college students. Sermons have been received with tremendous gratitude and applause.

Refreshments, provided in the foyer, encourage social interaction at the close of the service.

Attendance Grows Quickly

News about Connections spread quickly, and attendance grew to 700 in the following weeks, forcing planners to move the services to larger quarters. According to the follow-up survey taken in June 1992, students said that their needs were being met through Connections' less traditional and more spontaneous service. The services continued on a trial basis from January to June, when it was voted overwhelmingly to continue for the following school year.

"We felt a lot of gratitude that there were more people worshipping God on Sabbath morning," stated Venden.

Planning

Connections, completely generated by students, is now an official worship service of the college church. An overall steering committee of five chairpersons coordinates subcommittees in the areas of music, programming, public relations, hospitality and design/decor, and audio-visual aids. The steering committee, which meets weekly, is responsible for Connections' overall direc-

A typical Connections song service, consisting of song leaders, back-up music, with the words shown on a large screen.

Picture
Removed

tion, mission statement, final approval, and finances. The Student Association is not responsible for any duties relating to the service.

No money for operations comes from the church budget; Connections generates its

native service on the main sanctuary attendance. Indeed, there has been a rather noticeable change. Of the more than 600 who attend Connections each week, many are community members, elementary and academy students, and teachers who formerly

church at all," said Mike Dunn. "We feel it is important for each individual to have their needs met, whether it be through the main sanctuary service or Connections."

"We are a united church family. If we are truly worshipping God, the geography is not important," said Venden.

Those closely involved with Connections highly recommend the concept to other campuses. Judd and Savino agree on the imperative that college students realize the necessity of God and the Seventh-day Adventist Church in their lives. They believe that one way to accomplish this is through active student participation in worship services.

"When initially trying to implement a service like Connections," said Savino, "it is important to work closely with the pastoral staff, for without their support and help, it could never work. It is important for the pastoral staff to see the need for such a service, and this is probably best done by taking a survey of the students' felt needs."

"We have experienced tremendous support and encouragement from nearly everyone we have come into contact with," said Judd. "It is amazing

how God can work through people if we just ask Him and then give Him a chance."

"Connections has been meeting the worship needs of the students on our campus and has changed the idea of involvement," Dunn added.

An innovative idea dreamed up by three college students has now become a life-changing worship experience for hundreds of young people. ☞

Heidi Brenner is a student writer for the Public Relations Department at Pacific Union College, Angwin, California.

Picture
Removed

The audience enjoys participating in the song service.

own income through Sabbath offerings and non-student donors, such as interested adults, community members, and parents. Using these offerings and donations, Connections pays travel and accommodation expenses for all visiting speakers, and has also been able to afford, among other sound equipment, a new keyboard for its services.

Reaction

Reaction to Connections has been overwhelmingly supportive, although initially the administration and church board did voice some concern about the impact of an alter-

worshiped in the sanctuary. Although many tend to alternate attendance between the two worship service options, their regular presence is missed in the main sanctuary.

There has been some student criticism of Connections. A student-authored article in the *Campus Chronicle*, the PUC student newspaper, harshly criticized the college church for its apparent lack of willingness to minister to the needs of college students and instead support the congregational split.

"Instead of trying to develop a separate service, Connections' main goal was to attract those who do not normally attend