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Campus Wesley Foundations spur students' faith

By **Laura Bray**
Special Contributor

Far from home and surrounded by strangers, fresh-out-of-high-school teenagers often struggle to feel connected at college.

For nearly 100 years, Wesley Foundations have provided college students a place to meet, to be spiritually stimulated and to try out leadership roles that will prepare them for their future church communities.

Across the United States, the most thriving Wesley Foundations offer a range of programs to meet the needs of college students. From worship to mission projects, from small-group studies to series on music appreciation, successful Wesley Foundations -- just like effective churches -- develop programs that will appeal to their audiences and thereby encourage participation.



Most Wesley Foundations are housed in their own buildings on or near college campuses, where they can provide students space for worship, study, fellowship and meals.

More than 400 students participate at the University of Oklahoma's Wesley Foundation, which has experienced significant growth for the past decade.

"We've tripled in size since the 1990s," said associate director Daniel Dennison.

The foundation offers more than 20 small groups, ranging from Bible study to accountability groups.

At the University of North Carolina Chapel Hill, small groups help students discern vocations, discuss current events and make transitions.

Dean Blackburn, associate dean of students, said the groups help both incoming freshmen and outgoing seniors deal with changes they are facing.

"It's such a strong program that we've encouraged other faith groups on campus to consider adopting it."

The Wesley Foundation at the Georgia Institute of Technology (Georgia Tech) has stepped up to fill interests in liberal arts. The institute has no philosophy, religion or music departments, so the Wesley Foundation's small groups tend to be more academically based than devotional, said director Steve Fazenbaker.

The foundation just began a book-study group for faculty and staff that explores science and faith issues, for instance and also holds a weekly music appreciation workshop.

Given Methodism's focus on outreach, it's not surprising to find an emphasis on mission programs among Wesley Foundations. Many students are active with Habitat for Humanity, local nursing homes, Ronald McDonald Houses, disaster relief and food banks.

Wesley Foundations also sponsor overseas mission trips during summer and spring breaks to such places as India and Honduras.

Some Wesley Foundations provide a small residential community, where students can live, eat and fellowship together, as well as serve as leaders in their local chapters. The foundation provides leadership training and personal development during the students' stay.

For college students, food is always a big draw. Many foundations offer meals, pizza and fellowship opportunities at local restaurants.

"Offering free pizza after Vespers encourages them to stick around for fellowship," said Mr. Dennison at the University of Oklahoma.

Most Wesley Foundations enjoy strong relationships with their host universities.

Foundations also help students during a crisis (such as the death of a fellow student), and some provide emergency financial aid. Many also work with related campus departments, such as counseling, student health and the residence hall offices.

"The Wesley Foundation works with Georgia Tech to provide spiritual care without crossing church/state lines," said Stephanie Ray, associate dean of students.

Getting word out

Foundation directors and volunteers spend a lot of time at local churches, spreading the word about Wesley Foundations and asking church leadership to share names of students headed to their campuses. Some foundations contact annual conferences to enlist help in identifying arriving students.

"Many Methodist congregations don't know about Wesley Foundations, so our challenge is to educate local churches about our activities," Mr. Dennison said.

Since most Wesley Foundations are associated with public universities, they rely on the university for student information, which is then followed up with a phone call or personal visit. Most foundations participate in university-sponsored student-activity fairs and festivals to familiarize incoming students with their activities.

"I was invited to OU's Wesley Foundation by a friend in the band," said Chris Sykes, a senior religious-studies major and leader at OU's Wesley Foundation. "I instantly felt connected and welcomed."

After foundations connect with motivated United Methodist students, they encourage them to bring their friends and roommates.

Leadership training

As a part of the United Methodist Church, all Wesley Foundations ultimately exist to make disciples for Christ.

But another mission is to train future church leaders.

"The Wesley Foundations are the linchpin of the future church," said Luther Felder, assistant general secretary for campus ministry for the General Board of Higher Education and Ministry (GBHEM).

"This is the place to find and nurture the church's future leaders. Wesley Foundation programs prepare these students for leadership roles, both inside and outside the church."

Jan Rivero, campus minister for UNC's Wesley Foundation, said the UNC group has had a 20 percent increase in student participation.

"The entire notion of creating a future generation of church leaders is so important. Finding excellent and qualified campus ministers should be one of the highest priorities of the church," Ms. Rivero said.

Providing a nurturing environment and helping connect students with a positive group have been mainstays of the Wesley Foundation mission since the beginning. Especially at large universities, many students are looking for a place to connect on a more spiritually and emotionally intimate level.

"There's still that underlying theme of moving the students along in their faith walk," Mr. Fazenbaker said. "We want them to be grounded in something, and not just believe in something they were handed by their parents."

Foundations these days compete with increasingly busy student schedules. At Texas Tech University, the foundation includes programs on time management and making students' faith journeys a priority.

"Balancing classes, work and other activities is a real problem and struggle for our students," said Tammy Gann, assistant director of the Wesley Foundation at Texas Tech University.

OU tries to meet students' time-crunch demands by providing a coffee bar with WiFi capabilities to extend their study time in a comfortable atmosphere.

"There's lots of stress and anxiety; we help them deal with that," said Vance Rains, Wesley Foundation director at Florida State University.

History, structure

GBHEM supervises more than 700 Wesley Foundations, primarily in the United States. The movement began in 1913 when Bishop James C. Baker formed a program for college students attending the University of Illinois. He called it the "Wesley Foundation," which became a model for the United Methodist Church's campus ministry.

Wesley Foundations operate as part of the local Annual Conference and are initiated either through the conference or through a local sponsoring church, with the assistance of GBHEM.

Mr. Felder said most foundations are long-established institutions on public university campuses. They obtain their funding through apportionments and through local fund-raising activities. OU's Wesley Foundation, for example, takes advantage of its prime location and the love of Sooner football to charge parking fees during the game season.

Despite all the activities, many participants say they most value the relationships they developed in the foundation.

"You experience so much growth and maturity and change in college, and these are the people you change with," Mr. Symes said. "I have made incredible friendships here at the Wesley Foundation."

Laura Bray is a San Antonio-based free-lance writer.

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