The Importance of Christianity and Christian Registered Student Organizations at Illinois State University
Jakob Sedig

EVOKE
About the Ethnographer
Reflections:
For a while, probably since I was a sophomore in High School I have been interested in religion, how it effects people, and any current trends occurring. I do not come from a "standard" nuclear family, where the mom, dad and two kids attend church every Sunday. My father's side of the family is Mennonite. Not Horse and Buggy, no electricity, but the women wear hand made dresses (Black or Blue) and bonnets, and the men wear white or grey shirts with black or grey pants. They drive cars, but there are no accessories, they have electricity, but no TV. They do not believe in vanities. I have been exposed to this all my life. My dad is not mennonite, but my grandparents and most of my aunts and uncles are. The mennonites have a sort of "hands-off" approach. They do not try to convert people to their religion. They think that church and state should be completely separate. I have a relative who teaches evolution/biology in high school. However, they are also the most religious people I know. Their devotion to the church is almost unparalleled and is obvious, yet they are "normal".

I went to church with my mom until 5th grade. She was raised in the traditional nuclear family, attending church every Sunday. However, around 5th grade she started seeing corruption and hypocrisy in the church we were attending, so we stopped going. Since my dad is not a member of the mennonite church, he does not regularly attend. So, essentially I stopped going. Even before I stopped attending, I distinctly remember watching a video in Sunday school in which a human and a dinosaur were existing at the same time "as god made the earth." I remember questioning this logic even as a child. With my halted attendance and questioning mind, I began observing religion, and forming my own theories of the world without someone telling me what I had to believe. This is why religion is so interesting to me, because I've an "outsider" view, and I've always wanted to know what it's significance is.

------Field work may be difficult, as I want to objective and I do not want to effect the quality of my work. I am even worried about telling people I am doing research for anthropology; the people I am interviewing may be unwilling to work with me because they will think I am trying to write something controversial, or make them look bad. However, I am not trying to do this and really am interested in why religion is so important to some people, and whether or not attendance or participation has increased.

I am a junior Anthropolgy Major and music minor

EXPLORE
Question
What questions is your inquiry contingent upon?
Preliminary Question:

The research question I will be asking about the ethnography of the university is why has religious (Christian) involvement seemingly increased on campus in the last to years? What does it mean to be an active Christian on campus, and what does religion mean to the average college student? I will also attend one or more RSO Christian organizations
in order to find out if their membership has increased, what occurs at a group meeting and why such RSO’s are so appealing. It is my personal belief that religious (Christian) activity is increasing on campus, the community and the country in general and I want to know why. Does it have anything to do with the current administration? Are people being recruited to churches more? Has advertising increased or become more effective? Does this increase of Christian activity coincide with the September 11th attacks and the wars our country has been involved in the last few years?

Revised Question 1:
Everyone I have talked to has seemed to like my idea for research, and have said they think it is very interesting. My questions still remain the same, mainly I want to know why it appears (to me, at least) the Christian religious activity has increased the past few years. There are several side questions I can ask along with that, as previously mentioned, but they may or may not be followed. Something else I may want to research is “Great Revivals” in the Unites States. I heard somewhere once that the U.S. is going through another great revival, and that it goes through one approximately every fifty-seventy five years. I will have to do some history research in order to answer this question, and see if any correlations can be made to this “revival”, and previous ones.

University Document:
I looked at the website of ISU’s RSO InterVarsity website for my research on an ISU document.

http://www.ivisu.org/mission.htm

InterVarsity has been a RSO since 1954, and as a student organization was founded in England. InterVarsity’s website has a very focused mission, it is obvious that they are only trying to reach out to evangelical students who are considering joining the group. I found the site almost intimidating. The group focuses on the main values of Vision Statement, Evangelism, Spiritual Formation, The Church, Human Relationships, Righteousness, Vocational Stewardship, World Evangelization, and Doctrinal Basis. One of the group’s main goals is spreading the word of the bible and their beliefs. This point is brought up on several different occasions on the website. The website is not inviting to people who are not evangelical Christians, and may appear extreme to many. Yet the group is appealing, as it has been around since 1954 and appears to have continuous numbers and membership. The group also states it will try to out reach to people other than students on campus. They want to spread the word of God to the community.

This article is decidedly one sided. Although it may seem extreme, the group has every right to exist, and they make it very clear on their website what their goals are, so no one will be duped into going to a meeting and not know what to expect. I think as long as the group makes it clear that they are very vocal, they have every right to exist. The group may lose possible new members due to their forceful doctrine, but they are only appealing to a group of people who are already like minded.

Plan
How will you go about answering your inquiry?
Initial Plan:
There are many methods I plan on using in order to fully answer my research question. First, I plan on attending various ISU RSO’s dedicated to Christian activity and being a participant observer. I want to see what makes these groups appealing and the weekly or monthly activity of the groups. I also will interview multiple students at these meetings in
order to see when they became involved, and what drew them to the group. Since I am most interested in what appears to be increased activity, I will ask upper class-members if they have noticed such increased enrollment. If possible, I could look in the ISU archives and see if membership has increased. I also want to find the year that each group became incorporated. If there has been an increase in new groups over the past few years, this will back my research. I also plan on interviewing local church leaders, in order to find out whether student attendance has increased, and what student or community religious life is composed of. I am also interested in the recruiting techniques of the RSO’s. I plan on documenting where flyers are found and in what quantity. I have already taken field notes on the display that took place two weeks ago on the quad, and will continue to do so if more such events occur.

OBSEERVE
What observations, or findings are you encountering in your research?
The following are my observations of the I Agree with Kyle event hosted by Campus Crusade for Christ.

Beginning about a month before the actual presentation, ISU was chalked with the saying Do you agree?. Everyone was interested, but no one really knew what the saying meant. Then, the chalkling changed to Do you agree with Kyle? Shortly thereafter, bright neon green signs, which were probably the most noticeable signs on campus began appearing in almost every hallway of every building that said "Do you agree with Kyle?" Then, students began wearing shirts of the same color that said "I Agree with Kyle." By now, the majority of people on campus were interested and wanted to know what was going on. When a student wearing a shirt was asked "What is going on with this Kyle stuff?", they responded "Kyle is a Junior in Campus Crusade for Christ who will be talking about what he has learned from the bible on Thursday, October 20th. It's going to be an open forum, anyone can come."

When I attended the event I first noticed how large it was. At least 200 students were in attendance. The meeting began with Kyle explaining his position, stating that he "Doesn't know everything about the bible and hasn't read it all the way through yet", but that "It still has had a great effect on my life." Kyle then discussed his experience with the bible, and how it has led him to change his life and dedicate it to God.

Afterwards there was an open forum discussion. There was an equal amount of dissent and approval. Some of the dissenters were obviously not question, bringing up questions of science and evolution. To these questions Kyle answered "What I believe is..." He also said on more than one occasion "I don't want to push this down your throat. Think about it, let it roll around in your head. Think about what Jesus said, not what I said." Kyle was definitally shooting for an open debate, one that was inviting towards all people.

The following are my observations from a Campus Crusade for Christ (CCC) meeting.

CCC is probably the largest Christian RSO on campus with approximately 130 students attending the meeting I observed. The meeting began with a prayer. Upcoming social events were then discussed. I attended a meeting after the "I agree with Kyle" event, and everyone agreed on how big of a success the event was. They had many new people join the group and had exposed the campus to the debate. The group then discussed what their next big "Campus involving" event should be. No one really had a groundbreaking idea, so it was decided that ideas could be discussed at a later time and that much more time would be spent on the planning after Christmas break.
CCC then proceeded to discuss the difficulties of being a Christian. They talked about the temptations available on campus and how hard it was sometimes to turn down these temptations (underage drinking, premarital sex). The members agreed that being in CCC was beneficial because they knew they had someone to turn to, someone with similar beliefs that was experiencing the same thing. They also discussed how Jesus gave them strength to make it through these hardships, and how they should try their hardest to help people out of these situations.

The meeting ended with a prayer, and students then stayed around to socialize.

Observations from a Fuel meeting:

Encounter is one of the smaller Christian RSO's on campus, but that is intentional. Once a week the group meets as a whole to discuss planned events or social gatherings, then splits into smaller groups at that meeting to discuss bible passages. These smaller groups can then meet sometime during the week for discussion or any other activity if they so wish.

The meeting started with a musical performance. There was no bands, but individual performances. One girl played an electric Violin, another sang, and then the group sang some worship songs (accompanied by a CD player) which they all seemed to know. They then stated any big plans anyone had for next weekend or anything fun someone did the weekend prior. A reading for next week was assigned. They then had an open discussion about one reading which lasted about 20 minutes. They then broke into their smaller groups of 3-5 people to discuss another reading. The groups left whenever they were finished, there was no set ending time. Despite this, everyone stayed around until each group was done and socialized.

The Following are my observations from an InterVarsity weekly meeting:

I counted about 50 people in attendance. The meeting started at 7:30, but people walked in late, after the music had already begun and no one seemed to notice or care. The band consisted of 2 guitarists, a percussionist and a vocalist. They played rock songs about worship. I'm a music minor, and consider myself well versed in music, and these songs were new to me, no where near the traditional hymns sung or played in churches.

After the singing the student leader stated which reading would be discussed next week. She also said that since thanksgiving was approaching that the group should write down the things they are thankful for and pray and tell God thanks for these things. She then stated the date for Metamorphosis, the group's annual spring concert. She then said when the group's movie night that week, and what movie they would be watching. She than said that the group would be going to Chatters after the meeting to "hang out."

The group than had a guest speaker discuss Hebrews 6, and it's message. (Basically that being a Christian is hard, but there is people to help and that the reward for "Crossing the finish line" is worth running the marathon).

The group then had a prolonged singing session, lasting approximately 15 minutes, where students stood, sang and swayed together. After the music was over, everyone stood around for about ten minutes talking to each other about anything in particular, not necessarily religion. I talked to a student about Indiana Jones, after telling him I wanted to be an archaeologist.
What is most interesting is that although religious discussion and singing made up the bulk of the meeting, socializing was the focus. Everything that occurred had something to do with socializing. Be it the initial singing, to the discussion of movie night, to going to Chatters afterwards; everything stated or done involved someone else. This backs up my hypothesis that people join and stay in Christian RSO's for the social factor.

My Fourth interview was with Courtney, a sophomore member of encounter.

J-"What denomination are you?"
C-"I'm Presbyterian."
J-"Have you always been Presbyterian?"
C-"Yes"
J-"What made you join an interdenominational RSO?"
C-"Well, there is no Presbyterian RSO's on campus, but I'm not sure I would have joined it if there was one. I knew I wanted to join a Christian RSO, but I wasn’t sure which one. I had made some friends who were in Encounter so I decided to join that one. I don't think denominations are that important anyway."
J-"Do you think that there has been an increase in Encounter's numbers since last year?"
C-"Yeah, but I'm not sure how many."
J-"Do you think that there has been an increase in Christian media in the past few years, and if so, how do you feel about this?"
C-"I definitely think there has been increase. I like it because it puts a new face on worship. Like who would have ever thought that a rock band could sing inspirational songs. It really changes people's ideas on worship is."

Interview Number 3 was with Rebecca, a senior and official in Death, Resurrection, Life (DRL)

J-"What denomination are you?"
R-"I guess Non-Denominational"
J-"Have you always been non-denominational?"
R-"No, I was Methodist before I came to college. I always felt that it was too ritual and habitual. I came to school and so how others had a closer relationship with Jesus Christ. I saw how it affected their lives personally, so I decided that was what I wanted to do."
J-"Have you always been in DRL"
R-"Yes, from my Freshman year in 2002."
J-"What made you join DRL?"
R-"I went to a few different religious RSO meetings when I first came to ISU. My friend took me to DRL, I met a few people, they were really helpful and I liked them so that is the group that I stayed with."
J-"Has there been an increase in participation since your Freshman year?"
R-"Oh yes. I'm not sure of the exact numbers, but DRL has seen a significant increase since I was a freshman."
J-"DRL is non-denominational. I have talked to some other students in non-denominational RSO's if they have noticed increases in membership and they have. Why do you think there has been an increase in interdenominational activity?"
R-"I think the increase has occurred because of the introduction of non-denominational stuff to the media. For example, Christian rock is appealing to people because it shows that you don’t have to sing old, boring hymns. Christianity isn’t about tradition. It’s about a personal relationship with God and Jesus. People are finding this out more with more media exposure."
J-"About how many hours a week do you spend involved with your group?"
R-"About 3"
J-"Do you attend church off campus?"
R-"Yes, Christ church"
My second interview was conducted with Mark, a senior transfer student

J- "What denomination are you?"
M- "Denomination isn't necessary, it's about someone's personal realtionship with Jesus. I guess I'm non-denominational."
J- "Have you always been non-denominational?"
M- "No, I was Catholic before I came to college"
J- "What made you change"
M- "I wasn't happy with the church. It was too traditional. I wanted something that fit my personality better."
J- "When did you join your RSO? (InterVarsity)"
M- "Fall 2004, my first year here."
J- "What made you want to join?"
M- "I was deciding between groups actually. I knew I wanted to find a group with nice people, people I could be friends with. I chose my RSO because the praise and worship felt real, the people were really nice, and I really liked the singing aspect of it. Now all of my friends are from my RSO."
J- "Have you noticed an increase of members in your RSO since last year"
M- "Oh yeah. One of the numbers that I've heard is that two years ago we had about 30 people per meeting attend. Now it's at like 50, I think."
J- "Do you think that there has been an increase in Christian media in the past few years? And if so why?"
M- "I definatly think so. I think the increase in media has been happening because it introduces people to Christianity that might not have been previously been introduced to it. All of this exposure has made being a Christian cool, you don't only have to go to church Sunday and dress up all the time. It's becoming mainstream to be a Christian."

Excerpts from my interviews:
Here are the transcripts from the interviews I conducted.

Interview 1, with Luke
J- "What denomination are you?"
L- "Non-denominational"
J- "When did you join CCC?"
L- "My Freshman year, 2001"
J- "Have you noticed an increase in membership since your freshman year?"
L- "Yes, Definatly. In 2001 we only had 60 members, now we have 145"
J- "What made you join CCC?"
L- "I didn't want to come originally. I was in a weird spot in my life. I was doing things in my life, things that were against the law. I had fun at first, but then I started feeling like something was missing. I needed someone to turn to. One of my friends suggested that I come to CCC with him just to see what it was about. The people there understood where I was coming from. They introduced me to Jesus, and showed me he was the answer."
J- "Do you go to church off campus?"
L- "Yes, a non-denominational one."
J- "Did you attend church before college?"
L- "Yes, a lutheran church"
J- "How do you think students view CCC?"
L- "I think we're seen in a good light. I've never had a negative experience. Like Kyle was saying, we're not here to preach."
J- "How do you think Christian entertainment is affecting society today?"
L- "Christian entertainment is becoming all one conglomeration. It's affecting spirituality. A lot of entertainment is not one denomination focused. I think more people are being introduced to Christianity this way too. Christian media is becoming very popular"
The events I have attended, although they are hosted by different groups are very similar and share commons themes. Each group I have attended has praying, discussion and socializing. Groups talk about standard RSO stuff, such as the budget and different programs that they are putting on, like fundraisers or guest speakers. The main purpose of the groups however, is support and community. The students do not go simply to read the bible and talk about how to live their lives in the "proper christian way" (although several groups do discuss morals and talk about decisions to make in life and what the bible says), they are there mainly for the social aspect of the group. Sports are discussed. Homework for tests. What new movies should be seen. The religous RSO's are networks for students who share similar morals.

The religous dogma is an issue of the groups in and of itself. The dogma is not that dissimilar between religous RSO's. For example, if one went blindly into one of these groups, not knowing the people invovled, it would be impossible to pick which one was DRL and which one was campus crusade. They both discuss "the close personal relationship with Jesus", how this relationship was (or can be) found and the effects of this on the lives of the students. The biggest difference between the two groups is not the Dogma, but the presentation. DRL is more focused on the individuals relationship with Jesus, where as Crusade wants to spread the word and help others realize what is being missed. This is why "I agree with Kyle" was hosted. Kyle kept saying "I am not here to preach, I just want to tell you about my life", but the audience acted differently. When disagreement with Kyle was shown they audience did not clap or cheer like they did when someone praised Kyle. Kyle was perhaps inadvertantly (though I think it was on purpose) "preaching".

Interview excerpts:
Throughout the course of this class I have hosted several interviews and observed group meetings. I will post some of the excerpts from the interviews and discuss my observations and findings.

Jakob- Has there been an increase in numbers in your RSO since you first started attending?
-Rebecca- Yes, I,don't have exact numbers, but participation has definitly increased.
-Luke- Yes, it has increased. We used to have 60 members my freshman year, now have 145.
Of these two high ranking members of religous RSO's that I talked to, both confirmed that particiaption was increasing. When I asked a follow up question of why they think this is so, possibly due to mainstream media increase of Christianity, such as TV shows and bands
-Rebecca- "People are realizing Christianity isn't necessarily about tradition, this is what the rock bands has shown. You don't have to only sing hymns, music and praise can have various forms"

Another question I have asked is what denomination people were before they came to college. All of them were of one certain denomination, catholic, methodist, etc., but now are non-denominational (although this can actually be argued as a denomination in certain cases) From the information I have gathered, college is a time of transition, when teenagers are becoming independent and adults, and they like to find their own way, even if this is dissimiair from their parents. I believe this is why college students become non-denominational, they want to be different from their parents and find their own path in life.
I also asked my interviewees what they think the student body perceives of religious RSO's as a whole. No one thought that the religious RSO's are viewed in a negative light. "ISU has a very liberal and open campus, and students feel that they or others should be able to practice religion any way they want."

Another trend I have discovered is that most of my interviewees did not actively search out a religious RSO. They were invited by friends, roommates and classmates to come. They decided to stay with the group because "The people were really cool and I get along with them really well" Students are going because they feel obliged and they have to, they are going to have fun, along with worshiping, praying and community.

visual

Files:
kyle.jpg (Mon 10/31/2005 14:32)

I think my project can be relative not only to the ISU campus, but on a much larger scale. Although I am only looking at religious involvement here, I think that a national trend is emerging, and ISU is just a microcosm of that trend. I think that not only are more people getting involved with religious RSO's, but that the RSO's are becoming more visible and vocal. An example is "Do you agree with Kyle?". I am planning on doing some research on this, as I know this statement pertains to one of the campus Christian RSO's. Another example would be last year's "Upside down Jesus." I think that RSO's are trying to become more mainstream, and show that they have fun while discussing Christianity and biblical issues.

This increased religious activity not only affects the campus, but the community as well. I need to interview local churches and see if attendance is increasing (with students). Increased attendance increases a church's revenue, and its importance in the community.

I am more interested in the new members of an RSO than the old ones. I want to know why they decided to join this group, especially if they were not heavily involved in religious activity at home. I want to know why faith has become something that people have been wearing on their sleeve lately. Are they just trying to get new members? Or has something else changed? What has made this change occur, not only on our campus but in the country in general? I know that these religious groups have increased on other campuses as well, my girlfriend goes to Wesleyan, and she also has noticed an increase of religious RSO activity. What has changed in the importance of religion that college students are now more vocal and visible? Do they feel a stronger religious fervor, or are they simply part of a national trend that is more vocal and unashamed to be vocal?

ISU Interview
I decided to interview someone who sits next to me in one of my classes on why they decided to come to ISU. The interview was fairly brief, but I was able to obtain the basic information on why this person came to ISU.

J- "So what made you come to ISU"
K - "Well, I want to be a teacher and ISU is known for it's education program. Also, I play an instrument and ISU has a good music program"

J- "So you want to be a music teacher?"
K - "No, I'm a music minor, I want to be an elementary teacher, but I still like to play my instrument"

J- "Were any other factors involved in your decision to come to ISU"
K - "I applied to 3 schools in all, but ISU was my first choice. The price is right, it's far from my house, but not too, and like I said, the education program is what we are known for."
Observations:
On Sept. 13, 2005 I noticed a demonstration occurring on my way to class. As I approached, I noticed it was a religious demonstration, so I decided to partake in some participant observation since the demonstration may be of use for my study.
Throughout the day, I noticed one trend about the demonstration, a lot of people were protesting, I saw not many in support. The demonstrator, who I will name Mathew, was a middle aged white man. He had another white middle aged man as a subordinate, along with several asian student helpers. The demonstration was meant to be loud and noticeable. Mathew could be heard practically screaming "Hindu's, Bhuddists and anyone who does not believe in the one true God is a sinner" and "God does not love fags."
A vocal demonstration of this sort generated a vocal response, and by noon many students had set up camp around the demonstration and created their own signs, many meant to be comical, but others in response to what was being said, such as "Jesus still loves gays".
Mathew was definitly out to offend. He said that women should not be feminists, and should be subordinate, people of different faiths were sinners, homosexuals were sinners, under age drinkers were sinners; the list is very long. I think it was interesting that during my time of observation I noticed little to no student supporters of Mathew. It is my opinion that what he was saying was too radical, and the only comment I heard from a Christian in the crowd was "people are going to think that this is the only was to talk about Jesus, or that Jesus really love everyone."

I've attached my final draft below

DISCUSS
Discuss your inquiry, taking care to separate speculation from fact or data
Since my arrival at Illinois State University in fall of 2003 I have noticed two major trends that I observe almost every day: Cubs, Cardinals and White Sox fans will never get along, or even admit that their rival’s team is better regardless of whether the rival team won the World Series and their team finished fourth in the division, and that Christianity on campus is becoming more visible, prominent and important in a student’s daily life. I have chosen to research latter, since it may be next to impossible to explain why people continue to cheer for a team that hasn’t won the World Series in almost one hundred years.

I want to find out why being involved in a Christian Registered Student Organization (RSO) is important and even necessary for some students at Illinois State University. Has participation in these groups been growing, and if so why? What do students say about why they join such RSO’s?

The methods I used to investigate these questions were archival, participant observation and personal interviews. I attended RSO meetings, attended campus events and interviewed student leaders of Christian RSO’ and students who simply attended the meetings. I also examined Christian RSO websites in order to view how they represent themselves.

Christian Organizations on Campus

Through my research I have learned that student participation in religious RSO’s has been increasing (2001-2005). Campus Crusade for Christ has increased from 60 to 145 people in the last three years. According to Rebecca, a senior officer Death Resurrection,
Life, “DRL has seen a significant increase since I was a freshman (in 2002).” InterVarsity
has on average 50 people attend per week where two years ago it was about 30. Encounter’s
numbers have also grown from last year.

At ISU, the number of Christian RSO’s has grown over the past 50 years and their
color has changed also. Christian RSO’s have switched from primarily
denominational to interdenominational. Browsing through ISU’s 1942 year book I found
that out of the 6 student religious organizations 5 were linked directly to a certain
denomination (Catholic, Lutheran, Methodist, Episcopal and Presbyterian). The one
group that was interdenominational was the YMCA. In 1972 only 4 out of 9 Christian
RSO’s were linked to a denomination (Lutheran, Catholic, Methodist and Apolistic). The
remaining 5 were interdenominational (Movement in Crusade, Christian Collegians,
Christian Fellowship, Relating to Christ and Chi Alpha). Today, out of the 18 Christian
RSO’s at ISU only 5 identify themselves denominational (Lutheran, Methodist, Catholic
and 2 Baptist). Three of the four students I interviewed also changed denominations after
arriving at ISU. Luke went from Lutheran to non-denominational, Mark from Catholic to
non-denominational and Rebecca from Methodist to Church of Christ.

Student interviewees say that media is responsible for the shift to interdenominational
RSO’s. I asked Rebecca why she thinks an increase in interdenominational RSO’s has
occurred.

“I think the increase has occurred because of the introduction of non-denominational stuff
to the media. For example, Christian rock is appealing to people because it shows that
you don’t have to sing old, boring hymns. Christianity isn’t about tradition. It’s about a
personal relationship with God and Jesus. People are finding this out more with more
media exposure.”

Beside Christian rock, other forms of Christian media have been introduced recently.
“VeggieTales”, a children’s cartoon in which vegetables reenact bible stories has become
a huge success (bigidea.com 2005). “Seventh Heaven”, a family drama with the father as
a pastor, discusses good morals and is currently the longest running family drama on air
(thewb.warnerbros.com 2005). “The Passion of the Christ” was the most controversial
movie of the past 3 years (imdb.com 2005). And the soon to be released “Chronicles of
Narnia” is steeped in Christian metaphor (Soukup 2005). According to Mark “All of this
exposure has made being a Christian cool, you don’t only have to go to church Sunday
and dress up all the time. It’s becoming mainstream to be a Christian.”

Social/Moral Support

Religion is an important part of many people’s lives. Some students arrive at school and
lose their faith due to increased questioning of the environment around them. Others feel
overwhelmed by the amount of pressures put on them due to increased homework
requirements and peer pressure. These students turn to religious RSO’s for guidance. A
perfect example of this is Luke. I asked him why he joined Campus Crusade for Christ
(CCC).

“I was in a weird spot in my life. I was doing things in my life, things that were against
the law. I had fun at first, but then I started feeling like something was missing. I needed
someone to turn to. One of my friends suggested that I come to CCC with him just to see
what it was about. The people there understood where I was coming from. They
introduced me to Jesus, and showed me he was the answer.”
Religious RSO’s serve as a place of solace for many; “the meetings are fun and give lessons in leading a righteous life.” From my observations this statement is true. The formula of a religious RSO meeting is almost universal for each different group: discussion of assigned bible readings, maybe a guest speaker, group news such as upcoming events, singing and socializing. Many students who participate in Christian RSO’s, such as Luke, feel that the college social scene is less than conducive to Christian morals. They enjoy participating in the groups because they partake in fun social activities, such as a bowling night, with like minded people who stay away from smoking, drinking and other immoral activities.

Social Networking

One of the trends I discovered in my research is that students join a Christian RSO for the social factor as much as the religious. According to Mark, a Senior I interviewed: “I wanted to find a group with nice people, people I could be friends with.” Rebecca stated “I went to a few different religious RSO meetings when I first came to ISU. My friend took me to DRL, I met a few people, they were really helpful and I liked them so that is the group that I stayed with.” Practicing religion is an important part of participation in Christian RSO’s. That is what makes them different from any other general RSO. However, once a person decides they want to join a religious RSO, the social aspect is the overriding factor in choosing and staying in a specific organization.

The groups themselves do not have much difference in what they discuss. When I observed InterVarsity, the discussion was Hebrews 6. The point of the story was although being a Christian may be hard, one must not give up and continue living a moral life, away from sin. Campus Crusade for Christ’s meeting pertained to discussing the hardships of daily life (such as temptation) and how to deal with these challenges, by asking God for help and knowing other CCC members are there for support.

The main differences between the RSO’s are how they operate. InterVarsity has a live band consisting of 2 guitarists, a percussionist and a singer perform before and after each meeting along with discussion about planned events and any other news items and a presentation. Encounter also has music, but breaks into smaller groups of 3-7 people to discuss bible readings after the musical performance. These differences are one of, but not the overriding factor in deciding which RSO to join.

The main avenue for students in finding a Christian RSO is friends. According to Courtney, a sophomore in Encounter “I knew I wanted to join a Christian RSO, but I wasn’t sure which one. I had made some friends who were in Encounter so I decided to join that one.” However, if a student does not have any friends in a particular organization the group’s website presents much information. The websites of Campus Crusade for Christ, InterVarsity, Encounter, FUEL and others all show pictures of the group spending time together and having fun. They each talk about retreats, parties and events they have participated in and emphasize the social networking of the group. The groups do not appear to be just bible discussion gatherings, but a fun place to be and spend time.

Comparing Styles of Delivery

“Hindus, Buddhists and anyone else who does not believe in the one true God is a sinner, and will spend eternity in Hell!” said Brother John on September 13th during his annual visit to ISU’s quad. Brother John is a member of a traveling ministry that visits college campuses around the nation, preaching the fire and brimstone sermon that echoes back to
the Great Revivals of America’s past. His presentation from 10:00 am till 2:30 pm consisted of “revival preaching”: yelling, promises of Damnation and accusatory statements in order to grab the attention of students passing by. One of Brother John’s offensive posters read “You are a sinner if you are a Homosexual, Rock and Roller, Proud Person, Athiest, Angry Woman, Alcohol Drinker…”

Brother John drew an enormous crowd, reaching close to 150 students at its climax, but none of these were supporters, even though there were several students observing who I will arbitrarily classify as Christian due to the wearing of crucifixes or “What Would Jesus Do?” bracelets. One said “I hope everyone doesn’t think worshipping Jesus is like this.”

The Christian RSO’s presentation is much more open, friendly and inviting. I observed this by attending Campus Crusade for Christ’s “Do You Agree with Kyle” open forum. Kyle, a Junior at ISU began the event Thursday, October 20th at 8 p.m. by saying “I am not here to preach, I just want to tell you what I’ve observed by reading the bible. I haven’t read the whole thing yet, and I don’t have every passage memorized. But I’ve learned a lot, and I want to answer any question you guys may have.” He then proceeded to give stories from the bible and discussed how turning ones life to Jesus will lead to salvation.

In the weeks leading up to the actual discussion, the campus was littered with effective advertisement. It started with simple chalking on the quad that said “Do You Agree?” About a week later neon green posters appeared in almost every hallway of every building on campus that read “Do You Agree with Kyle?” The following week students began wearing neon green shirts that said “I Agree with Kyle.” The students not in Campus Crusade for Christ were oblivious to what any of this meant. Students and faculty were stopping and asking students “what does your shirt mean.” The CCC members would then respond that “Kyle is a student who wants to discuss the bible and how it has changed his life personally. We will be having an open forum on October 20th at 8 p.m. to discuss this.” Events such as “I Agree with Kyle” may be another reason why participation in Christian RSO’s has been increasing. Bolstering membership is the main goal listed on Campus Crusade for Christ’s parent website.

Our Goals
Imagine the changes the world would see if every one of the 60 million college students had an opportunity to hear and respond to the gospel every year. Our goal is to see as many students go from a place of unbelief to a place of belief in God. We want to see students embrace the purpose, love and forgiveness that God offers them in a relationship with Jesus Christ.

The “I Agree with Kyle” advertising campaign was effective as over 200 hundred students attended the forum. Although Brother John and Kyle had the same goal, recruitment, Kyle was trying to offend no one, was much more inviting and less accusatory and made a connection with the students. He wanted an open debate with discussion, not simply “preaching”, which is one-sided. He was therefore more successful in spreading his message to the student body. Brother John did not know how to connect with the student body. His website has no mission statement, and has no pictures of students socializing, having fun and helping one another. It consists of his doctrine, pictures of him preaching and links to websites or articles that he agrees with. In fact, his website was even more radical than his presentation on campus. Statements on his website include “I did not want to dignify ‘the little Queer in Wyo.,’ (Matthew Sheppard) by using his name. The sodomites want to make a martyr out of a pervert, who the Bible teaches was deserving of death.” and “we must know the enemy (Muslims)”. Although
his tactics may work for an older demography, college students are in a transitional part of their life, with much questioning, and a much more open mind due to the academic environment they are participating in. In the eyes of most students, Brother John is an extremist.

Conclusion

I feel that my study is far from complete. I have only begun to scratch the surface of what I can find and discover. I now know that joining a Christian RSO is more about friendship and socializing than scouring the bible for the tiniest tidbit of information. While people want to join a Christian RSO due to a need for something more, or guidance in a busy life, they stay because of the social network. More people are being introduced to the Christian community due to mainstream media exposure, and that has caused college students to become non-denominational; they do not want to follow the traditions of their parents, they want to find something new, something from their generation. I want to explore more of why this is occurring on the national scale. My belief is that I would results similar to those at ISU. Christianity, like so many other sacred objects is becoming a big business, and as more and more movie companies, record labels and book publishers try to cash in on this burgeoning industry, one of two things will happen: All of the different sects and denominations will conglomerate into one interdenominational group, or the differences between sects and denominations will become more concrete, due to a resistance of uniformity.

Files:
Ethno report.doc (Mon 11/28/2005 15:09)

REFLECT

Link
Connect with other resources and materials.
Related Articles/Findings:


Interview excerpts:
I have done research on how many RSO's ISU has that deal with Christianity. There are 19 total. Out of the 18, only 5 are denominational. This is a major shift from the research I have previously done, where almost all of the RSO that deal with religion were denominational. Also, excluding sororities and fraternities, religious RSO's are one of the largest categories of RSO's. This also differs from the past, when there were only a few Religious RSO's and were not a major part of the RSO community.

I also have done some formal and informal surveying on group membership. One person, someone who has attended ISU since 2001 said that the numbers in his group has grown substantially, by almost 100, although no "official" records are kept. Another person could not give specific numbers, but he said he has noticed an increase also. From my own observations, these religious activities are receiving more press also. I have noticed 2 stories in the vidette about on campus religious events this semester, and have found none from previous semesters in the vidette archives at Milner.

Literature Review:


The Following is a link to the listing of all Religious RSO's on ISU's campus
http://www.deanofstudents.ilstu.edu/studentorganizations/list/category/12

Implications
Could your findings have broader implications beyond this inquiry?
I have learned two developing trends from my research. 1. Participation in Christian RSO's has been increasing in the the past few years (apx. 2001-2005). 2. Students have switched from denominational RSO's, such as the Newman club (Catholic), to interdenominational RSO's, such as Campus Crusade for Christ and InterVarsity.

I would like to further investigate why these changes are taking place. I have already found the beginnings of this answer, and that is an increased media presence. From my interviews I learned that Christian media has become an influential part of mainstream entertainment today. This increased presence has shown students that church isn't "Boring" and can be fun and modern. I would like to find out why media conglomerates have been producing more shows, movies, books and bands. Is this simply because they have found an untapped market, or are do they really feel they are helping society as a whole by producing this product. I may never get a truthfull answer to this question.

I would also like to research if increased recruitment is a part of the growth of Christian RSO's. From my interviews I learned that students joined a group most often because "they were brought there by a friend or someone who lived on their floor." Yet these students had a pre-existing idea that they wanted to join a Christian RSO. I believe that joining a Christian RSO occurs in three steps. 1. The student has a desire to join a Christian RSO. 2. The student is introduced to the group by a friend, neighbor or acquaintance (or website or other means of advertisement) 3. The student stays due to the social network/involvement in the group. I would like to more fully research stes 1 and 2.