

Semester Missionaries Provide Lifeline for Churches

When she entered college, Jennie Reid had it all planned out: a little studying and a lot of partying. By the time she was a junior at James Madison University, it was not unusual for Jennie to black out several nights a week from alcohol consumption. She managed to pull through her studies, but one day she realized her life path was headed down the proverbial dangerous and curvy road. It was then that Carrie Graham, a student missionary serving at Aletheia Church, guided Jennie through a U-turn of faith called salvation that changed the course of her life.

Student missionaries, like Carrie Graham, use various approaches designed to engage those who might not be reached otherwise to learn of Christ's love. Whether it is cooking ethnic food, finagling free campus rooms for small-group meetings, coordinating sports games, or simply engaging in a conversation, student missionaries become "social experts" and are able to reach out on all levels.

Dave Proffitt, senior pastor at Aletheia Church in Harrisonburg, Va., testifies to the impact and critical need churches have for student missionaries. Proffitt, who has more than 30 years church planting and pastoral experience, traveled with four others from California to Virginia to begin Aletheia Church in 2000. Since that time, Aletheia has grown to 700 people, but Proffitt admits that "the key to maintaining the church is the student missionaries."

Student missionaries assist local churches, campus ministries, and the North American Mission Board (NAMB) missionaries with evangelism and church planting. While working as missionaries, their objective is to support community ministries, which include ministering to teenagers, working with campus ministries, or facilitating in church planting. Steve Canter, Planter and Partner Enlistment Manager for the Church Planting Group, believes student missionaries "are an invaluable resource for church planters. They help church plants with limited personnel and budget to expand their ministries and influence in a community."

Student missionaries prove to be essential for the growth and expansion of freshly planted churches because "they push to engage people relationally. These guys aren't afraid to try things and meet people and see people for who they can be and not what they are," Troy Palermo, Community Life pastor of Lifepoint Church in Columbus, Ohio, states.

Likewise, Proffitt concurs that without student missionaries, "these churches would have a hard time existing." Using Jennie Reid and Carrie Graham as primary examples of student missionaries, Proffitt is quick to describe the length these eager women will go to in order to create ministries that will draw, engage, and retain newcomers. Both have coordinated ministries and student

missionaries as well as served in vital administrative positions. Proffitt laughs with sincerity that Carrie Graham can start a church on her own. More importantly, these two “phenomenal” women, as Proffitt describes them, will even go to more personal levels while evangelizing, such as inviting people from several different cultures into their house at once for a meal before serving them the Word of God. As Proffitt sees it, “hospitality and evangelism are synonymous.”

Students must meet minimum requirements to be accepted as a NAMB Student Missionary. Collegiate students must have completed their freshman year in college and have a minimum 2.0 GPA. They must be a member of a Southern Baptist church, and not be out of school for more than six months at the time of application. Students can begin serving anytime during the year and may serve for up to five consecutive semesters. Those who meet the qualifications are given an honorarium and supplemental insurance, paid for by NAMB, supported by the Cooperative Program and the Annie Armstrong Easter Offering®. For more information on qualifications and the application process, go to www.answerthecall.net and click on the “Students” tab.

Although the pay is relatively low, the rewards of their efforts are high. Because student missionaries are both high school and college-aged, they are able to easily connect with a younger, more modern generation. Proffitt says that by using students, at least 18,000 personal evangelistic visits have been made to Virginia area student apartments.

Student missionaries open the doors to meeting hard-to-reach people. For example, Proffitt and two student missionaries were able to minister to two Kurdish families for three hours in their homes. What is so unique about this experience is that the Muslim Kurdish families invited them into their homes to hear the message of Christ’s love and plan of salvation. Proffitt believes that many students possess the gift of being able to connect to such diverse people. Palermo adds that there is no doubt that “God uses their gifts strategically.”

Student missionaries are able to serve in other critical areas vital to the church. Palermo explains that one of the student missionaries in his church concentrates on working with teenagers while others serve solely with the children’s ministry. In addition to ministering, some organize and lead outreach programs. Equally important are the talents student missionaries provide in the administrative arena, enabling beginning or young churches to get the clerical assistance needed. Doing survey work and/or serving as church planting interns prior to starting a church is another way church planters are using student missionaries.

Steve Canter sees another benefit to using student missionaries. “Many of our church planters, pastors, and career missionaries got their start as student missionaries. As they serve in a student missionary role God paints a picture of their future and they respond to the call.”

“Nearly all of our student missionaries have decided to go into being some kind of vocational missionary,” a point that brings Proffitt to high energy and irrepressible excitement. “They’re all over it!”

Palermo probably puts it best when he speaks about the student missionaries and the critical need churches have for their use. “They are the backbone of our structure,” he admits. “They are our lifeblood.”

For more information on using student missionaries to support your church planting efforts contact Steve Canter, Planter and Partner Enlistment Manager, at (770) 410-6225 or scanter@namb.net.

References

Palermo, Troy, interview by author, 19 June 2007, Columbus, Ohio, phone interview.

Proffitt, Dave, interview by author, 19 June 2007, Harrisonburg, Va., phone interview.