



Staying Connected 101:

A guide for connecting congregations and students

Introduction

Most statistics suggest that a significant percentage of the students who come from a strong habit of church involvement at home will arrive on campus only never to darken the doorway of a church or collegiate ministry while attending college. From spiritual exploration to simple disinterest to participation exhaustion, the reasons for this disconnect are many. Regardless of the reasons, the outcome is the same: *students and the church part ways.*

In fact, many of the habits broken while in college will take years to restore, if restored at all. This reality diminishes us all. The effort to maintain this habit of connection is vital for the spiritual health of our students and the long-term health of our local congregations and The United Methodist Church.

But what are we to do? How can we prevent our students from leaving both their homes and their faith communities when they go to college? How might we stay connected to them and keep them connected to us? Here, we offer some suggestions from what is termed the “push/pull” technique. The student’s home congregation encouragingly “pushes” the student toward collegiate ministry, while the collegiate ministry gently “pulls” the student into a deeper relationship with Christ, the church, and other students of faith. These suggestions do not make for a foolproof plan. However, by implementing some or all of them, we better the chances when our students leave for college they will not leave their faith at home, too.

Part One- Preparation

A student might think he is ready. She might tell us that she is ready. However, many times, those all-to-ready students arrive in the great-wide-world of the college campus only to be overwhelmed by everything new. They have new sheets, new pillowcases, new books, new computers, new classes, new friends, and new lives. Their worlds, almost instantaneously, alter. In such an altered state, our bearings can be hard to find.



With a little cooperative preparation on the part of both their home churches and the collegiate ministries and congregations at their new colleges or universities, we may increase the chance that when our students are overwhelmed they will seek out the familiar. They will seek out the church.

Here are some ideas that might make that transition easier:

- Before the student leaves, ask her for her new address at college.
- Regularly, send her a copy of the church's newsletter, announcement sheets, bulletins, and/or church magazines. This will keep her up-to-date while also reminding her that the church remembers her.
- As a high school graduation gift, encourage the student's family, the church, or someone in the church to give him a good, rigorous study bible. While exploring the world anew at college, this will encourage a deeper, more investigative stage of his faith.
- Give the student the contact information for the collegiate ministries and/or campus ministers/chaplains at her new school. Encourage her student to visit those ministries once on campus.
- Provide the name and location of local churches that he might attend near the campus.
- With the student's permission, give her name and contact information to the campus ministers, chaplains, and local church ministers near the student's new school.
- Try to identify other students, if any, already at that college or university and who are connect with the church who might connect with him before he arrives.
- Regularly include college students in your personal and public prayers.

Part Two- Practice

Once your student arrives on campus, start several habits:

- Begin a habit of regularly texting, Facebooking, tweeting, or writing your student to say hello and to keep his home faith community in the forefront of his mind while away from home.
- Mail a devotional book. Your student might not read it. Nevertheless, it will let her know that you are thinking of her. You never know, between homework and classes, it might be read.
- Invite a group within your congregation to adopt your student. A men's group, women's group, prayer group would be a good start. Have them send care



packages loaded with special treats, cards, and general notes of encouragement, especially at exam times, birthdays, and holidays.

- If you are in a congregation near a college campus, intentionally seek out ways to make your church community accessible to students. For instance, pick the students up for Sunday worship, invite college students to special welcome meals in their honour, coordinate with the offices of the campus ministers/chaplains an event on campus, plan special mission trips for college students during their term breaks, start an adopt-a-student program at your church.
- Encourage college students to become involved in multigenerational ministries at your church working with older adults or young children.
- Offer a student a paid internship in your congregation.

Final Exam- Furthering the Connection

These “push/pull” efforts will better the chances that our students see the importance of faith and a faith community as they challenge and expand their perceptions of the world at college. Together, we might encourage our churches to retain its faithful students as we struggle to be faithful caregivers to our students.

Remaining actively engaged at this dynamic and pivotal intersection of faith and the academy is vital for preserving our heritage and embracing our future. These students are not simply congregation members—who will one day sit in our pews, they are the laity who will teach our Sunday school lessons, lead our bible studies, be are our lay leaders, be are our lay workers, be our worship leaders, be our ordained ministers, and be our bishops.



The more actively engaged we are in the lives of these young people the more actively engaged they are to be in the lives of our local congregations and communities. Such a connection between the church and the academy, between the congregation and the student is not accidental. It must be intentional. This intentional connecting of student to church must be essential to who we are if we are to become the church we must be.

*Come, Father, Son, and Holy Ghost,
To whom we for our children cry.
Unite the pair so long disjointed,
Knowledge and vital piety.*

--Charles Wesley