



## New England Presbyterian Campus Initiative

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Dear Friends,

Greetings in this season of Advent! As 2008 draws to a close, we wanted to share with you the work that we have done together this year on behalf of the New England Presbyterian Campus Initiative (NEPCI), and invite you to continue your participation in this project. This year has provided great insights, and we pray that 2009 will bring new opportunities to strengthen our ministries to college students across New England.

After months of gathering data, interviewing campus ministry stakeholders, and conducting student focus groups, the research phase of the project is near completion. In 2008, the project collected information about the 215 accredited colleges in New England, including information about religious life on each campus. We also spoke in-depth with nearly 40 individuals about the current work of campus ministers and the challenges facing that work. Finally, we sat down with four groups of students from different colleges to talk about their perception of the church and its ministry on campus. In 2009, we hope to visit a few more college campuses to continue hearing student perspectives.

Now we move into the process of sifting through these mountains of data and drawing conclusions from what we have heard. Demographically, we have already learned much about the campuses we serve:

- There are just over 70 colleges in each of the three presbyteries supporting this project. With more than two colleges for every Presbyterian church in the region, Presbyterian con-

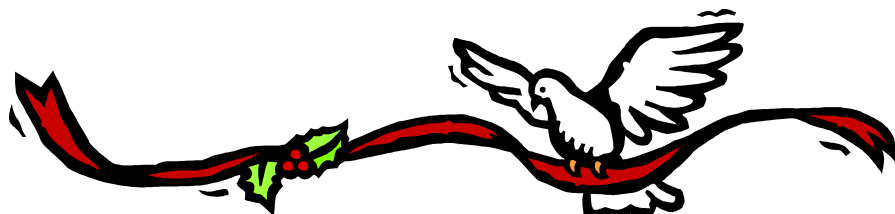
gregations cannot support colleges alone— we need to create new partnerships with the presbyteries and other denominations to serve students.

- Presbyterians throughout New England currently support 23 ministries to college students, reaching less than 10% of New England's campuses.
- Limited data from the colleges suggests that the strongest religious tradition in New England is Roman Catholicism. Only small percentages of students identify with specific mainline Protestant denominations, while a significant minority claim no religious preference.
- There are hundreds of religious activities on New England's campuses— but more than half of all on-campus religious activities take place at 34 of the region's most elite colleges. Most of these colleges employ their own religious life staff. Many other campuses are underserved.

The data reveals that there are many opportunities to minister to our campus neighbors, both by remaining faithful to the work we already support and by exploring new ways to reach out.

Though we are still sifting through interview notes, several generalizations have already emerged from our conversations with chaplains and campus ministers, congregational ministers, college faculty and staff, and other Presbyterians:

- Students want to change the world. Those who work with students spoke repeatedly about today's college students finding real purpose in making a difference in the world. For religious students, service opportunities



- are an important way to live out their faith.
- Students need relationships to grow. Ministry is about life-changing relationships. Students need challenging mentors and companions for their faith journeys, and safe communities that will allow them to authentically relate to one another.

- Churches must reorient themselves toward college students. A commitment to campus requires churches to completely rethink their mission and ministry— do we embrace the vision of young adults? Are we willing to let go of our old ways and use student gifts? Will we trust that our gifts of time and money will bear fruit, even if results aren't immediate?

We have also learned much about the wonderful ministries Presbyterians already support. Through our supported campus ministries, Presbyterians:

- Witness to Christ's love through a ministry of presence. At the University of Massachusetts Lowell, the Protestant campus minister spends one morning a week in the student center with a full-sized door that says, "The Pastor Is In." Students can respond to provocative questions on the door, or just share. The University of Vermont's minister offers prayers "here or to go" in the student union building during exams week. Our chaplains are often the first clergy called during a campus emergency, providing care to the entire college community.
- Bring students together in communities of faith. In addition to weekly worship, students at MIT enjoy the hospitality of the Protestant campus minister during an annual retreat to his family cabin in Maine. The weekend ends with communion on the lakeshore, bringing students closer to God and to one another. At Providence Presbyterian Church in Providence, RI, student members of the church gather regularly for fun and fellowship outside of worship.

- Help students reach out to the world. The Presbyterian Undergraduates at Yale, a ministry of First Presbyterian Church in New Haven, CT, hopes to spend January ministering with Presbyterian mission co-workers in Egypt. The ecumenical ministry at the University of New Hampshire runs the Cornucopia Food Pantry, which offers assistance to needy members of the community.

This litany of the life-changing work Presbyterians already support make this sound suspiciously like a fundraising letter. Although the ministries named above would probably welcome your financial contributions, NEPCI is not asking you for money in this holiday season. **We are asking for your prayers and your time.** Pray for the campus communities we serve and those yet to be served. Ask questions and help strategize when we visit your presbytery in the spring. Attend the spring event we're planning, in which we hope to bring campus ministry stakeholders together to strategize for the future (details forthcoming).

In some sense, the NEPCI project parallels our Advent discipline—just as we wait with expectation for the Christ child, just as we hope with confidence for God's justice to permeate our broken world, this year of NEPCI is one in which we patiently discern the Spirit's call into the messy, beautiful mosaic of campus life. We hope that this project is only the beginning of a grassroots movement in Presbyterian campus ministry, one through which God will raise up a generation committed to fulfilling the Advent vision. Please join our efforts through your prayers, your ideas, and your time, now and in the days to come.

May you and your loved ones experience the riches of God's grace in this holiday season, and commit anew to your calling in the coming year.

Blessings,

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