

DISCERNMENT

Theology and the Practice of Ministry

Volume 10 | Issue 1

Article 3

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Recommended Citation

Kirkland, Dylan () "National Status of Campus Ministry in Churches of Christ," *Discernment: Theology and the Practice of Ministry*. Vol. 10: Iss. 1, Article 3.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.acu.edu/discernment/vol10/iss1/3>

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Theology and the Practice of Ministry

National Status of Campus Ministry in Churches of Christ

Dylan Kirkland

Abstract: This article introduces research on the status of campus ministry in Churches of Christ in the United States, particularly related to ministry size, baptisms, and preparation of future ministers and missionaries. It then analyzes significant correlations in the data. Finally, it takes the data (based on the 2022-2023 school year) and makes comparisons with similar markers of success from Church of Christ campus ministries from roughly fifty years ago.

Introduction

Campus ministry is a small, but significant part of the impact of Churches of Christ in the United States. While research has been done in recent years to point to the numeric decline of Churches of Christ across the country, this can prove difficult due to the autonomous nature of churches. Especially challenging is discerning the status of campus ministry within these churches since no official records are kept of ministries and their impact. Anecdotally, many ministers with longer tenures and historical knowledge would speak to ups and downs across the various eras of campus ministry in Churches of Christ, which I would delineate as follows: the Bible Chair Era (1918-1965), the Campus Evangelism Era (1966-1970), the Crossroads Era (1971-1987), and the present (1988-2024). However, the lack of quantifiable data makes it difficult to arrive at conclusions, particularly relating to the past thirty-five or so years.

In addition to these obstacles is the variety of data that exists from decades past. Throughout the mid-1960s and mid-1970s, records were kept of “church preference,” Bible Chair course enrollment, devotional attendance, and those who planned to preach.¹ In the late 1970s, records were kept of attendance and baptisms.² Into the 1980s, reports were given from various ministries without strong, comprehensive data which was national in scope.

¹ “Yearly Statistic Totals 1965-74,” *Campus Journal* 7 4 (1974): 13.

² Tom Jones, “The Seventies and Campus Ministry: What Happened and What Did We Learn?” *Campus Journal* 23 3 (1980): 3.

This research is an attempt to begin to understand the national status of campus ministries in the Churches of Christ, with some preliminary comparisons to prior decades. For the purposes of this study, the status of these ministries was measured by a set of quantifiable markers that shared some similarities with prior research. This was done for two reasons. First, discussions of the best ways to quantify success are beyond the scope of this paper. Fruitfulness in ministry could certainly be measured in other ways, and yet in another sense, cannot be fully measured. Secondly, using a different set of markers would make it nearly impossible to compare with years past in any quantitative sense. Therefore, discussions surrounding the benefits or drawbacks of various quantifiable markers are avoided; while these may be worthwhile regarding future changes in metrics, they are not useful in comparison with the past. A few supplementary questions were added to investigate potential correlations between those makers of success and various contextual differences.

Scope and Methodology of Research

Because of the lack of an official and updated directory, the exact number of campus ministries run by Churches of Christ is hard to discern but is a little over one hundred. In July 2023, at the annual Campus for Christ conference, one leader from each of these ministries was asked to complete an online survey. In order to be certain that active ministries without a representative at the conference were not excluded from research, outdated campus ministry directories were consulted and compared to church websites. After compiling a list of active ministries which had not participated, other leaders were contacted at the start of the 2024 spring semester and asked to take the survey.

A few dozen of these ministries operated primarily on or near Christian campuses, particularly on or near Church of Christ universities; eighty-four ministries operated primarily on or near state universities or non-Christian private universities. Both groups were initially asked to participate in the study. However, because of the small response size of ministries to Christian universities and the differing approaches to ministry between the two groups (particularly related to evangelism), those ministries to Christian colleges are not included in the data below.

Of the eighty-four ministries to non-Christian universities, fifty-four participated in the survey; this presented an 8% margin of error at a 95% confidence level. In addition to this limitation, some ministries were limited by having newer ministers attempting to answer questions that might have extended beyond their tenure. A small number were between full-time

campus ministers but still operating an active ministry and thus had another knowledgeable church leader answer questions. Finally, one question was asked related to COVID-19's effect on campus ministry which is impossible to quantify, but important in relating current data to pre-pandemic ministry.

Research Questions

Fifteen questions were asked of respondents, as listed below.

1. In which region of the country is your church/ministry? (NE, MW, S, W)
2. What is the enrollment of the primary campus to which you minister?
3. What is the average attendance of your church?
4. What was the average attendance of your ministry's main gathering this past school year?
5. How many of your students are planning on going into congregational ministry?
6. How many of your students have gone into congregational ministry in the past four years?
7. How many of your students are planning on going into cross-cultural missions?
8. How many of your students have gone into cross-cultural missions in the past four years?
9. How many students did your ministry baptize this past school year?
10. How many students has your ministry baptized in the past four years?
11. How much do you believe COVID-19 impacted the above answer in comparison to prior years? (Significantly decreased, slightly decreased, stayed the same, slightly increased, or significantly increased baptisms)
12. How many graduate apprentices have worked with your ministry in the past 4 years?
13. What is the nature of your ministry staff? (e.g. 1 full-time male campus minister, 1 part-time female graduate apprentice)
14. If your ministry has a full-time campus minister, how many years has your primary campus ministry leader served in their current role?
15. Which of the following best describes your campus ministry facilities? (Campus ministry building/house, designated area within church building, no facilities, or other)

An additional question about the campuses ministers served was also asked, which was later used to factor out ministries to Christian colleges, as previously stated.

Survey Results

Church Size, Ministry Size, and Baptisms

On a basic level, responses showed data relating to the average size of ministries and their churches, the number of students baptized, and ministers and missionaries being prepared for future service. The overwhelming majority—just under 80%—of responses came from ministries in the South (AL, AR, DC, DE, FL, GA, KY, LA, MD, MS, NC, OK, SC, TN, TX, VA, WV). However, the size of their churches varied, with the most common being 120-299 members at 38% of ministries. The average ministry attendance was forty-three, with just four (7%) ministries of over one hundred students. If these four ministries were factored out, the average attendance would drop to thirty-four. Only the largest, at 250, represented a significant outlier; after factoring it out, the average would drop to thirty-nine.

During the 2022-2023 school year, these ministries baptized 185 students, which amounts to a little under 3.5 each. Just as four ministries made a significant impact on ministry size, the four ministries that baptized ten or more students accounted for almost half (47%) of students baptized. Over the past four years, the average number of baptisms dropped to 2.5 per year per ministry. The same four ministries that baptized the most students in the past year also baptized the most over the past four years. Because research of this sort has not been done in decades, ministers were asked how they felt the number of students they baptized over the past four years would compare to the number prior to COVID-19. In response, 5 (9%) said they felt it significantly decreased baptisms, 16 (30%) said it slightly decreased, 6 (11%) said it slightly increased, 1 (2%) said it significantly increased, and 26 (48%) said it stayed the same. Altogether, only six (11%) of the fifty-four felt that COVID-19 made a significant impact on the number of students they've baptized compared to prior years.

Minister and Missionary Preparation

Regarding students preparing for congregational or cross-cultural ministry, numbers were relatively small. At present, ministries averaged 1.67 students preparing to serve in congregational ministry. When asked about students preparing to become missionaries, the average dropped to 0.67. These estimates of students who may enter ministry upon graduation are relatively consistent with the actual number of students who have done so over the past four years. Ministries averaged 1.69 students who have entered congregational ministry in the past four years and 1.47 students who have entered cross-cultural ministry in the past four years.

While ministry training through apprenticeships is a common theme at campus ministry conferences, most ministries do not yet have any form of an active apprenticeship program. Most (thirty-two) have had no graduate apprentices trained in the past four years. Of the other twenty-two ministries which have had graduate ministry apprentices, some have had a significant number, as high as sixteen. However, most trained one to four.

Staff Size and Tenure

As for staff size, calculations were made based on full-time equivalency. Part-time ministers, part-time graduate apprentices and undergraduate interns were counted at 0.5. Full-time ministers and full-time graduate apprentices were counted at one. The average staff size was 1.93. While many ministries had full-time apprentices, only six (11%) had more than one full-time minister. Most ministry staff were supplemented by part-time ministers, part-time apprentices, or undergraduate student interns. Thirteen ministries (24%) had gender diversity on staff (excluding undergraduate interns). The average tenure (at the current campus ministry position) of lead campus ministers was a little over six years. Five of the fifty-four ministers (9%) had served within their current role for fifteen or more years.

Significant Correlations and Analysis

Correlations Related to Baptisms

A few interesting points in the data deserve recognition. First, no strong correlations existed between baptisms and church size, ministry size, minister longevity, staff size, or staff gender diversity. As stated before, only four ministries had over one hundred in attendance and only four ministries baptized more than ten students. Interestingly, though, only one ministry fell into both groups; three of the four ministries that baptized more than ten students in the past year were less than one hundred in attendance. The facts remain similar when looking at baptisms over four years.

In fact, only two strong correlations existed related to baptisms. The first was between facilities and baptisms. Whereas those campus ministries with facilities (such as a house or ministry building) were likely to have a higher attendance, they actually baptized less than half as many students this past year when compared to those with no facilities (or only a designated area in a church building), baptizing 2.14 as compared to 5.79. The second was related to the region and baptisms per student. In the past

year, those in the Northeast, Midwest, and West baptized one student for every 6.7 students in their ministry, whereas those in the South baptized one student for every 15.5 students. Two of the four ministries that baptized more than ten students were also outside of the South, despite those in the South making up almost 80% of the ministries.

In other words, ministries that were larger and in places where Churches of Christ were stronger did not baptize more students on average. Ministries were likely to be larger in larger churches or at larger universities, but this did not necessarily translate into baptizing more students. This is possibly because those ministries without facilities or in areas where they may not receive as many incoming Church of Christ students are driven to be more evangelistic; they have less of an automatic presence.

Correlations Related to Minister and Missionary Preparation

As far as the number of students preparing to enter vocational ministry in an existing congregation or in cross-cultural missions, a few points arise. To start, there was no strong correlation between students preparing for ministry and the number of baptisms within their ministry or the tenure of their campus minister. Actually, the correlation between minister tenure and students preparing for ministry was one of the weakest in the data.

However, there was a correlation between students preparing for ministry and geographic region. Ministries in the South were roughly twice as likely to have students preparing for vocational ministry. Surprisingly, though, there was no strong correlation with ministry size and students preparing for ministry. In other words, the reason ministries in the South have more students interested in ministry is not simply because they are larger on average. Churches in the Northeast, Midwest, and West are baptizing more students on average, but those in the South may be preparing more for vocational ministry.

Historical Comparisons

Number of Active Ministries

Taking these points related to ministry size, baptisms, and students preparing for ministry and comparing them to prior research has its limitations but is worthwhile nonetheless. Unfortunately, nationwide statistics from Church of Christ campus ministries over the past several decades are sorely lacking. The one statistic which has been measured somewhat consistently is the number of active ministries.

Rick Rowland's *Campus Ministries* attempted to provide a historical account of the ministry of Churches of Christ on college campuses up until 1991. Rowland's history paints a picture of the relatively slow growth of ministries during the early parts of the Bible Chair era, growing from one ministry at UT-Austin in 1918 to twenty-one ministries by 1957.³ Directories published in *Bible Chair Journal* (1958-1968) and *Campus Journal* (1968-1993) give us the best picture of the number of active ministries. By 1967, the year more data began to be collected, Churches of Christ operated eighty-nine ministries on state university campuses.⁴ This number peaked in 1986 at 224 during the height of the Crossroads Era.⁵ Following the disruption caused by the Crossroads Movement and the departure of several ministries for what would become the International Churches of Christ, the number declined. It first dropped to 191 in 1988, as ministries associated with the movement were not included, then increased to 214 in 1989, as some ministries disassociated with the movement or churches started new ministries.⁶ Slowly, however, the number declined again. In 1993, Churches of Christ counted 195 ministries in the United States.⁷ In 2003, an article in *Christian Chronicle* cited 186 Church of Christ ministries in an online directory.⁸ At NCMS 2005, a map promoting campus ministry planting listed 157 campuses with Church of Christ ministries.⁹ In 2008, a survey by Campus Ministry United found 150 ministries.¹⁰ This decline plateaued for

³ Rick Rowland, *Campus Ministries* (Fort Worth: Star Bible, 1991).

⁴ "Directory of Campus Ministries - Churches of Christ," *Bible Chair Journal* (Spring 1967): 8.

⁵ "Directory: Campus Ministries of the Churches of Christ," *Campus Journal* 24 4 (1986): 18-22.

⁶ "Directory: Campus Ministries of the Churches of Christ," *Campus Journal* 31 2 (1989): 17-23. "Directory: Campus Ministries of the Churches of Christ," *Campus Journal* 31 4 (1989): 24-31.

⁷ "Campus Ministries of the Churches of Christ," *Campus Journal* 35 1 (1993): 25-32.

⁸ Lindy Adams, "Shortage of Campus Ministries, not Ministers, Most Critical, Leaders Say," *Christian Chronicle*, June 2003, 22.

⁹ "Our History," Campus Ministry United, <https://campusministryunited.com/about-us/history/>.

¹⁰ Kari Ogle, "Campus Ministry United workshop focuses on 'target-rich' mission field," *Christian Chronicle*, July 24, 2014, <https://christianchronicle.org/campus-ministry-united-workshop-focuses-on-target-rich-mission-field/>.

a few years, with an updated map listing 146 in 2014.¹¹ In 2017, Neil Reynolds cited “less than 150” ministries, estimating “around 125.”¹²

In my personal research for this article, I found that the number of ministries with a hired minister or strong student group (possibly between ministers) would likely be much closer to 100, depending on what one considers “active.” However, in looking at these online directories as far back as 2017, I have often found that ministries listed may be as small as a college Sunday school class in a church which has been between campus ministers for years, which I did not consider an active ministry for the purposes of this research. In this case, the discrepancies between my more recent numbers and the number of ministries over the past decade from these miscellaneous sources is likely much smaller and not indicative of a sharp decline around the turn of the decade. Time will tell whether this decline is continuing or leveling off.

Ministry Size, Baptisms, and Minister and Missionary Preparation

Less prevalent are nationwide statistics on ministry size, baptisms, and minister and missionary preparation. However, piecing sources together can provide some preliminary comparisons to the status of campus ministries roughly half a century ago. A report in the Summer 1974 edition of *Campus Journal* provides statistics for the prior decade.¹³ During the 1966-1967 school year, around the genesis of the Campus Evangelism movement, the average campus ministry had twenty-six attending weekly devotionals; the next year the average was only twenty-three. However, the average increased from the 1968-1969 to 1974-1975 school years, ranging anywhere from thirty-nine to fifty. As the Crossroads Movement began to affect a larger number of ministries, statistics began to change from those enrolled in courses and attending devotionals towards those baptized. Interestingly, though, a note from Gordon Ferguson counts an average of thirty-three *non-Christians* per campus ministry attending weekly ministry devotionals at the start of the 1980s.¹⁴ Regarding ministry size, the average campus ministry today is on par with those near the end of the Campus Evangelism era and the start of the Crossroads Era. By the height of the

¹¹ Tyler Ellis, Facebook post in Campus for Christ Conference group, Facebook, August 8, 2014, 12:20 pm. <https://www.facebook.com/groups/CampusForChristConference/permalink/606676722785046/?mibextid=c7yyfP>.

¹² Neil Reynolds, *The Need for College Ministry* (Self-published, 2017), 20, 41.

¹³ “Yearly Statistic Totals 1965-74,” 13.

¹⁴ Gordon Ferguson, *The Crossroads Controversy: One Preacher’s Perspective* (Fort Worth: Star Bible, 1983), 39.

Crossroads Era, however, ministries had almost as many non-Christians attending as current ministries have altogether between Christians and non-Christians.

Statistics on baptism are less clear, with just a few years with which to compare. During the 1975-1976 school year, ministries baptized an average of 4.7 students.¹⁵ By 1978-1979, however, the number had jumped to 11.25 baptisms per ministry, and twenty-five baptisms per ministry at the turn of the decade.¹⁶ A few references also point to the ministries which baptized the most students. During the 1976-1977 school year, four ministries baptized over forty students.¹⁷ By the end of the decade, this number had jumped to twenty-two.¹⁸ Today, no ministry has baptized more than thirty students per year over the past four years. What is the same as the late 1980s is the high proportion of baptisms by a small number of ministries. In 1979, 72% of baptisms came from the top 13% of ministries; this year, 47% of baptisms came from the top 7% of ministries.¹⁹ Since firm baptism statistics prior to 1975 are lacking, it is impossible to say with certainty, but it seems that the early 1960s saw fewer baptisms and the 1980s continued to see an increase. Anecdotal evidence points to this conclusion, with some of the largest ministries of the Bible Chair Era baptizing few and some non-Crossroads affiliated ministries baptizing many in the 1980s.²⁰ Based on the evidence, it is likely that current baptism rates are similar to those at the end of the Campus Evangelism Era and start of the Crossroads Era, similar to ministry size.

Finally, a few comparisons can be made to the number of students preparing for vocational ministry. From the beginning, campus ministers saw that their efforts on the state university campus could contribute to “a continual output of ministers, teachers, elders, and strong Christian men

¹⁵ Jones, “The Seventies and Campus Ministry,” 3.

¹⁶ Jones, “The Seventies and Campus Ministry,” 3. Ferguson, *The Crossroads Controversy*, 39.

¹⁷ Kip McKean, “National Campus Ministers’ Seminar Report,” *Lexington Church of Christ Bulletins*, August 30, 1981, 4.

¹⁸ Ferguson, *The Crossroads Controversy*, 39.

¹⁹ Jones, “The Seventies and Campus Ministry,” 3.

²⁰ For example, the Spring 1970 edition of *Campus Journal* states that the ministry at UT-Austin regularly had a few hundred students each semester in the late 1960s, but had only baptized 17 students in the past 6 years. Meanwhile, the Fall 1982 issue of *Campus Journal* showed the efforts at Troy growing from one baptism in 1980 to 23 in 1982, though it was not associated with the Crossroads Movement. Many other examples could be cited throughout the 1980s.

and women.”²¹ However, prior statistics only listed those “planning to preach,” and it is uncertain whether this included students also preparing for cross-cultural missions, though it does seem to include those serving in other forms of congregational ministry like campus ministry. From the 1966-1967 to 1974-1975 school years, the number of students planning to preach ranged from 1.58 (1971-1972) to 4.04 (1967-1968).²² By 1981, the average was 5.27 per ministry, in all likelihood in conjunction with more baptisms and larger ministries.²³ Regardless of how this trend continued through the 1980s, it is clear that the ministries had a significant source of new ministers, as they were able to continue their reach onto new campuses. Today, the number of students preparing for vocational ministry per campus is similar, but smaller in total because of the lower number of active campus ministries.

Conclusion

All in all, the typical campus ministry in Churches of Christ is located in the South and serves a campus with more than 15,000 students. Its church has an average attendance ranging from 120-299 and its ministry is around thirty-nine students. In the past year, it baptized three students, which is slightly more than the average of the past four years. Two or three students may be considering serving in some form of vocational ministry after graduation. The campus minister, a male, serves the church and ministry with some assistance, a graduate apprentice, or a couple of undergraduate interns.

Over the past several decades, Churches of Christ have seen a significant rise and fall in both the number of campus ministries and their evangelistic impact. Though data is limited, the transition from the Campus Evangelism Era to the Crossroads Era saw a great increase in the number of ministries and baptisms per ministry. Since then, those numbers have fallen. The number of ministries is roughly half of what it was at the peak of 1986, with their evangelistic and vocational ministry preparation impact also falling. The statistics show that most campus ministers do not see a significant difference between these numbers and pre-COVID levels, but the history also shows that there is not a significant difference between these numbers and pre-Crossroads levels. In many ways, Church of Christ

²¹ C.L. Kay, “Need for Bible Chairs in State Schools,” in *Teaching Them to Observe All Things: A Study of Bible Chairs Among Churches of Christ*, ed. Earle McMillan (Austin, TX: Church of Christ Bible Chair, 1957), 12.

²² “Yearly Statistic Totals 1965-74,” 13.

²³ Ferguson, *The Crossroads Controversy*, 39.

campus ministries are having a similar impact as they did fifty years ago, just on a smaller number of campuses.

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