

Staying Connected to College Students

When I opened my footlocker in my freshman dorm room, I found a prayer tucked inside that remained tacked up in every dorm room and apartment for the next four years:

*Dear Lord,
May (name) never forget
that nothing can happen to them
that the two of you can't handle together. Amen.*

"Young people need models, not critics." - John Wooden

What Can Congregations Do?

- Send them away with a tangible reminder of their faith community. For example, a cross signed by other church members, a travel mug with the church's logo, young adult study Bible, picture frame signed by the youth group, a water bottle with the church's logo, etc.
- Send your newsletter and other church information, events, and updates to their college email account.
- Include them in email updates about prayer requests and pastoral care concerns in the church family.
- Make sure they have contact information for other church members at the same school.
- Make Facebook introductions. Find out who their college Chaplain, Presbyterian Campus Minister, or pastor at the local PC (USA) congregation is and connect them to each other via Facebook or email. This will make the initial contact from the local clergy less awkward and more effective, and will be more comfortable for your college student, too.
- Contact staff members you know at PC (USA) churches near the colleges your young people will attend and find out about specific ministries they have with local colleges or what their specific ministries and interests are. For example, if one congregation goes to Haiti every year, and your young person has been and wants to go again, make that connection. Or, if you find out the congregation has a large choir and pays soloists, make that connection between the church and your young person who is a music major, etc.
- Ask the session of your church to subsidize a trip for one of the pastors or youth leaders from your church to go visit college students and take them out for a meal. Be sure to ask the college students when it's convenient for them, and find out when they have a football game, or are performing, and make the most of the visit. This is especially welcomed if there are multiple young people from your congregation at the same school within a few hours from your home church.

- Plan something they will look forward to when they are home for breaks. Make it fun and informal, yet an upgrade from high school youth group. Create a Facebook page for college students from your church, and let them decide what date works best for everyone, where they'd like to meet for dinner, etc. Let them choose and be sure that as many people as possible are able to come. For instance, don't plan a Christmas party on December 16 just because it works for you, when all of the students may not be finished with exams yet, etc.
- Invite them to speak to the congregation about their campus ministry experience or invite them to serve as liturgists or ushers while they are home for summers or holidays. Some college students love being involved in Easter sunrise services or Christmas Eve services, while some would rather sit with their families, so be sensitive to that when extending an invitation.
- Give them resources and ideas for summer jobs. If you know they need an internship with an engineer, and there are engineers in your congregation, put them in contact with each other. Or, let them know about Presbyterian Camps and Conference Centers who have Summer Staff opportunities for college aged young people. If they have a favorite presbytery camp or national camp/conference center, check their website for summer staff applications and information. Or, if they simply want to live at home and just do something to earn money, send them an email of local restaurants that are hiring or community swimming pools that are hiring lifeguards.
- Research opportunities for alternative spring breaks. Many colleges with campus ministries have something already in place, but if you have a lot of students at smaller schools or their school doesn't have anything planned, take a Facebook poll, and if they are interested, plan something yourself. This is a great chance for them to hang out with old friends, and better the world. Ask your Session about funds and fundraising since college students don't often have extra money. Also, keep in mind that you don't have to travel to another country. Save travel expenses and save the environment by finding something like Habitat a few hours down the road. And plan early. Start taking a poll by November for a March spring break, so you have an idea of numbers, and can start working on details. An outstanding resource is Presbyterian Disaster Assistance.
- Send mail, packages, gift cards, and food. Be sure to send a birthday card and be sure to send a package of goodness for final exam weeks. These packages don't have to be fancy or expensive, and one way to cut down on shipping is to mail everything in a large shoebox. Fill it with snacks (microwave popcorn, trail mix, candy, homemade cookies, etc.) and something fun like Post-Its, Sharpies, or good pens. Travel size Tide and Downy are also appreciated and fit in a shoe box. Depending on your budget, include a few small gift cards like McDonald's, Wendy's, Gas Stations, Target, Amazon, iTunes, and anything else that would help during exams or their drive home. Be practical and creative.
- Pray for them. Pray for their safety, their friends, their professors, the many changes in their lives, and their families.

Keep in mind that not all college age young people attend college right away, and not all move out of their house to attend college. Be sensitive to their needs as well and be sure to include them in all Facebook and email groups. Think of college ministry as the age bracket between 18–22, instead of their specific educational journey. And, if your church is located in a larger city or university town, consider starting a “Post High” / College Aged Sunday School class, or a Wednesday Night Dinner for local college age young persons. Be creative but be sure that it doesn't look like high school youth group, while also not looking like Theology on Tap, or other Young Adult ministries. There is a fine line in the 18–22 age bracket between glorified youth group and young professionals, so be aware of that in your planning.

What Can Parents Do?

- Help ensure the ideas for congregations actually happen in your church.
- Keep up with your child via Facebook, email, texting, and phone calls. Some parents find it helpful to try to plan to talk on Sunday afternoons, but text and email throughout the week.
- Ask the youth director or pastors of your church about local churches near your child's school. See if they know if there is a Presbyterian Campus Minister, etc. and share that with your child.
- Network with other parents. If anyone is headed to campus, send a care package with them for your child, and offer to do the same for them in return.
- When you visit your child, let them choose where to go for a meal, and allow them to invite their roommates, friends, significant other as well. This is not only great hospitality but gives you a chance to see a few of the people who now make up your child's day to day world.
- When you visit on a Sunday, go to church together.
- When your child is home for visits, have a conversation about house rules and family expectations, especially if there are younger siblings. Determine what curfew you can all live with since they aren't 15 anymore, but it's also still your house. Decide what events or meals you will do as a family, like church together and then lunch, and what meals it would be fine if they missed to visit their friends. Having these conversations shows respect on both sides while acknowledging trust as well.
- Send mail. Lots of mail. Cards, gift cards, snacks, laundry supplies, etc. You know their favorite foods, and what they like to do/eat when they are stressed. And send enough that the significant other or roommates could have some, too. Gift cards are always perfect, and don't require extra postage in a note or card.
- Pay their expenses to Presbyterian College Ministry Conferences like Montreat College Conference, alternative spring breaks, etc. If they want to go, do your best to make it a reality. Talk with your pastors and youth director if you cannot afford it and find out about scholarships.
- Pray for them and tell them you pray for them.

Relax. You have done your best and given them a firm foundation of faith. It is natural for this time to be a spiritual and person exploration, so encourage them and keep talking to them. Remain open and non-judgmental, and they will be more likely to share their questions, feelings, and keep you in the loop. And, as always, God continues to love them and want the best for them even more than you do.

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