



Office of Church Relations  
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# Church Relations Update

## In Praise of Student Chaplains



Fall semester 2013 is now over, and there is so much to celebrate:

- A benefit concert for Mennonite Disaster Service that raised more than \$5,000 for MDS's continuing work in and around Oklahoma City;
- Hosting a "Faith Mentoring" conversation on our campus that involved all the vice presidents for student life and most of the campus pastors at all five U.S. Mennonite colleges;
- Co-sponsoring a highly successful symposium on "Engaging Our Sexual Culture" with the Western District Conference's Human Sexuality Discernment Committee, featuring presentations by Ted Swartz of Ted & Co. and Keith Graber Miller of Goshen College;
- Hosting another wonderful symposium, this one entitled "Mothering Mennonite," with accessible and interesting presentations by faculty members from almost all the Mennonite colleges and universities in both the United States and Canada;
- Organizing the second in a series of Worship and the Arts symposia, made possible by an endowment established by the generosity of Rosella and Harold Duerksen and the Estate of Lucille Graber. This one again featured Thomas Long of Candler School of Theology at Emory University and John Ferguson of St. Olaf College. The focus this time was on death, dying and the Christian funeral. It was a remarkably successful event, deeply appreciated, especially by pastors.
- And last, but certainly not least, the successful completion of two wonderful Bethel Advent traditions: the *Messiah* sing on December 4, when some 300 individuals gathered in the Bethel College Mennonite Church to watch only student conductors, listen to an orchestra comprised entirely of students, marvel at the virtuosity of only student soloists, and sing the choruses of the Christmas section of Handel's *Messiah*. It was a moving and magnificent experience. Then, four days later, we again celebrated the Lighting of the Green, with a darkened campus, scripture and singing, and more than 200 candles encircling the Green. As always, the highlight for me was watching those 200+ points of light come walking to the center of the Green to form a huge "Christ candle" to the strains of "O come, all ye faithful."

But despite all those wonderful and successful gatherings, I've decided to focus this essay on my student chaplains. I have six this year: Leland Brown, Galveston, Texas; Ben Kreider, North Newton; Katelyn Melgren, Olathe; Marvin Rice, Ontario, Calif.; Alli Rudeen, Osage City; and Jerrell Williams, Garland, Texas.

In addition to monitoring the pulse of spiritual life on campus, keeping an eye out for special needs and serving as a resource to students in need, each chaplain plays a leadership role in some spiritual life activity (e.g., a weekly Bible study, Gospel Choir, discussion group leader, etc.). But the group also serves as my sounding board for weekly chapels.

We had just completed a four-part chapel series on the First Commandment – love God with heart, soul, mind and strength. Now it was time to focus on the second half of that commandment – love your neighbor as yourself. I told the chaplains, "I'd really like this to be a powerful and special service. Something memorable." Alli responded immediately, "Let's do a foot-washing service."

I quickly went into crayfish mode, backing up as fast as I could go. In my 30 years at Bethel, we'd never done a foot-washing service. The last time it was seriously suggested, we compromised with a hand-washing service.

I questioned whether we're really a close-knit enough worshiping community to try something that intimate. To a person, the chaplains told me it was high time to take the risk. I decided that six thoughtful, committed students could not be wrong.

So I planned a foot-washing service. We read Luke 10:25-37 (Jesus' response to the question: "Who is my neighbor?") and John 13:1-15 (the account of Jesus washing his disciples' feet). Then the student chaplains and I washed each other's feet. And then we waited.

And they began to come. Slowly at first, and certainly not everyone. But we filled the chapel time slot quite nicely. And within 10 minutes of the end of the service, I was getting e-mail thanking me for one of the most meaningful and powerful chapel services ever. I told those expressing appreciation that they needed to thank the student chaplains, not me.

In fact, I was so taken with the impact of that service that we devoted the next chapel service to talking about the foot-washing experience. And that one, too, was a wonderful worship experience, with three incredibly powerful and thoughtful reflections by two students and a faculty member.

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Later in the semester, Alli and Katelyn said, “It’s time for our 24-hour prayer event.” Alli and Katelyn had been talking about this since the beginning of the semester, but time—as it always does—had been slipping away. This time I was not in the least bit reluctant to throw my full support to the enterprise, but I had a different problem. I was going to be out of town on the weekend they were proposing to have the event.

The chaplains were unfazed by my impending absence: “Don’t worry, Dale. We can do this.” And they did. I returned to town right before the 24 hours ended—just in time to pray in one of the final half-hour slots. And those chaplains were right—they did do this!

The Agape Center in the Richert House (the location of the event) featured a bedsheet hanging from the attic window proclaiming “24 Hours of Prayer.” The interior of the house had been arranged with multiple prayer stations. More than 40 students, faculty and staff had signed up to participate. Members of the Bethel College Mennonite Church had prepared snacks for the participants—who, virtually without exception, had a moving and meaningful experience. It was a truly wonderful event (I’ve included, below, a press release about it). And, once again, without those student chaplains, it never would have happened.

Bethel College has been truly blessed by Alli, Ben, Jerrell, Katelyn, Leland and Marvin! Thanks be to God!

## Sharing the power of prayer

### Bethel College community spends 24 hours praying with and for each other

by Melanie Zuercher

NORTH NEWTON, KAN. – Bethel College student Alli Rudeen had always wondered what it might look like to pray without ceasing.

“That verse, I Thessalonians 5:17, always stuck out to me,” says the junior from Osage City, Kan. “I’m not good at sticking with one thing for a long time. I’m easily distracted.

“‘Pray without ceasing’ is a tough concept for me. What does it look like? What does it mean? But in these past couple of years, I’ve seen the power of prayer.”

Rudeen and her roommate, Katelyn Melgren, junior from Olathe, Kan., “discuss all things, at all hours,” Melgren says. So they talked about prayer.

Rudeen recounted some of the experiences she had this past summer as a counselor at Covenant Heights, a Christian camp located between Estes Park and Allen’s Park, Colo. One of Rudeen’s fellow counselors described having 48 hours of prayer on his campus.

As two of Bethel’s six student chaplains, Melgren and Rudeen didn’t think there had been a similar opportunity at Bethel in recent memory. “What if we started with 24 hours?” Melgren wondered.

They took the idea to their weekly chaplains’ meeting with Dale Schrag, campus pastor.

“I thought it was an awesome idea,” says Leland Brown, junior from Galveston, Texas, “but I was trying to figure out how we would do this for 24 hours.”

“I wasn’t sure what the campus reaction would be,” adds Ben Kreider, junior from North Newton. “Prayer can be uncomfortable to talk about. People think you have to be some kind of ‘prayer master.’ But once Katelyn and Alli described their vision, I was on board.”



Audra Miller

Alli Rudeen, left, and Katelyn Melgren look at some of the prayers and drawings that Bethel students left in the Campus Ministries house after 24 consecutive hours of prayer, Nov. 9-10. Rudeen and Melgren are student chaplains at Bethel who planned and organized the prayer time.

“We talked about the logistics, and would this be possible, and we all got excited,” says Melgren. “We could actually do this!”

“Alli came up with what it would look like. She brainstormed the different prayer stations, and what jobs would need to be done ahead of time. We looked at the Bethel calendar to figure out what day might work.”

“It was awesome to put it out,” says Rudeen, “and it was obvious it was what God wanted, since Dale, the chaplains and the community were all so supportive.”

They decided on 6 p.m. Nov. 9 through 6 p.m. Nov. 10—“We thought it would be good to do this before the crazy days of Thanksgiving break and then finals started,” Rudeen says.

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Student chaplain Marvin Rice, junior from Ontario, Calif., was in charge of sitting outside the cafeteria at noon for several days to encourage people to fill the time slots. Schrag got volunteers to provide snacks.

In the Nov. 6 chapel service, people were invited to write prayers and place them in a basket, which then went to the house for the 24 hours of prayer. People could pray for requests they found there and add more of their own.

The location was the Campus Ministries house, Agape Center. Rudeen and Melgren arranged different areas in the small house, including a collection of Bibles and books on spirituality and prayer, an altar with candles that burned for 24 hours and those that could be lighted by people saying prayers, art supplies, paper and pens.

They got 10 prayer shawls made by a knitting group that Bethel staff member Tricia Lopez is part of and invited people to pray over the shawls and to take one if they needed it or knew someone else who did.

Reflecting on the experience a couple of weeks later, Melgren was still in awe of the prayer requests, written on small pieces of paper, that she had collected at the end of the 24 hours.

Some were as simple as one or two words: "You know" or "Mom." Some seemed to list "all the burdens of Bethel students in one spot," Melgren said. "People had lost loved ones. They wrote lists of names and requests for friends.

"It was quite an honor to read them."

She also noted that there were "a lot of prayers for 'a revival on campus,' which we thought was really interesting. As chaplains, we're intrigued about what that would look like for students. There are a lot of different spiritual life activities on campus, so does that mean their needs aren't being met?"

She was most touched, she says, by a prayer someone wrote expressing feelings of sadness and hurt and of hiding it so well no one else could see.

"Then someone else wrote a response next to that prayer," she says. "It was a written prayer for someone who was writing out their heart, a response that said, 'You're never alone, there are others in this community who share your pain and are praying for you.'

"That floored me."

There were also song lyrics written out and several drawings.

Response from those who participated in the 24 hours of prayer was overwhelmingly positive.

"People were saying, 'I had no idea it would be so easy to spend half an hour praying,'" Rudeen says, and Melgren adds, "People tend to think it means you have to bow your head and fold your hands for the whole time."

"Prayer means so much more than speaking eloquently in public," says Rudeen. "It's your heart speaking with God. It's being plugged in and having your [spiritual] batteries recharged."

Some people went for their half-hour slot and ended up staying longer. Student chaplain Jerrell Williams, junior from Garland, Texas, did so when the person signed up after him didn't show. "Being there for an hour was no problem at all," he says.

"It was good to take a break from the world," says Audra Miller, senior from Hesston. "There was nothing to distract you or take your thoughts from what you needed to do right then. You could focus on one thing at a time, which we don't get to do often."

"I went early in the morning, when it was still dark," says Kreider, "and left when it had gotten light. There was such a cool vibe in the house.

"It was powerful to pray some of the requests of the community, to see how vulnerable people were, and to be part of something bigger."

"When I got there, there were a couple other guys there," says Brown. "Marvin had his gospel music on. We decided to all pray together out loud, with our different styles and perspectives."

"Bethel loves community and we have a good one," says Rudeen. "This was another kind of act. To pray for each other and with each other and to let yourself be prayed for—it's something different."

"Our prayer is that people used this as a time to get closer to God and that through that, in their relationship with Christ, their lives are changed," says Melgren. "Not because of us and this 24 hours of prayer, but because they had this quiet time with God and that changed them.

"We tried to emphasize that this was a time to wrestle with God, to say thanks and be joyful, as well as to bring prayers for themselves and others. This was a place where all emotions were OK to express."

"Someone tweeted: '24 hours of prayer was not what I wanted but it's what I needed,'" Rudeen says. "So I hope we opened that channel for people.

"Some people don't expect to encounter God so powerfully on a college campus, or in such a familiar place. I didn't. When I went there for my time slot, I was blown away. God was there, that was for sure."