

# PULSE

OUTREACH TODAY

## ONE IN CHRIST

Fellowship Monrovia Reaches Out to Diverse College Students

When Fellowship Monrovia organized a trip to the South for members of its college ministry, it led one student to have a revelation about her faith and racial identity.

“One of the students struggled a lot with reconciling her racial and ethnic community with her Christian community,” says Brittany Barron, director of the Monrovia, Calif., church’s Becoming ministry for college students. “She felt like she had to abandon one for the other, but understanding the church’s role in civil rights, she found a new way to be wholly herself.”

Launched in September 2013, the Becoming ministry aims to provide a safe space for college students to connect with their peers and explore life’s challenges. Roughly 50 to 100

students take part in the ministry, where they confront common issues for people their age.

“The two biggest questions they have are, ‘Who am I?’ and ‘How do I do Christianity?’” Barron says.

Fellowship Monrovia launched three years ago in suburban Los Angeles and averages about 1,700 worshipers on weekends. The church identifies itself as multiethnic and multigenerational, and while it welcomes college students at its main worship services, Becoming was created to allow young adults the opportunity to get to know each other.

About 80 percent of the students who take part in Becoming attend nearby Azusa Pacific University, a Christian institution, but the ministry has also attracted community

college students and young people who haven’t committed their lives to Christ, according to Barron.

Because students come from all walks of life, the church strives to inspire them to continue interacting, even if they disagree on hot-button social issues. Students bond by taking trips, like the civil rights tour in 2013 and a tentative trip to South Africa in 2015.

Fellowship also aims to bring together students who have vastly different knowledge of Christianity.

“In terms of our messaging, our content, we try to do our best,” Barron says. “So, if you are a biblical studies or theology major, you can grab something from this, or if you are hearing these Scriptures for the first time, it’s palatable.

That’s a line we walk.”

Fellowship Monrovia counts about 300 students among its congregants. A third of those participate in Becoming. College students in and outside of Becoming serve in the church’s children’s ministry or participate in life groups. But when they gather together for Becoming in particular, they break into small groups so they can explore questions of faith and life in a deeper capacity.

“We try to ask a lot of questions,” says Barron. “The conversation is shaped by their answers to the questions. Just asking the questions levels the playing field. We’re creating a safe space no matter where they are, which is the dream and the goal.”

—Nadra Kareem Nittle

ONLINE: [MadeForFellowship.com](http://MadeForFellowship.com)

## A SIMPLE FAITH

### Church Hosts Friendship Bible Study for Adults with Disabilities

Years ago Julie Oehme attended a weeklong volunteer camp designed to help adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities build Christian community. The camp inspired her to start Friendship Bible Study (FBS) at Messiah Lutheran Church in Brownsburg, Ind., where average Sunday attendance is 220.

Her intention was to invite those with disabilities into the church body so they might share their gifts and learn how to live their faith.

“In addition to volunteers who bring their gifts of music, organization, teaching, compassion, creativity and friendship, our students bring these same gifts and a spirit of joy to the table,” says Oehme, who describes FBS as a safe and forgiving community, free of pretense. “Because the students don’t have the same social boundaries, they’re more willing to be vulnerable.”

Josh Saupe has been attending the group since its inception and has recruited others by inviting his friends from Special Olympics. “FBS makes me feel accepted and welcome in the church,” says Saupe, who in the past 15 years has helped the group swell from six to 29 students.

A typical Thursday night class involves fellowship followed by singing, prayer, Bible study, games and snacks. Prayer time is always a highlight of the evening. “It’s amazing all of the things the students pray about,” says Cathy Canfield, the group’s co-leader. “If they see an accident on TV, they’ll pray for those involved. If there’s been a storm in the area, they’ll pray for the victims. They’ll pray about world issues.”

Canfield says that not only are the students tuned in to the wider world but they are also focused on those near them. “They notice if you’re a little off, and they’ll ask if



you’re okay,” notes Canfield.

FBS students, who range in age from teens to 50s, live with various issues including cerebral palsy, autism and Down syndrome. Oehme and Canfield cite fear as the biggest hurdle to overcome when working with those with disabilities. People fear offending someone, of saying the wrong thing or of looking stupid. The fear inevitably fades, though, once the students are seen as individuals.

“They’re not their disabilities,” says Oehme, “just as we’re not our weaknesses.”

Each week volunteers demonstrate to the students how to apply their faith in real-world scenarios. For instance, they might discuss conflict resolution and what to do if someone cuts in front of you at the movies.

Spiritual awakening, however, is a two-way street.

“Jesus said to have faith as simple as a child’s and the FBS students do,” says Oehme. “They have a simple faith and a simple trust and we don’t. That’s what they’re teaching us—to trust and grow in our faith.”

—Christy Heitger-Ewing

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