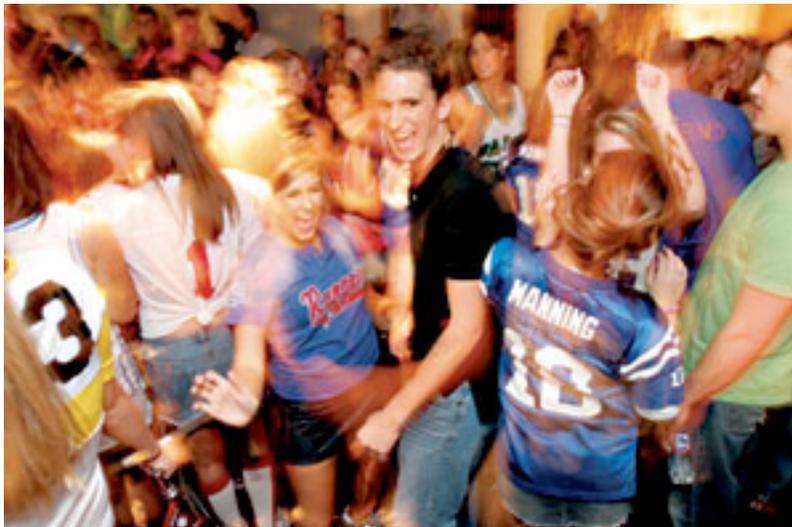


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## Faith and Frat Boys

Can devout Christians reconcile their beliefs with college culture? A look inside one campus

By JAFF CHU/BLOOMINGTON



At 3:30 on a Sunday Morning, Brandon Straub soberly surveyed the bodies draped across the sofas in his fraternity house at Indiana University. Two girls cuddled and exchanged a languid kiss. One's breast popped out of her low-cut top. "Aaaawesome," drawled one of Straub's frat brothers. Straub could only muster an awkward half-smile. "I'd be lying if I didn't say that seeing some of these scenes makes me sad," he said. "How will they feel when they wake up in the morning?"

Truth is, most of them wouldn't be up in the morning. By the time the revelers rose, after noon, Straub, 21, who is not only a loyal fraternity member but also a leader in the Greek InterVarsity Christian Fellowship, had already gone to church and come back.

As some of his frat brothers nursed hangovers and others cleaned up from the night before, Straub pondered his situation. He walks a fine line of faith at Indiana, which is currently ranked by the Princeton Review as America's No. 15 party school (and No. 5 in the category "lots of beer"). The challenge, Straub says, is "How can I serve God and love the guys here?"

College is traditionally a time of transition and new freedoms, the years when young people have to figure out for the first time who they are. The task is even more complex for the growing number of devout young Christians on secular college campuses who feel called to approach this time in a way that sets them apart. They draw inspiration from Paul's letter to the Romans: "Do not be conformed to this world." But the Bible gives few details on how to navigate the collegiate world in 2005, leaving Christians to grapple with tough questions as they try to integrate their beliefs--and themselves--into college life: Can they be, like Straub, both a brother in Christ and a brother in a frat? Or should they live only with other believers? How do they deal with stereotypes of Christianity that others may hold? And what does it mean to live out their faith on a secular campus like Indiana's?

Faith matters to students as they head off to college, but then it tends to lapse. In a national study issued last month by UCLA's Higher Education Research Institute, 79% of 112,000 freshmen surveyed profess a belief in God; 69% say they pray. Still, only 40% think it is very important to follow religious teachings in everyday life. Spiritually, "college is a time of flux," says Alexander Astin, the study's co--principal investigator. That leads to "a dramatic falling-off of religious participation during the undergraduate years." But a significant minority are holding fast to their faith. Fourteen percent put themselves in the "other Christian" category--dominated by the nondenominational Protestant churches that have proliferated across the U.S.--up from just 5% in 1989. And 26% of the students surveyed call themselves born-again Christians, which would be a natural constituency for religious-fellowship groups on campuses. Evangelical student leaders at Indiana University estimate that fewer than 5% of the

30,000 undergraduates participate in one of the campus's Christian groups. But that's an uptick since the stridently secular 1960s, says dean of students Richard McKaig. In the past five years, "attention to spirituality has been especially strong." But committed Christians seem to want more than just spiritual living. "They're looking for something deeper," he says.

At Indiana, there are five main fellowship groups for evangelical students. The distinctions tend to be stylistic rather than substantive--the religious equivalent of J. Crew vs. American Eagle vs. Abercrombie. Campus Crusade is the largest, drawing as many as 350 students to "Cru," its weekly meetings, which, like those of all the groups, feature singing, Bible study and prayer. (Students say it's the best for dating opportunities as well.) The Christian Student Fellowship (CSF) is set apart by its house on Greek Row in which students of faith can live together. The Navigators, known for rigorous Bible study, are seen as more intellectual. InterVarsity is the most ethnically diverse, with higher numbers of African-American, Asian-American and Hispanic students in its ranks. And Greek InterVarsity is aimed at fraternity and sorority members.

But all the groups tend to go about their business quietly. "They kind of operate under the surface," McKaig says. Josh Sanburn, editor in chief of the Indiana Daily Student, notes that the number of students in the fellowships is roughly the same as the school's African-American student population, but unlike the Christians, "the black students on this campus are very good about making sure they're heard." Evangelical students, however, see their spiritual mission differently. Says sophomore CSF member Emily Hoefling: "We usually believe what affects people more than a newspaper article is to see people living Christian lives."

Joshua Hoke, 21, a preacher's son from Franklin, Ind., was more interested in having a good time than in setting a Christian example when he arrived at Indiana in 2002. At home, "Christianity wasn't a choice, and I wanted to do what I wanted to do," he says. "The culture of college is, If it feels good, do it." He

says pot was his drug of choice but admits that he also drank heavily and even tried cocaine. None of that felt as good as he had hoped. One night in his sophomore year, he went for a walk, talking along the way to a God he wasn't sure was listening. "I said, God, are you even on this campus?" Hoke recalls. As he wandered down Greek Row, he heard music. "I thought it was a band in some frat," he says, but it was actually CSF's worship team. He saw the CHRISTIAN STUDENT FELLOWSHIP sign outside the house and went in.

Today Hoke lives in the house with 54 others, in what director Bill Kershner says is "possibly the biggest Christ-centered community living together on a college campus." CSF bought the house in 2001, after the fraternity that had occupied it was suspended for alcohol violations. Christian students share rooms with one or two other like-minded students, eat their meals in a communal dining room and get together for one-on-one spiritual mentoring and small-group Bible study. One women's group is studying Song of Solomon; an all-male group is looking at biblical role models like Abraham, King David and Jesus' disciples.

Some CSF members say they wanted the academic challenge of a secular school but appreciate the house's spiritual ethos. "It's almost like going to a Christian school," says Andrew Harper, 23, a senior from Indianapolis, "but you're not totally excluding yourself from the world." Says Tyler Irwin, 20, a sophomore from Polson, Mont.: "I don't want to put myself in a compromising position, with lots of alcohol and lots of girls and not a lot of clothes." House rules ban drinking, tobacco, illegal drugs and premarital sex. Room doors must be open when students of the opposite sex are together inside. Marks of holy living are everywhere. In the corridors, residents have posted snippets of Scripture, like FLEE THE EVIL DESIRES OF YOUTH. On a recent Friday night, as other Greek Row residents headed for bars, CSFers watched the animated film *The Incredibles* in their basement lounge.

For believers who live together--at CSF or in off-campus houses

and apartments--insularity is a real concern. Lane Bowman, 22, a Crusade senior from Chesterton, Ind., lives with four other Christians and admits, "I'm immersed in a Christian bubble." He says he prays regularly that he can break out of his bubble and share his faith. But his cultural cues--his music, his books--are almost all Christian. The "angry music" that he liked in high school--such as Eminem's--is out, replaced by Christian rockers like Sonicflood. His nonclass reading tends toward books like *Lord, Change My Attitude (Before It's Too Late)*, a guide to Christ-centered thinking by Illinois pastor James MacDonald.

Reaching out to other students is easier for the faithful who live in regular campus housing. Senior Kathryn Nelson, 22, a Crusade member from Milford, Ohio, recalls how she invited the atheist girl across the hall in her old dorm to join her at Bible study and would talk with the Jewish girl two doors down about faith. Now that she shares a house with nine other Christians, she has lost such casual, everyday interactions. "When you're living with people who aren't Christians, your ministry is right in front of your face," she says.

That was what attracted Greek InterVarsity's Straub to frat life. He pledged after an older InterVarsity member told him it would be "an incredible ministry opportunity," he says. "Try to think of another time when you'll live with 100 other guys, most of whom don't want to be bothered with God right now." But influence can flow both ways. Early in his freshman year, Straub found himself waking up after a couple of drunken nights, suffering a spiritual hangover of guilt. Now he leads a weekly Bible study in his secular frat. It's a daunting challenge, but he draws strength from Paul's letter to the Ephesians, in which the Apostle urges believers to "put on the full armor of God, so that you will be able to stand firm against the schemes of the devil." The idea "is very manly," Straub says with a smile. "If I'm saying to God, 'You're my man,' then I have to aspire to be a warrior for him."

Christians at Indiana say one of the biggest battles they fight is the stereotype that they are intolerant of the way other people live.

"I'm in a Teaching in a Pluralistic Society class," says InterVarsity member Jennifer Beach, 19, a physical-education major. "People will talk about how women are oppressed and how that comes from the idea in the Bible that women have to be submissive."

Others lament that they are lumped with fundamentalist Christian groups--whether or not they agree with them. Protesters from Old Paths Baptist Church in Campbellsburg, Ind., 50 miles from Indiana's Bloomington campus, have come to the school weekly, toting posters of aborted fetuses and shouting anti-gay slogans. A picketer spotted Greek InterVarsity member Samantha Schein wearing an Alpha Phi sorority sweat shirt and told her that she lived in a "house of sin." "I said, 'Can't you just be quiet?'" says Schein. "Other students will just assume most Christians are like that."

What is true is that some of the students are making their mark in ways that will never draw much public attention. On the first Tuesday night after Easter, Greek InterVarsity president Peter Howell went door to door in his house, Sigma Nu, inviting his brothers to Bible study, as he has done every week for the past two years. Just two of the 70 brothers accepted the offer, but that doesn't mean the rest haven't been affected by Howell. "In the biggest meathead frat, he's himself. He's 100%. And no matter what day I say no, he'll always come back," says junior Trevor Loe, who declined to attend that week's session. "One day, when I'm ready, I'll remember Peter."

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