



So, You Want to Start a UKirk Ministry

By Rev. Miriam Foltz

“For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.” – Jesus

UKirk stands for “university church.” (Kirk is the Scottish word for church.) Some UKirks are campus ministries out of a single congregation, while others are supported by their Presbytery. Some are 501©3s that have been around for decades, while others are recent start-ups that involve part-time leadership. Whatever your campus ministry’s model, Christ calls the church to support college students in their transition from a child-like faith to an adult faith, providing intentional spaces for Reformed worship, fellowship, mission, and spiritual discipleship. UKirk is not just a bridge between a church and the campus nearby; UKirk invites students to be the church on campus.

For four and a half years, I served as the organizing pastor of UKirk – St. Louis, the Presbyterian campus ministry serving Washington University and St. Louis University. In the fall of 2014, I developed a mission study with the support of a local church, and we launched in January 2015 with funding from the 1001 New Worshiping Communities Seed Grant and support from the Presbytery of Giddings - Lovejoy. We hit the ground running that Spring 2015 semester. We raised financial support and leadership buy-in from congregations around the Presbytery, and we secured recognition by both campuses to be present at the Fall orientation fairs. It involved a lot of hard work, committed leadership, constant reassessment of expectations, and a deep faith that ministry was happening regardless of how many students showed up at any one time.

At the end of this Quicksheet is an assessment tool that the UKirk Collegiate Ministries Association prepared for church leaders to faithfully answer during the discernment start-up process. Starting a campus ministry is not for the faint of heart. Walking onto campus and inviting college students into Christian community is daunting. Campus ministers are doing gutsy evangelism and heart-breaking pastoral care while often being undervalued and underpaid. If you are a church leader reading this, go make a donation to your local campus ministry. If you are an aspiring campus minister, know that the UKirk network celebrates your work!

So maybe this article’s title was misleading. There’s no formula or starter-kit to bring a UKirk to your local college or university. Starting a UKirk requires your leadership and the buy-in of every single person that you can get at the table. It involves lots of discerning conversations about the model of gathering and funding, sometimes going back to the drawing board when initial ideas don’t work out. It involves hours of cheerleading and reminding folks from area churches that the goal is not to get students to show up at 10 a.m. on a Sunday morning. First-year students spend 87.6%¹ of their time in college on campus. While it’s so important to provide students with off-campus intergenerational opportunities, the church has to stop expecting students to magically show up in worship one Sunday, when the students haven’t left campus for anything else in weeks. So gather your church’s leadership, Presbytery leadership, the leadership of other area congregations, and through the assessment tool, begin to outline the possibilities for a campus ministry in your context!

¹ This is a made-up figure. However, I’m sure the average percentage is high. On residential college campuses, first-year students eat, sleep, study, work out, buy groceries, see medical professionals, and generally have all their daily needs met each day without ever having to leave campus. Why would they ever leave campus for something like church?

For potential campus ministers and volunteer leadership, four final pieces of advice:

- 1) Take this assessment tool seriously. Answer the questions in as much detail as you can. And the questions will inevitably raise more questions – write those down too! Also, you shouldn't have to answer these questions yourself; hold broader church leaders accountable. In the midst of church decline, ask how campus ministry can be part of the church's work of resurrection, to proclaim the Good News even in the midst of death. Part of years one through four² in any campus ministry is trying things that don't go according to plan. Having a process to assess how and why things went and noting how to do things differently the next year is the foundation of "success"!
- 2) Connect with campus ministers already serving in your contexts. My Lutheran and Episcopal colleagues cheered me on, provided opportunities for ecumenical events (especially in the early days when we had 2-3 students!), and had bountiful insights for how and why things happened on campus. Ecumenical colleagues make campus ministry possible and fun. They also provide realistic programming and financial expectations for doing campus ministry in that immediate context.
- 3) Use the UKirk network! There have been 30+ UKirks started over the past decade. Some are still going while others have evolved. But incredibly important, Christ-centered ministry has happened along the way. I give thanks for the *many* Presbyterian campus ministers who encouraged me in the early days, giving insights on everything from how to organize a trip to the Montreat College Conference to how to create community amidst high-achieving collegiate cultures. Send an email to ukirknational@gmail.com for connections with other campus ministers!
- 4) A final budgeting note: The nature of campus ministry is that the majority of the budget should go towards staffing. Free or low-cost meeting space is widely available either on campus or through a nearby church. Programmatic materials for a campus ministry are similarly low-cost. (Presbyterians are great about donating their cooking skills or money towards Bible study materials!) So, commit to paying your campus ministry leadership equitably – including benefits! This will ensure that quality leadership will be committed to your ministry for the long-term.

It was with great joy and some sadness that I left my call at UKirk – St. Louis in July 2019 to serve a congregation in Delaware. A central part of my call there was that I was called to be organizing pastor, but not the ministry's long-term pastor. God was faithful. My successor was a person truly fit for the call, to take the ministry to its next phase of existence. Where two or three, ten or twenty, young or old, Tier 1 or community college students are gathered, God is there and faithful still. Amen.

UKirk Assessment Tool:

Please click on the following link and the UKirk Assessment Tool should download automatically:

https://s3.amazonaws.com/mywt5-files/wp-content/uploads/sites/130/2020/05/22151558/ukirk_assesment_tool_updated.pdf

Office of Christian Formation: <https://www.presbyterianmission.org/formation>

UKirk Collegiate Ministries: <https://ukirk.org/>



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² As well as years five through a hundred and four. Every year in campus ministry is a new adventure!