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One Nation Under God: Navigating Tensions Between American Culture, Christianity, and Education

Cassie Engvall
Western Washington University

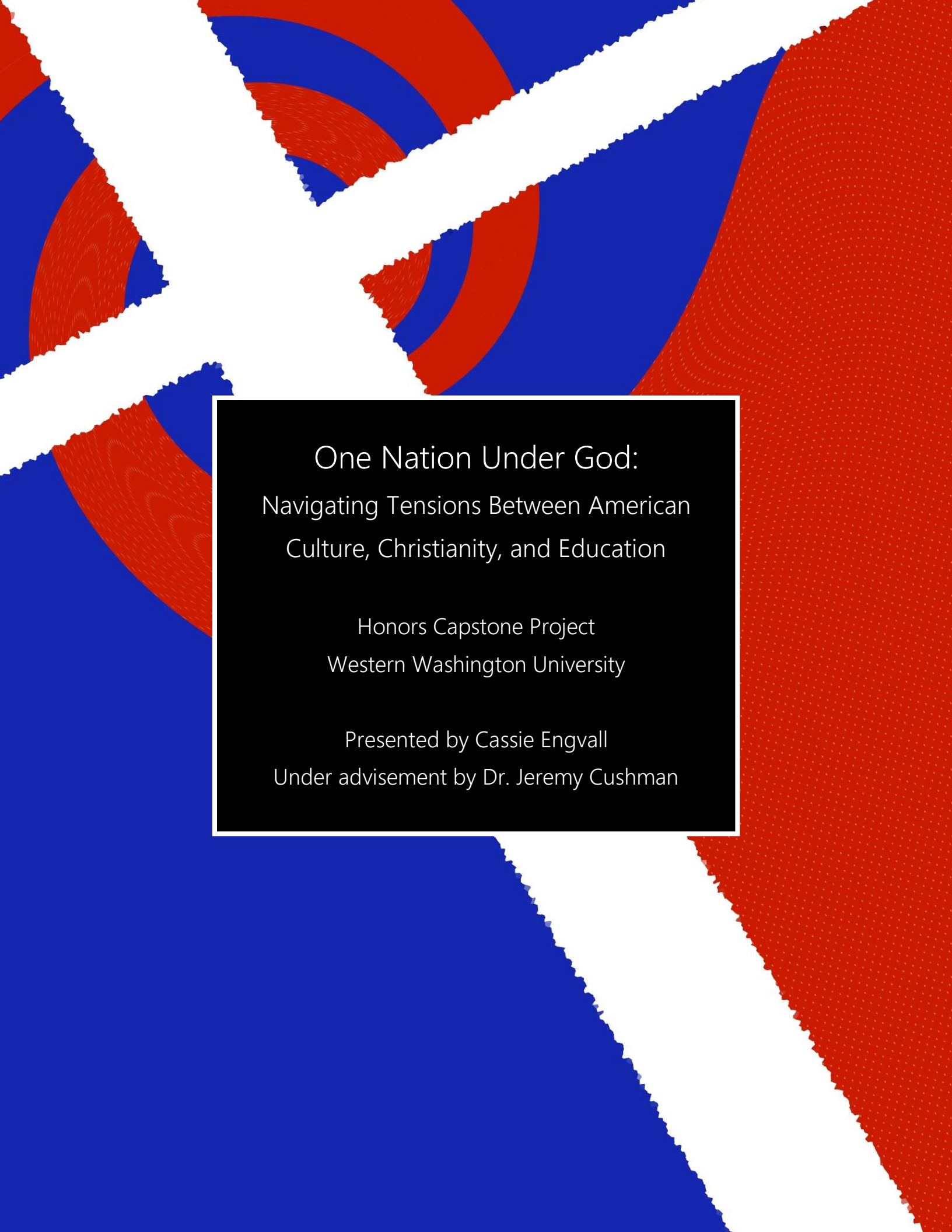
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One Nation Under God:
Navigating Tensions Between American
Culture, Christianity, and Education

Honors Capstone Project
Western Washington University

Presented by Cassie Engvall
Under advisement by Dr. Jeremy Cushman

Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God – this is your true and proper worship. Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is – his good, pleasing, and perfect will.

Romans 12:1-2 (NIV)

Stories: An Introduction

As a Theatre Arts major, I'm fascinated with stories – the ones we choose to tell and how we choose to tell them. Stories reveal what information feels important to us, and in turn, our values and perspectives. They are so much more than a list of facts strung together: they are a way of articulating who we are and what we experience. As we pull information from the world and examine cause and effect, we naturally construct narratives. And when we share stories, we invite others to see through our perspective for a moment and then respond by reinforcing, challenging, or complicating our worldview. Stories are an exchange.

To articulate what this project is, it seems appropriate to begin with two stories.

The first is how I arrived at a project on this topic in this particular format. When I was a freshman at Western, I thought I already knew what my honors capstone project would be: directing a play adaptation of *Crime and Punishment*. I had read the book in high school and loved its moral dilemmas, contradictory characters, and concrete depictions of philosophy. The play adaptation, by Marilyn Campbell and Curt Columbus, condenses those elements into a 90-minute psychological thriller set inside Raskolnikov's mind – the mind of an unrepentant murderer. It's well-written, fascinating material that would be a fun challenge to direct.

I came across another, equally interesting play a couple of years later. This one drew me in partly because it seemed to address a real gap in the shows selected by Western's Theatre Department – an absence of religious content. The play was Lucas Hnath's *The Christians*. It opens with a sermon in which a pastor shares that he no longer believes in Hell, and then faces the consequences as his congregation splits and his relationships unravel. Hnath's script cleverly avoids taking a side in the theological debate. Instead, the play explores the deep relationships and real commitments people form in religious communities and how hard it can be to wrestle with scripture. As a

Christian student at Western, I have heard several of my peers openly denounce organized religion and Christianity in particular. I hoped that this play would humanize people with religious faith and create opportunities for dialogue.

Shortly after I read *The Christians*, I took a one-credit course designed to help me prepare for my capstone project. My professor, Dr. Goldman, recommended working on a project in one of three areas: something related to your major field, something related to your intended profession (especially if that was not the same as your major field), or creating curriculum for other students. At the time, I still intended to direct *The Christians*, even though my major concentrations were acting and education (not directing). I believed that the project would help me prepare for directing high school students as a drama teacher. I started listing necessary resources and possible advisors, planning to get started that fall.

At the beginning of senior year, however, I realized that I might not have the availability to complete a directing project. By then, I was a full-time student, working ten hours a week, and committed to twelve hours a week as a small group leader with Campus Christian Fellowship. I wanted to direct, but couldn't find a way to make that work with my schedule. I started trying to come up with other ideas that would combine my interests, but by the middle of winter quarter, I felt stuck. I began to pray regularly for inspiration and an opportunity to work on something I genuinely cared about.

As I was searching for spring quarter classes, I came across one titled English 201: Writing in the Humanities (Christianity and the U.S.). That caught my attention – it was a class that might allow me to explore ideas I had already been thinking about throughout college in more depth. I registered for the class, then sat down to brainstorm project ideas. A few hours later, I had scrawled four pages of notes for a project which contrasted aspects of American culture with Christian values. Although the project would involve some traditional research, I didn't want to write a straightforward research paper; I wanted my piece to be accessible to more than an academic audience. Taking

inspiration from Tom Romano's *Fearless Writing*, a book about multigenre that I had been reading in my English education class, I instead envisioned a project with multiple shorter pieces tied to the central theme of navigating tensions. Multigenre would give me a real writing challenge and help me apply some of my favorite principles of theatre to the page, giving me the chance to present stories where the audience plays a necessary role in making meaning. The project would relate less to my major, but more to ministry, which at this point had become my intended vocation.

"A multigenre paper arises from research, experience, and imagination. It is not an uninterrupted, expository monolog nor a seamless narrative. A multigenre paper is composed of many genres and subgenres, each piece self-contained, making a point on its own, yet connected to other pieces by theme and content and sometimes by repeated language, images, and genres.... The craft then – the challenge for the writer – is to make such a paper hang together as a unified whole."

Tom Romano¹

Once I was confident that I had a concept for the project, I contacted Dr. Jeremy Cushman, the professor for English 201. It turned out that I had registered before the class was restricted to freshmen and sophomores. Thankfully, he didn't kick me out and was actually very receptive to my ideas. He agreed to be my advisor and has provided endlessly helpful feedback throughout the creative process since.

I will always be curious about how Western students would have received *The Christians*, but I am still quite proud of this project.

The second story that I think is helpful to frame this project is my own religious journey, simply because it positions me as a writer. I write in various personas throughout the pieces in this project, and writing with generalizations can make me seem like I think I'm an expert. I am only an expert on my own experiences in what can be an extremely

¹ Romano, Tom. *Fearless Writing: Multigenre to Motivate and Inspire*. Heinemann, 2013. p. 8.

personal topic. Still, it was important to me to explore the human impact of how the identities of “American” and “Christian” intersect in concrete terms. To do so, I wrote pieces where I am the object of study, encountering these tensions during my college years. I hope that by detailing my story here in the introduction, my perspective will make a bit more sense.

My faith journey, abridged: When I was little, my family went to a Baptist church every Sunday. I grew up learning about God there and believing He was real, and I remember hearing that that should affect the way I lived. To me that mostly meant treating others well and not doing the things God said not to do. I didn’t learn much about God from my family. I prayed with my parents every night before bed, which consisted of me praying out loud for a memorized-by-rote list of friends and family and then singing “Jesus Loves Me” and “Away in a Manger” with them. When I was ten, I asked if I could be baptized in water, and I was. It was a happy occasion, though it’s hard for me to remember if I understood the full significance of baptism at the time.

As I got older, the nightly prayers stopped. My family ended up switching to a much larger Baptist church closer to home. Although this church had youth programs, I struggled to make friends; most of them had known each other for years, and it was hard to be the newcomer. Still, many of my friends in middle school and high school were Christians, meaning that we believed God was real and did the things “good Christians” were supposed to do.

I graduated from high school in 2015 and moved to Bellingham to attend Western Washington University. My roommate at the time attended a local church and invited me to join their college ministry with her. I attended somewhat regularly, but theatre rehearsals generally took priority for me. When I did go, I again found it hard to make friends. By the end of my freshman year, people were still asking if it was my first time there. By sophomore year, I stopped attending completely. I withdrew from the friendships I did have, began an unhealthy long-term dating relationship, and

increasingly isolated myself from other people. When that dating relationship ended right before my junior year, I realized how different I had become. I no longer liked the person I was, I had no close college friends, and I was dreading my return to school.

In that place of anxiety and stress, I had what I can only describe as an encounter with God. As a result, I began praying regularly and joined a different campus ministry, Campus Christian Fellowship (CCF), during my first week back on campus. In CCF, I really learned and internalized that following God is less about rules and more about *relationship*. That truly changed my life, putting my character and future on a new trajectory. I could spend pages and pages writing about what I have witnessed in my life and others' since then.

So, why this project exactly? I can't answer that. But in theatre classes, actors learn that when you're trying to understand someone's motivations, it's usually less helpful to ask "why?" than to ask "what for?" *Why* asks questions about past experiences and desires. I've outlined those above, but it would be hard for me to articulate a single reason why I wanted to do this project.

What for, though, is rooted in the present, getting at purpose, what we want to happen. I'm not here to talk you into putting your faith in God. If you can be talked into that, you can probably be talked out of it just as easily. That's not what I'm after. But I do hope this project complicates the way you think and talk about Christianity: its role in the United States, its implications for real people, and what that means for those who have faith and those who don't.

Because there's really a third story at the core of this project: the story of the United States as a "Christian nation" founded on "Christian principles" and led by "Christian leaders." This rhetoric persists even though it would be difficult to reconcile contemporary American culture with the Kingdom of God depicted in the gospels. Those are very different stories.

But these are just my thoughts. Please accept this invitation to catch a brief glimpse of my perspective and, by doing so, to participate in the creation of new meanings. I believe this story belongs to you as much as it does to me.

Glossary²

American [*uh-mer-i-kuh* n] *adj.*

1. Of or relating to the United States of America or its inhabitants.
2. This definition is really broad, and in that way, accurate?

Culture [*kuhl-cher*] *n.*

1. The quality in a person or society that arises from a concern for what is regarded as excellent in arts, letters, manners, scholarly pursuits, etc.
2. But also, not necessarily what is *excellent*... maybe what is popularly valued?

Religion [*ri-lij-uh* n] *n.*

1. A set of beliefs concerning the cause, nature, and purpose of the universe, especially when considered as the creation of a superhuman agency or agencies, usually involving devotional and ritual observances, and often containing a moral code governing the conduct of human affairs.
2. A man-made institution that either A) turns people into unthinking robots or B) promotes escapism, apparently, according to some.
3. Why only stress "a set of beliefs" here? Hey, dictionary writers, the word "relationship" is relevant.

Christianity [*kris-chee-an-i-tee*] *n.*

1. The Christian religion, including the Catholic, Protestant, and Eastern Orthodox churches.
2. Is it possible to narrow this group down effectively? People seem to assume you're talking about Protestants if you talk about U.S. Christians in general. Sometimes people use modifiers, like "nominal" or "active" Christians to try to be specific. But people and beliefs vary so much that even that isn't entirely helpful.

Tension [*ten-shuh* n] *n.*

1. A strained relationship between individuals, groups, nations, etc.
2. And, you know, among other things.

² Pronunciations and the first definitions for each term are taken from Dictionary.com.

For All

An Environmental Theatre Piece

A public place, preferably an educational institution. There are two settings. A wall separates Setting 1(left) from Setting 2 (right). An American flag is affixed atop the wall. The two settings are near enough to each other that the audience is able to see and hear everything happening in both at once.

Segment A begins at the pre-determined time, and the performance proceeds according to the following timeline:

Setting 1	Setting 2		
Segment A	Segment B	Segment C	Segment D
<i>First instance</i>	<i>Frozen tableau, seated</i>		
<i>Repeats</i>	<i>First instance</i>		
<i>Repeats</i>	<i>Repeats</i>		
<i>Repeats (w/o ONE STUDENT)</i>		<i>Only instance</i>	
<i>Repeats *Optional changed ending for last instance</i>			<i>Only instance</i>

SETTING 1

Setting 1 contains a whiteboard (upstage) and student desks (downstage), facing the whiteboard. A TEACHER stands by the whiteboard. There are notes for a lesson written on the board, possibly related to American history (if they are elementary school students) or The Great Gatsby (if they are high school or college students). STUDENTS sit at the desks.

SETTING 2

Setting 2, on the opposite side of the wall, is messy. It contains some trash and belongings that look generally worn. In this setting there is a BEGGAR, a teenager or adult. This person is obviously destitute, homeless, and unkempt. During the first instance of Segment A, they sit facing the wall.

SEGMENT A

Sound effect: School announcement bell, followed by the recorded line "Please stand for the Pledge of Allegiance."

STUDENTS stand. STUDENTS and TEACHER face the flag, hand on heart.

STUDENTS and TEACHER (articulated without feeling, pausing at each of the following line breaks):

I pledge allegiance
to the Flag
of the United States of America,
and to the Republic
for which it stands,
one Nation
under God,
indivisible,
with liberty and justice for all.

STUDENTS sit back down at their desks. TEACHER smiles at the students and any spectators who join in. A pause (until Segment B, C, or D concludes).

Segment A repeats until the performance ends.

SEGMENT B

Segment B begins at the same time as the second instance of Segment A. The BEGGAR stands up and smiles grimly at the spectators, holding a cardboard sign requesting aid. The bottom of the sign reads "God Bless."

The following is possible dialogue, but sometimes the BEGGAR improvises or chooses to stay silent.

If anyone offers a small gift or amount, the BEGGAR acknowledges them with a small head nod and a "bless you."

BEGGAR (to a spectator): Could you spare some change?

BEGGAR: Anyone?

BEGGAR (*quietly to themselves*): I wish I could go home.

BEGGAR: Spare change?

BEGGAR: Anything helps.

When the Pledge is close to ending in Segment A, the BEGGAR looks longingly at the wall, goes over to it, and knocks on it loudly.

BEGGAR (*to the wall*): Hello?

Segment B repeats, with the BEGGAR growing increasingly insistent to be acknowledged, until Segment C.

SEGMENT C

When the BEGGAR knocks after the Pledge of Allegiance, one STUDENT from Segment A violently stands up and crosses around the front of the wall. Segment A continues as usual without them.

STUDENT: Hey, could you keep it down?!

STUDENT sees the BEGGAR. The BEGGAR freezes.

STUDENT (*unsure*): Here.

STUDENT pulls some money out, approaches, and presses it into the BEGGAR's hand. The BEGGAR holds onto the STUDENT's hand throughout the next line.

BEGGAR: "The King will reply, "Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me."³ Thank you.

STUDENT: Sorry, I uh... I have to be somewhere.

STUDENT leaves and returns to Segment A. They do not acknowledge the BEGGAR again.

³ Matthew 25:40.

SEGMENT D

*Segment A continues. The BEGGAR tries to follow the student, but can't get around the wall. So they knock on it, first slowly, then more rapidly, as if to knock it down. The flag shakes and waves but remains affixed to the wall.**

****OPTIONAL CHANGE HERE FOR SEGMENT A:*** *During this section in the final performance cycle, the Pledge continues, but the responses of the Segment A performers become more exaggerated and chaotic. The STUDENT who crossed around in Segment C pretends nothing is going on and recites the Pledge as normal, willfully ignorant. Other STUDENTS circle around the wall and taunt the BEGGAR as they attack the wall. The TEACHER pushes against the wall from the classroom side, trying to stabilize it, while continuing to recite the Pledge. At the end of the Pledge, all Segment A performers return to their original positions as if nothing has happened.*

When the Pledge ends, the BEGGAR finally gives up and sits, facing the wall.

BEGGAR: "Has not God chosen those who are poor in the eyes of the world to be rich in faith and to inherit the kingdom he promised those who love him?"⁴

If the entire performance structure repeats, the BEGGAR remains seated for the next round of Segment A, then begins Segment B. If it ends, the BEGGAR sits alone, facing the wall, until all spectators leave or the other actors finish dismantling the two settings.

⁴ James 2:5.

Genesis 22

it's wednesday in the second row day four of this class and i love it so far we're reading Genesis and it's so cool that we get to read the Bible for homework also this professor is really smart and his lectures are helpful i'm glad we get to discuss so much i miss the discussions from ap lit but these are good too

i don't know her name she wants to know about abraham and isaac she wants to know how a loving God could ask abraham to sacrifice his son

i don't know

why would God do that?

our professor he doesn't offer possible explanations or historical context or anything like in the lectures he asks us what we think

people talk and maybe i'm the only Christian in the room? because these people don't seem to think God is good

our professor is still smiling i feel sick something is missing here because there are people much smarter than me who have read the whole Bible and still say God is good but i don't know

i don't know why God the God who sacrificed His own Son to save humanity would ask someone else to do that and no one in this room seems to have an answer and it's so sad to hear people talk about God like this i guess no one's ever told them what God is like before and if you only know Genesis 1-24 then you're missing so much

no one will tell them today either though i can't answer the question i don't know how i could talk about God like He is good here right now so i'll just sit mouth shut and wait for class to end because i can't say anything without evidence from the text

Our Church Belongs in a Lecture Hall: When Christian Students Sued Western Washington University

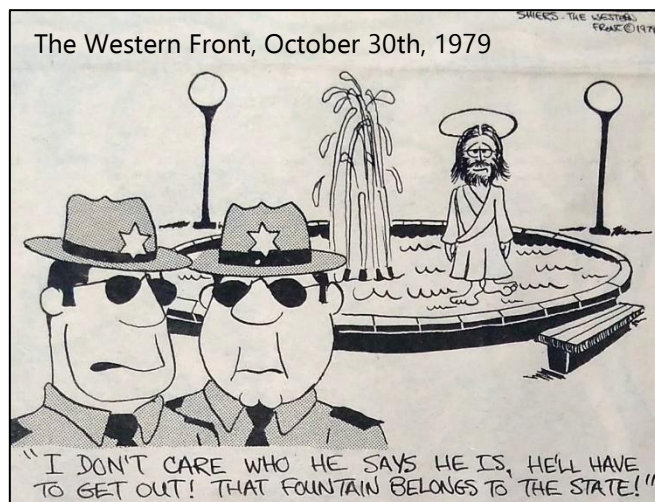
A New Recognition Policy

In 1978, the Associated Students (A.S.), or student government, of Western Washington University began to update a policy regarding the rights of campus student groups and the formal requirements for official university recognition. According to the policy, all student groups which were officially recognized by the university would have the right to reserve and use university facilities (lecture halls, classrooms, and

meeting rooms) for free on a regular basis. Based on this policy, however, the A.S. planned to deny official university recognition to religious student groups. Free, unlimited access to university facilities for religious worship, instruction, or exercise seemed to be prohibited by state law.⁵

In January 1979, the A.S. requested an opinion from the Washington State Attorney General's office on the issue. The response arrived in May from Assistant Attorney General Stuart C. Allen. In the written opinion, he affirmed the right of student religious groups to be officially recognized, but argued that recognition would not entitle these groups to access university facilities for religious activities without paying rent. He stated that religious student groups should have to pay rent any time their activities included "religious worship, exercise, or instruction." He also suggested that these groups should only be allowed access to university facilities occasionally, "certainly not more than twice per quarter," to prevent frequent religious meetings from being perceived as university endorsement.⁶

Based on these recommendations, the A.S. approved a new version of the recognition policy in May 1979 that would take effect the following September. Under the new policy, religious student groups qualified for official university recognition and were allowed to reserve



⁵ Milligan, Jessie, and Clay Hartl. "AS to Decide Religious Groups' Status." *The Western Front*, 20 Jan. 1978, p. 1. Special Collections, Western Libraries Heritage Resources, Western Washington University, content.wwu.edu/cdm/ref/collection/wfront/id/33943.

⁶ Rust, Brian. "Religious Groups Get Recognition, Must Pay Rent." *The Western Front*, 11 May 1979, pp. 1–2. Special Collections, Western Libraries Heritage Resources, Western Washington University, content.wwu.edu/cdm/ref/collection/wfront/id/36917.

and use university facilities for free whenever those activities did not involve religious worship, instruction, or exercise. Room reservations would be approved or denied on a case-by-case basis by the Viking Union Facilities Director and the Viking Union Activities Director. When it was difficult to determine the nature of the designated activity, they might ask for a signed release that "no religious worship, exercise or instruction [would] be conducted." The groups could then choose to appeal any requests that were denied on religious grounds to A.S. Religious activity was still permitted in public plazas, walkways, and dorms, which were exempt from the policy. But religious student groups could gather for religious worship, instruction, or exercise in university facilities no more than two times per quarter, and only if they paid a fee.⁷

Religious student groups had never been explicitly authorized to meet in Western's facilities for worship before. But several had been doing so for years. Policies restricting the use of university facilities had been relaxed in the early 1970s.⁸ By 1979, multiple student groups had formed growing communities that were meeting on-campus for worship and fellowship every week. These groups included Campus Christian Fellowship (CCF), with 470 students; Campus Crusade for Christ (CCC), with 165; and InterVarsity Christian Fellowship, with 120.⁷ The new policy put an end to the weekly gatherings, sending religious communities into exile from campus. But that was only the beginning.

SOMEONE GREATER THAN US . . .

This is what we have heard from Him, and the message that we are announcing to you: God is light; there is no darkness in Him at all. If we say that we are in union with God while we are living in darkness we are lying because we are not living the truth. But if we live in the light, we are in union with one another, and the blood of Jesus, the Son, purifies us from all sin.

The Inn

The Inn is a student led ministry, seeking to reach the Campus through a local church. On Tuesdays through we gather together for a time of singing and praise, sharing of personal joys and needs, and teaching based on Scripture.

For information contact: Dave Miller - First Presbyterian Church - 734-5510

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The Western Front
October 6th, 1978

⁷ Hookham, Eric. "Religious groups facing uncertain future." *The Western Front*, 9 Oct. 1979, p. 1, 6. Special Collections, Western Libraries Heritage Resources, Western Washington University, content.wwu.edu/cdm/ref/collection/wfront/id/36535.

⁸ Nunley, Shelley. "Religious suit under advisement of judge." *The Western Front*, 25 Jan. 1980, p. 4. Special Collections, Western Libraries Heritage Resources, Western Washington University, content.wwu.edu/cdm/ref/collection/wfront/id/15029.

Legal Stakes and Practical Implications

In the opinion statement given to A.S., the Attorney General's office had considered Article I, Section 11 and Article IX, Section 4 of the Washington State Constitution, as well as the Establishment Clause found in the First Amendment to the United States Constitution. Based on these documents, "free and regular" use of public university facilities seemed to violate state law. Allowing groups to meet for free would mean that public money spent on utilities and facility maintenance would benefit religious purposes, not just educational ones. Allowing groups to meet regularly could also constitute "sectarian influence" or an "establishment of religion." Based on the wording of these documents, the Washington State Attorney General's office suggested that A.S. was legally obligated to restrict access to university facilities. Otherwise, WWU would be violating the Washington State Constitution.⁴

The Christian students also had legal claims to use these spaces, however. First, the policy seemed to infringe on their First Amendment rights to free exercise and assembly. To these students, it seemed as though the Establishment Clause (which protects the state from undue religious influence), should yield to the Free Exercise Clause (which protects individuals from the state) when the two conflict. Second, university facilities are public property intended to facilitate the free exchange of information. Restricting religious instruction in these spaces seemed to do the opposite. Why should campus squares and walkways receive the free speech protections of "public fora" when university facilities did not? Third, university officials were generally responsible for deciding what activities counted as "religious," which could be vague and overbroad in application. And fourth, the release forms possibly constituted prior restraint, since they were intended to preemptively deter certain forms of expression. Restricting access to university facilities seemed like an unnecessary infringement on their First Amendment rights; as long as religious groups did not receive public funds other than the indirect benefit of facility maintenance and utilities, they seemed to have as much right to use them as student groups with a particular political agenda. If political student groups were allowed to regularly and freely

United States Constitution⁹ Amendment I

Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the government for a redress of grievances.

Washington State Constitution¹⁰

Article I, Section 11

No public money or property shall be appropriated for or applied to any religious worship, exercise or instruction...

Article IX, Section 4

All schools maintained or supported wholly or in part by the public funds shall be forever free from sectarian control or influence.

⁹ "The Bill of Rights: A Transcription." *National Archives*, National Archives and Records Administration, www.archives.gov/founding-docs/bill-of-rights-transcript#toc-amendment-i.

¹⁰ *Constitution of the State of Washington*. Legislative Information Center, 12 Jan. 2011, leg.wa.gov/lawsandagencyrules/documents/12-2010-wastateconstitution.pdf.

use university facilities, even though the university did not endorse their beliefs, why not religious student groups? Regular assembly was not considered "promotion" in those cases. And religious students paid tuition and fees to use university facilities just like any other students.^{11 12}

The Western Front ¹²

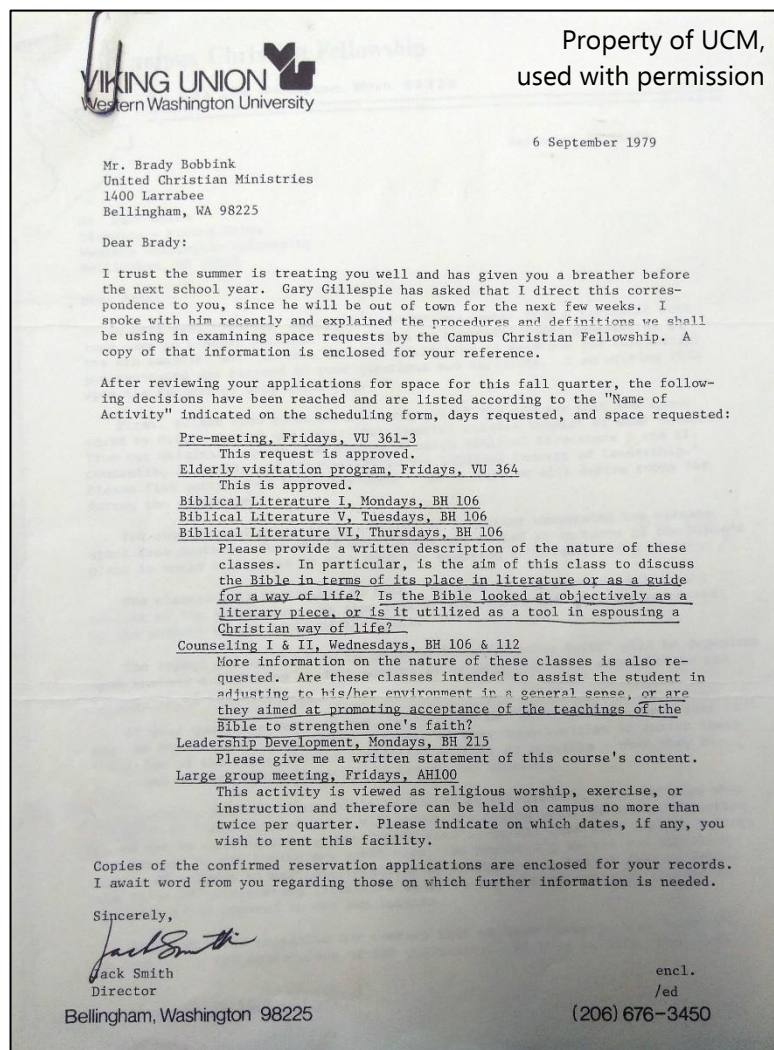
Oct. 23, 1979 (excerpt)

An Aug. 7 memo from Smith defined religious worship, exercise or instruction as "any activity intended to propagate or support a particular religious doctrine or belief, or any activity which is the prescribed ritual of any religion."

The Western Front ⁷

Oct. 9, 1979 (excerpt)

"Here we have a man who defines what religion is," [Brady Bobbink] said, referring to Smith.



For religious students, the implications of the new policy were more than legal; they were also practical. Access to university facilities had made large communities possible, and none of the alternatives were ideal. Meeting outside on-campus required good weather. Meeting in churches off-campus required greater time commitments from members and lowered visibility

¹¹ United States. Court of Appeals. *United States Court of Appeals for the Ninth Circuit: Michael Dittman, Et Al., Appellants, v. Western Washington University, Et Al., Appellees: Brief for Appellees: Appeal from the United States District Court for the Western District of Washington, at Seattle, Washington (D.C. No. C-79-1189V)*. 1980.

¹² Waits, Barbara. "Religious groups denied court injunction but control funds." *The Western Front*, 23 Oct. 1979, p. 1. Special Collections, Western Libraries Heritage Resources, Western Washington University, content.wvu.edu/cdm/ref/collection/wfront/id/36744.

to other Western students. The cost to rent university facilities, even twice per quarter, was also too high to be sustainable. A.S. had decided to charge the same price as it did for non-student groups to use university facilities, higher than what student groups typically paid for rent.

It was obvious that the new A.S. policy would continue to affect future generations of Western students. It could also set a precedent for other colleges, forcing ministries at other Washington State universities to face similar challenges. The way Western students responded would impact students far beyond their own college experience.

Brady Bobbink was one of the original co-founders of Campus Christian Fellowship (CCF) at Western Washington University. As director of University Christian Ministries (UCM) during this time, he was also a functioning spokesperson for Christian students. I was very fortunate to talk with him about his experiences.¹³

CASSIE: I know you were on staff at this time. What was your official position?

BRADY: I was the director of UCM [CCF at Western Washington University, Whatcom Community College, and Skagit Valley Junior College]. So I was the lead, you know, non-student lead working with students at the time that the A.S. began to try to pass the new [regulations] on group recognition.

CASSIE: Do you remember when you first heard about the policy? What was your response?

BRADY: Yeah, you know, actually I do. I can remember I was in the downtown office... I got a phone call, a student, so it was probably someone who had access to our mailbox on campus, the UCM mailbox. We didn't have officers in those days – we do now, but we didn't then – and whoever it was, somebody, somehow, they were a student who had access to the box, or it potentially may have been a believer or someone who was concerned about the direction, they called us. And so we got a copy – you know, you couldn't send things through the internet, it didn't exist yet – so we got a copy of it.

And my initial reaction was, you've got to be kidding me. How in heaven's name can you say you're a university and you squash major worldviews? You know? How can you do this? How can you say you're an educational institution when you squash the right of students to discuss, practice, and express their faith? Their worldview?

So I remember thinking that, and my goodness, what do we do? So I called a friend of mine that was an attorney up here. His name's Steve Brinn – you'll see his name in the documents – and I think it was Steve that told me about an organization called the Christian Legal Society. And so I called the Christian Legal Society... and they said "oh, the person you want to talk to in Seattle is a guy named Skeeter Ellis." I'd never heard of him – fun name, Skeeter. Skeeter was a make-it-shake-it major law firm partner, and a deeply committed believer, and so I called him...

¹³ Engvall, Cassie, and Brady Bobbink. Personal Interview. 3 June 2019. Lightly edited for coherence.

(BRADY:) and he said, well, I think I've got the right guy in mind for you, so let me talk to him. And he did. He ended up connecting us to a young attorney by the name of Bob Gunter. And Bob Gunter became the lead in Seattle, because that's where the federal court is. And Steve Brinn became the associate up here. And I became kind-of a legal assistant running around and getting depositions. But when we talked to Gunter and Skeeter together, they said, well, let's try first to persuade the student associated government, the student council, to reverse themselves.

CASSIE: So there wasn't a lot of time that passed between first hearing about it and then going to seek legal help.

BRADY: No, no, that was within two days.

CASSIE: Oh, wow.

BRADY: I mean, the phone calls started going the second I heard about it and saw the nature of it.

Early Challenges

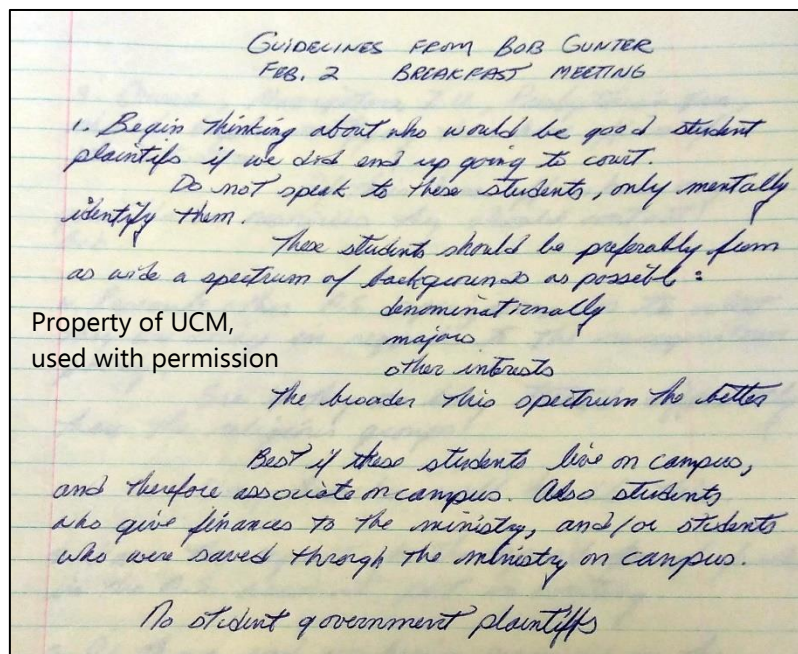
Under advisement from legal counsel, Christian religious groups worked to challenge the policy in A.S. before it was approved. The first step was attending A.S. meetings to ask questions, give input, and try to persuade A.S. to reconsider. Meeting after meeting, Christian students filled the room to push back. So many students attended that A.S. began to meet in a different room to accommodate everyone. The recognition policy frequently took up a majority of the open discussion time.¹³ Soon, open letters written by Christian students and A.S. board members alike were being published in *The Western Front*, Western's student newspaper, to extend conversations from these meetings.



During spring A.S. elections, Christian groups also tried to elect students to the council who would oppose the policy. These students were not necessarily Christians, but favored religious groups' ability to associate on campus.¹³ One such candidate even spoke at a CCF Friday Night Fellowship meeting, sparking outrage from others in A.S. who were frustrated at the idea of a "Christian voting bloc."

The story also circulated off-campus in a *Bellingham Herald* editorial,¹³ the student newspaper at the University of Washington, and later, the *Seattle Times*.

While students' approaches met with limited success, the directors of Christian groups at



Western began to plan out legal strategies. These legal strategies included a need for student plaintiffs who would truly be impacted when the policy took effect.¹³ It also involved research into past precedent and potential arguments.

A.S. approved the policy that May, to take effect in September, 1979. Once it did, more of the policy's effects became clear.

After reflecting and praying, the team decided it was time for legal action.

CASSIE: What was the process like of getting other organizations involved and deciding to sue?

BRADY: Well, at that time, there was the INN, Intervarsity, Campus Crusade, CCF, and the Navigators. And the directors – the non-student leaders – we met together regularly. So we notified all them, and said “hey, this is going on.” And they certainly were supportive, were praying for us and stuff. And the ones that were on campus, their students began to come to council meetings.

But we were like the huge dogs. I mean, by that time we were probably in Arntzen Hall and packing it out. It was the years of 400-500 students. So we were out in Red Square singing. We were doing concerts that were packing out, outreach concerts. I mean, we were the most active student body group on the campus. We were huge compared to any other religious group, much less all the other underwater basket-weaving, all the – you know.

And so while [the policy] was aimed at all religious groups, certainly the group that made the most waves of impact socially and visibly was us. So we really took the lead. We had the resources – student resources, stronger economic resources, and you know... it was time to fight. I knew enough history to know that hey, these things [really matter].

There was a Christian radio station [that] denounced what we were doing when we sued. They said well, Romans says, “submit to the authorities of your government.” Well, yeah, that works if...

(BRADY:) you have a Caesar and he's god. But in the democratic process, no. You rabble-rouse, you fight back, you try to get elected, you write editorials, and, if it's a grievous enough assault on your rights under the Constitution, you [confront] it. Otherwise you embed the bigotry and stuff.

So [other groups] got involved. But all the first-name plaintiffs were CCF students. They were the people we knew. And they put their neck out. 'Cause it wasn't just pushing against students, it was pushing against the whole A.S. [and] non-student leadership.

Dittman v. WWU

On October 12th, 1979, fourteen individual Western students partnered with four Christian student associations to file suit against Western Washington University, the A.S., and nine university individuals in official capacities (including the Board of Trustees, the President and Vice President of Student Affairs, and two university advisers for the A.S.), seeking free and regular access to university facilities.

They were denied a preliminary injunction, though Judge Donald Voorhees ruled that the state did not have a right to the funds that student groups raised in off-campus meetings, which had also been in dispute.¹² The case then received a hearing on December 14th, 1979, and a decision on February 27th, 1980.

In the decision, Judge Voorhees ruled in favor of Western Washington University and the A.S., confirming that the new policy was legal. His decision concentrated on the state and federal constitutions' requirements on the separation of church and state.¹⁴

The defendants' brief, filed by the Washington State Attorney General's office, had made similar arguments. They had argued that the

The Western Front¹⁴

Feb. 29, 1980 (excerpt)

Voorhees, in his decision, said:
 "there can be no question that the university is interfering with the exercise by plaintiffs of religious beliefs, sincerely held by them. The question which must be addressed by the court is whether the state has sufficiently justified that interference.

"The university's current policy goes far to accommodate religion but avoids the very real danger of establishing it," he said.

Voorhees dismissed the suit, saying:
 "prior restraint in this instance is justified not only by the state's interest in avoiding establishment dangers but also by its interest in avoiding entanglement problems."

¹⁴ Lorentson, Gary. "Campus religious groups lose lawsuit. *The Western Front*, 29 Feb. 1980, p. 1. *Special Collections, Western Libraries Heritage Resources, Western Washington University*, content.wwu.edu/cdm/ref/collection/wfront/id/15532.

policy was the “least intrusive arrangement possible to comply with the Establishment Clause mandates” (31) and that “to allow the regular and free use of educational buildings for religious activity [was] to provide what amount[ed] to a public subsidy and endorsement to the religion” (34). The defendants had also countered the prosecutors’ supporting arguments. They claimed that infringing on rights was justified in order to avoid an Establishment Clause violation, and that past precedent did not support the notion that the Establishment Clause should yield to the Free Exercise Clause (37). There was also no past precedent for considering university facilities as public fora. They argued that religious instruction could not find constitutional protection under the notion of “academic freedom” (39). And they argued that there was past precedent for allowing the government to determine what activities counted as “religious” in order to apply the Establishment Clause (41).¹¹ When it came to the separation of church and state, the arguments were thorough.

Notably, many of Voorhees' rulings were based on *Chess v. Widmar*, which was so recent that the decision only reached the plaintiffs the morning of the hearing. *Chess* mirrored *Dittman* in a number of ways. In *Chess*, eleven students had filed suit against the University of Missouri-Kansas City (UMKC) when the university revoked permission for their religious group, Cornerstone, to meet in university buildings or on university grounds for religious purposes. The court concluded in *Chess* that “the university's present ban on religious services in its buildings [was] *required* by the establishment clause” (emphasis added) based in part on the Lemon test of *Lemon v. Kurtzman* (1971) and the *Tilton v. Richardson* (1971) decision. In other parallels, it affirmed that UMKC was not guilty of prior restraint, that the Free Exercise clause was not inferior to the Establishment Clause, and that the current policy was not vague or overbroad. The *Chess* court also concluded that “speech with religious content cannot be treated the same as any other form of speech.”¹⁵

Judge Voorhees’s decision in *Dittman* reached similar conclusions based partly on the reasoning in *Chess*. But these two decisions were vague on the issue of religious groups’ First Amendment rights to freedom of speech, assembly, and religion. This created possible grounds for an appeal centered on these rights and the Fourteenth Amendment right to due process.¹⁶

BRADY: Judge Voorhees did rule against [us] and based that on the Kansas case.... So we immediately appealed up.... I do not remember whether we were briefed by Gunter, Skeeter, or Steve about the Kansas case before ours lost.... You know, [that was] probably part of the reason that we could come out and go right back to the fight. It was theirs, too.

¹⁵ *Chess v. Widmar*, 635 F.2d 1310 (8th Cir. 1980).

¹⁶ Jarvis, Barbara. “Law and religion meet.” *The Western Front*, 11 Mar. 1980, p. 4. *Special Collections, Western Libraries Heritage Resources, Western Washington University*, content.wwu.edu/cdm/ref/collection/wfront/id/15479.

Deciding to Appeal

UMKC students appealed the *Chess* decision to the Court of Appeals for the Eighth Circuit, and Western students filed a notice to appeal *Dittman* to the Ninth Circuit on March 21st, 1980. By this time, the groups at Western owed around \$13,000 in legal fees.¹⁷

Chess reached the Court of Appeals for the Eighth Circuit first, on August 4th, 1980. In their decision, the panel of three judges unanimously reversed the original ruling on the grounds that students' First Amendment rights had been violated.¹⁵ Cornerstone was allowed to meet on campus once again that September.¹⁸ But while the new decision in *Chess* helped Cornerstone and set a new judicial precedent by a superior court, the ruling itself did not directly challenge Western's policy. For that, *Dittman* would have to be considered at the Ninth Circuit and reversed for Western's policy to change.

The *Dittman* appeal finally received a hearing by a three-judge panel in Seattle on January 9th, 1981.

BRADY: The Ninth Circuit has lots of judges. They shipped three of them up to Seattle 'cause the Ninth Circuit will do a hearing in Seattle rather than have everyone else fly to San Francisco. And so it was three judges: all male, two white, one black. And they did the full hearing. And it was fascinating.

One of the things I remember the most was the conversation between them and the A.S. They were questioned and the attorney general for Western was in the fray and stuff, and then our turn. Most of the questions were factual and just verifying the case under Voorhees.

But the black judge, you could tell that he was quite skeptical of this policy. He'd say things like, "let me understand" and talk to the Western attorneys or the A.S. leader, asking questions like, "so, you're telling me that if they don't have religious speech or purpose or teaching or worship or prayer, that they can meet?" And they said, "yes, that's correct." "So it's okay, they can have beer parties, or whatever, they can do whatever your other groups do that you give club status to, but this group can't. These groups can't because of their speech and their religious intent?" "Yes, that's correct, it's a violation of the state constitution and the federal constitution." And he says, "So... you're telling me that if they wanted to pray before their beer...?" It was those kinds of questions. And you could tell that he was just going, "seriously?" You probably can get a manuscript – it might not be quite as colorful as I remember it.

¹⁷ Jarvis, Barbara. "Students appeal decision." *The Western Front*, 15 Apr. 1980, p. 1. *Special Collections, Western Libraries Heritage Resources, Western Washington University*, content.wwu.edu/cdm/ref/collection/wfront/id/15466.

¹⁸ "The Story Behind *Widmar v. Vincent* -- Part III (The Decision and Its Legacy)." *Alliance Defending Freedom*, 11 June 2010, [www.adflegal.org/detailspages/blog-details/allianceedge/2017/10/18/the-story-behind-widmar-v-vincent----part-iii-\(the-decision-and-its-legacy\)](http://www.adflegal.org/detailspages/blog-details/allianceedge/2017/10/18/the-story-behind-widmar-v-vincent----part-iii-(the-decision-and-its-legacy)).

But the Ninth Circuit decided to delay their decision for *Dittman*, for one very important reason.

UMKC (represented by Widmar) had appealed the overturned *Chess* decision to the U.S. Supreme Court. And out of the approximately 7,000 cases that are appealed to the Supreme Court every year, *Chess* was among the 100-150 are selected for review. Despite the odds, the Supreme Court had granted the case (now called *Widmar v. Vincent*) a writ of certiorari and scheduled it for a hearing on October 6th, 1981.²⁰

This initially seemed like cause for concern, since it opened the possibility that religious students might be permanently banned from practicing in university facilities. But students at UMKC and Western came to realize that if the *reversal* was upheld by the Supreme Court, it would have a nationwide impact, protecting religious student groups at other universities. Decisions in a regional circuit might not affect policies in other regions, but a Supreme Court decision could. Even though the future was uncertain again, there was also reason to be cautiously optimistic.¹⁸

For Western students, this would mean more waiting. The Ninth Circuit intended to make a ruling after *Chess* was resolved.¹⁹ And by the time the Supreme Court even heard the case, Western's policy would restrict religious student groups' access to university facilities for two full years. In the meantime, all they could do was pray.

Widmar v. Vincent

On October 6th, 1981, seven Cornerstone students and their attorney, Jim Smart, argued their case before the Supreme Court. They based their claims primarily on First Amendment freedoms of speech, association, and religious exercise, and on the Fourteenth Amendment, which protects rights to equal access to a public forum.²⁰

Then they waited.

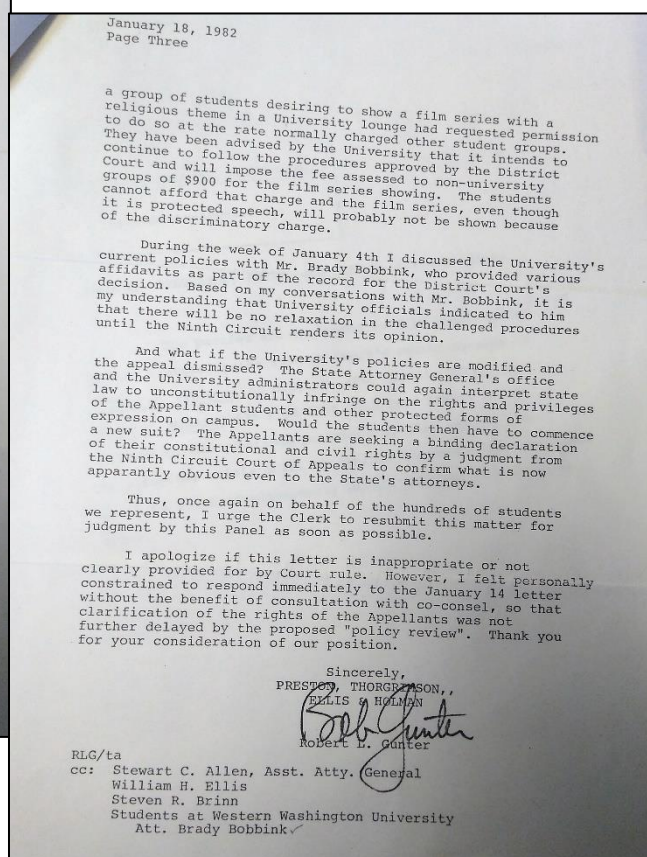
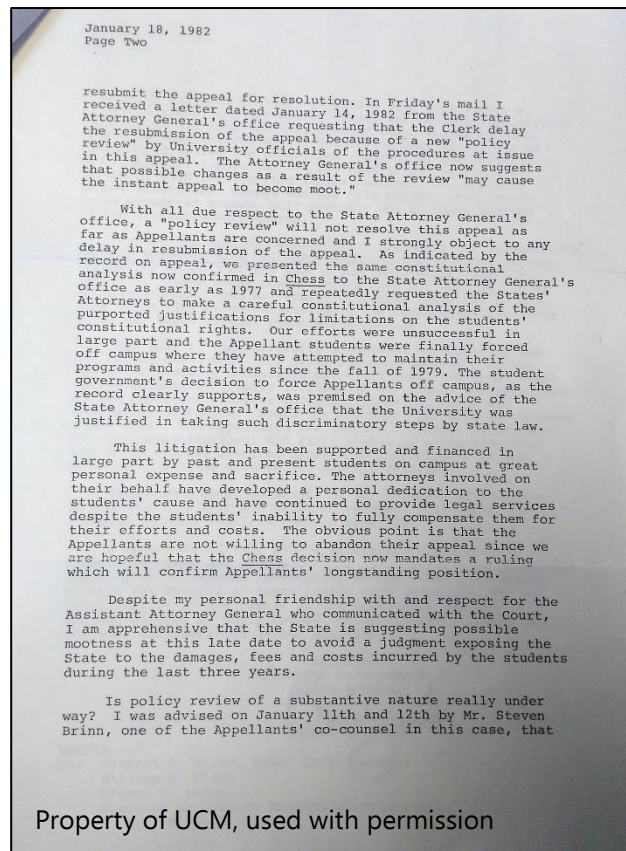
The decision, written by Justice Powell, arrived on December 8th, 1981. The Supreme Court had decided by a vote of 8-1 to affirm the Eighth Circuit decision. The Court held that "First Amendment rights of speech and association extend to the campuses of state universities," and that "religious worship and discussion... are forms of speech and association protected by the First Amendment." UMKC had discriminated against students by regulating religious speech and the university's argument of protecting the separation of church and state was not sufficiently compelling to justify content-based discrimination. The court held that universities could not exclude student groups based on the content of their speech. In addition, the court decided that UMKC's facilities created a forum that was generally open for student groups to use, and that the Establishment Clause was compatible with a policy of equal access for all student groups. In the decision, Powell conceded that religious student groups might

¹⁹ Reed, Lauri Ann, and Grace Reamer. "Religious groups given equal campus space." *The Western Front*, 5 Feb. 1982, p. 1. *Special Collections, Western Libraries Heritage Resources, Western Washington University*, content.wvu.edu/cdm/ref/collection/wfront/id/17865.

²⁰ "Widmar v. Vincent." Oyez, www.oyez.org/cases/1981/80-689.

benefit from access to university facilities, but that the court was "unpersuaded that the primary effect of the public forum, open to all forms of discourse, would be to advance religion."²¹ This was a huge victory for the religious student groups.

But the fate of Western's policy was not yet determined. Despite the Supreme Court decision, the Ninth Circuit appeared to consider nullifying *Dittman* without a formal decision. This would not account for costs that students had paid over the years, and would not set a precedent for future incidents at Western. As more issues arose, Gunter sent a strongly-worded letter to the Ninth Circuit, asking for a ruling.



However, even without a ruling for *Dittman*, the Supreme Court's statements about content-based discrimination and equal access were relevant to Western's situation. This forced a new generation of A.S. to grapple with the recognition policy. There wasn't an obvious fix. The Washington State Constitution differed from Missouri's, and allowing equal access to religious student groups still seemed to violate state law in order to abide by the Supreme Court's

²¹ U.S. Supreme Court. *Widmar v. Vincent*. no. 80-689, 8 Dec. 1981, cdn.loc.gov/service/ll/usrep/usrep454/usrep454263/usrep454263.pdf.

decision. But A.S. could see no way to fully accommodate both. On February 1st, 1982, the A.S. Board of Directors held a closed executive session for five-and-a-half hours to reach a decision. Finally, they voted 5-4 to eliminate the three-year-old restrictions, allowing religious student groups free and regular access to university facilities, effective immediately. They filed the revised policy with the Court of Appeals, assuming it would agree that Western's policy now complied with the First Amendment and that the court would decide that the policy no longer required a ruling.²²

After three-and-a-half years, religious student groups returned to campus.

The Western Front²²

Feb. 12, 1982 (excerpts)

"I am disturbed by the *Widmar* ruling," said AS President Greg Sobel, who voted for the policy change. "It bothers me that the court mandates indirect financial support by the state. But, if I disagree, that would indicate that I should go ahead with what I think is right, while it is now illegal," he said.

Sobel said he had considered the decision "deeply." He added he feels it is clear the *Widmar* decision leaves no choice but to allow equal access, thus contradicting the state constitution. According to state law, no public funds may be used to support religious groups.

"I have a responsibility as a state official to uphold the law," he said. "I will not go blindly against the law without careful consideration."

Sobel explained he voted in favor of the revised policy because, "If the state courts had set up this law, we could have challenged it, but with the Supreme Court setting up the decision, in my opinion, there was nowhere to go."

The Western Front²²

Feb. 12, 1982 (excerpts)

"People are really excited about this," said Steve Hawthorne, a member of the student staff of the Campus Christian Fellowship (CCF). "The policy was unfair because we are students who pay tuition just like any other students...." Hawthorne said he feels it was "a good decision of the Associated Students to go along with the Supreme Court."

Kurt Helm, a member of the Campus Crusade for Christ, agreed religious groups deserve the same amount of recognition as any other group. "It was a good move, but I would rather see it solidified," Helm said. He agreed with CCF member Nancy Bell, one of the appellants who initially filed suit. They said the struggle is not over with the policy revision.

Bell said the case should not be declared null with the revision, but that religious groups should receive just compensation for the rent costs of the last two years. "The court should make a ruling on the case and set a precedent," she said. "We paid rent for two years and were inconvenienced by this."

²² Reed, Lauri Ann. "Access given to religious groups." *The Western Front*, 12 Feb. 1982, p. 3. *Special Collections, Western Libraries Heritage Resources, Western Washington University*, content.wvu.edu/cdm/ref/collection/wfront/id/18092.

The Ninth Circuit eventually sent the case back to Judge Voorhees to “reconsider” and make a new ruling that aligned with the Supreme Court.¹³ He issued the new judgment in December, 1982, affirming the rights of student religious groups to associate in Western facilities. The decision also stipulated that \$41,000 be awarded to the plaintiffs – enough to cover the legal fees for the case.

BRADY: [Once] the Supreme Court ruled, it made ours come back to life, and the Ninth kicked it back to Voorhees to reconsider. I.e. “reconsider” meant, you ruled wrong, this needs to be adjusted.

And then there were issues related to it. We sued under the Federal Civil Rights Act. And while it was a religious case, the approach to it was through the civil rights laws. There was a violation of rights to association, of speech, and it just happened the speech was religious....

So when they kicked it back, if you sue and win under civil rights law, you can get up to I think it was tenfold in –

CASSIE: Really?

BRADY: Yeah, so our costs were covered.... And we could’ve said, “We have been damaged, our reputation has been damaged, we’ve been off campus, it’s affected students’ perception of us, it’s caused all kinds of grief, sorrow, etc. etc. We want [400,000] bucks. They’ve violated our civil rights.”

And we very consciously, in conversation with our attorneys, said we’re not gonna do that. There’s no point in making the taxpayers suffer for the lack of foresight on behalf of the Associated Students and their non-student leaders. So the taxpayers still had to pay the [40k], but... so we came out with all of our bills paid. We weren’t left [wondering] how [we were] going to pay up.

Western Today

Many students in religious student groups at Western Washington University today have no idea that there was a time when they wouldn’t have been allowed to meet in university buildings. Every week, sandwich boards are put up in Red Square to advertise religious gatherings. There are currently fifteen official religious student groups at Western, and more that don’t have official status. At least ten of them are Christian, representing different denominations, worship styles, and purposes.²³ But there is little sense of competition among them. Christian students of different ministries live together in community houses off-campus, and ministries sometimes collaborate to host events. In general, there is the same kinship

²³ “Organizations.” *Western Involvement Network*, Western Washington University, win.wvu.edu/organizations?categories=10695.

among these groups as there was in the 1970s. Students and staff alike acknowledge that different students respond to different approaches, and that hearing the gospel of Jesus clearly presented and learning what it means to follow Him matters far more than which ministry they decide to join.

Of the original four groups who were involved in the 1979 lawsuit, only Campus Christian Fellowship is still active on Western's campus. But it remains the largest student ministry, even forty years later. Every Friday night at 7:00, while many college students are partying somewhere in Bellingham, hundreds of others stream into Arntzen 100 to worship, hear a Scripture-based message, and pray. It would look like a traditional church service, except for the bright orange chairs and the hyped-up enthusiasm of a diverse group of college friends gathering together to laugh, learn, grow, and celebrate.



Photo credit: CCF, used with permission

What makes that kind of community possible on Friday nights and throughout the week? Around fourteen full-time campus missionaries, twelve campus ministry interns, five student officers, dozens of student small group leaders, and many, many space reservations for both “non-religious” preparation and religious practice – 358 reservations in the 2018-2019 academic year alone.²⁴ It would be hard to argue that CCF doesn't make the most of free and regular access to university facilities.

Perhaps the most surprising thing is that Brady Bobbink, who has been with CCF since it began and often represented the group during the lawsuit, has been continuously working with Western students, interns, and staff ever since. This year he will step down as Director of University Christian Ministries, but he'd be the first to tell you that he is not retiring. He intends

²⁴ Bunge, David. Personal communication, Facebook Messenger, 27 May 2019.

to continue working with college students until God gives him specific instructions to do otherwise.

Church and State Universities

If the Supreme Court hadn't ruled that religious worship and discussion are forms of speech and association protected by the First Amendment, and that universities had a general responsibility to make content-neutral policies regarding group meeting space, it's possible that there would be much fewer religious student groups at public universities today. With lower visibility on campus and greater time commitments, student members would have to work harder to reach out to other students and build community. Without access to meeting space, members would have to spend a significant amount of money on rent just to maintain their existence. Those obstacles wouldn't be impossible to overcome, but students in these ministries would have to make significant sacrifices so that they could continue to exist.

Universities present a unique ministry challenge: new students are always arriving and older students are always graduating. This means that if a generation of students doesn't effectively reach out to others on campus and no one new joins the ministry, it ceases to exist in four years. Based on this concept, it's possible that without on-campus meeting space, most college ministries would shrink until they disappeared. The added time and money it would take to maintain a college ministry off-campus would burden students who are already busy and using loans to afford college. It's not hard to believe that college ministries would shrink under those conditions.

In short, religious student groups at colleges today owe much to Cornerstone and the Western students and associations who abided by university policies but refused to accept them. It is impossible to measure how many people have been impacted by *Widmar*, but at the very least, it includes many generations of college students. It's only unfortunate that few of them know how fortunate they really are.

It is still difficult to define how the separation of church and state plays out at a public state university in terms of education. Many public universities offer courses with religious content, and what to teach and how to teach it is largely determined by the professors of individual courses. There are no readily available court decisions addressing these issues. Examining what can and can't be taught, as well as the manner in which religious matters can be taught in these settings, is outside the scope of this research.

Still, the Supreme Court affirmed that religious students' right to free speech on campus does not unduly interfere with the separation of church and state - even when that church wants to worship in the middle of a state-owned lecture hall. That's a real victory for religious students that will help their ministries thrive for generations to come.

Communion I

Two o'clock Friday morning. Girl slips out of her boyfriend's dorm. Catches the door, gently helps it settle back in place.

Quiet, lonely campus. Most students are already home for summer.

Girl starts to walk to her dorm. Stops. Stands still for a minute, two, deciding. She walks to Red Square.

A warm quiet. The moon hides behind clouds. Spray from Fisher Fountain reaches up on tip-toes, expectant.

Girl steps onto the stone that rims the fountain and walks, clockwise, counterclockwise, revolving. She takes off her shoes and dips her feet in, just a little. She walks back around the fountain one more time. Graffiti.

She stops, facing Fisher and the Humanities. She takes out a pencil and paper and writes down three wishes, a college bucket list. Later, she tears up the paper and forgets the first two.

The last one is to grow closer to God. She prays for that, but she doesn't expect anything to change.

Girl takes a picture, to remind herself. Later, she loses that picture.

Feet still wet, she pulls on her shoes. Carries her socks home.

First key opens the building door. Girl walks up the stairs. Second key opens the room door. Girl catches the door, gently helps it settle back into place.

Pitch blackness, sleeping roommate. With practiced silence, Girl crawls in bed to rest.

Are American Christians Idolizing Time?

The way we think about time reveals if we really trust God.

Imagine that you're in the middle of an important conversation when you realize that you have a meeting with someone else very soon. You glance covertly around the room, but there are no clocks on the walls. You're not wearing a watch. It would be rude to pull out your phone. Your conversation partner keeps talking, but you're only half-listening, in free-fall, unsure when you'll land. With each moment that passes, you can feel your muscles tensing up. Tick. Tick. Tick. Tick.

Anxious?

Most of the time, we don't have to worry about situations like this. We almost always can check the time, because we're almost always surrounded by timepieces. We have wall clocks and alarm clocks; clocks on vehicle dashboards, microwaves, laptop screens, mobile devices, and more. And when those aren't enough, we even display clocks on our bodies by wearing watches.

How many times a day do we glance at a clock? Fifty? One hundred? Two hundred? Yet we often forget how essential it is to the way we navigate the world.

Americans are truly obsessed with time—or more specifically, with spending it efficiently. Efficiency quite literally pays in a capitalist culture where “time is money.” Someone who can accomplish more in a given amount of time has a higher economic value. And since [many Americans derive a sense of identity from their jobs](#), it makes sense that the desire to feel like an efficient person could affect not only someone's work life but their personal life as well.

But prioritizing efficiency has side effects. As [Cornelius Grove commented in 1992](#):

Americans are deeply preoccupied with attaining efficiency in numerous aspects of their daily life. Saying this is not meant to imply that they are blind to questions of quality, effectiveness, durability, health, humanitarianism, ethics, and the like; it is meant to say that their concern for efficiency is often greater than their concern for these other admittedly worthy ideals.

When efficiency is our top priority, we consequently lose sight of “worthy ideals” that efficient work doesn't necessarily produce. Many of these worthy ideals require collective effort for collective gain. But efficiency, in the workplace and in personal lives, has

become such an important value in American culture that it's invisible, and we often seek it automatically without considering an alternative.

For example: consider the wristwatch. A basic watch reflects our own desire to know the time, signaling to others that we value efficiency. But like any apparel item, the watch goes beyond function to reveal other values of its wearer. If I wear a watch with an analog clock face, you might think I'm traditional; if it's digital, I might seem tech-savvy. A small clock face could signal humility; a large one, pride. A leather strap seems comfortable, a metal one more luxurious. Appearance, brand... these choices may not feel that important, but they reveal what we care about.

And this is just for the basic watch. Consumers have even more options as the market for smartwatches and fitness trackers grows. [According to the NPD Group's 2018 Smartwatch Total Market Report](#), it is estimated that 16 percent of adults in the U.S. now own a smartwatch. This number includes nearly a quarter of U.S. millennials. Even though smartphones offer similar functions, watches have not become obsolete. Why?

Because it's more efficient to have information on your wrist than your phone, *even if it's the same information*. Smartwatches are a luxury, not a necessity. And as a luxury item, we associate them with values of power: ease, status, success, and more.

Why do watches matter? Because on close inspection, watches associate American values of time and efficiency with other self-centered values: comfort, luxury, ease, status, success. (None of these make Grove's list of worthy ideals.) Watches reveal how we twist values together until we associate personal efficiency with the American Dream. For some Americans, this may not seem that bad. But for Christians, this should be deeply troubling, because the values that surround physical objects have a real spiritual impact.

In the introduction to her book *Material Christianity*, Colleen McDannell writes that traditional religious scholarship separates what she calls "the sacred" from "the profane," or the everyday. This binary, however, does a poor job of representing the role that objects play in the practice of faith. She writes,

To focus exclusively on the binary opposition between sacred and profane prevents us from understanding... how Christianity works... for understanding how Christians, of assorted types, continuously mix the supernatural, God, miracles, ethical concerns, and prayer together with family, commerce, everyday worries, fashion, and social relationships. (8)

For McDannell, material objects play a real spiritual role. And if this is true of objects that are obviously associated with religious values, we can assume that objects without an obvious religious association still affect the way faithful people live.

Keeping with the theme of watches and time, it seems reasonable that the way we perceive time will affect the way we spend our lives. If we believe that we get one lifetime and that's it, we will spend our time differently than if we trust in God's promise of eternal life. In the former worldview we are ruled by time; in the latter we are ruled by God.

American culture tangles up time and efficiency with other values (comfort, luxury, ease, status, success) that seem like reliable ways to live a good life. That means it's tempting to trust them rather than God as the means to a fulfilling end. That's true for believers and non-believers alike.

But Christians are commanded to put God before themselves: to "love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength," and to "love your neighbor as yourself" (Mark 12:30–31, NET). When those beliefs affect real-world actions, the results should look more like Grove's list of worthy ideals than the American Dream. The American Dream is focused on the self. These commandments and Grove's worthy ideals focus on others.

What, then, might it look like to prioritize God over time? I heard a story recently from a man who was recently challenged by this question. He and his wife are Christians, and have been foster parents for several years. As his kids reached adulthood, he thought he was done raising children, and was planning to transition into the post-parenthood stage of his life. But when he prayed about that transition, he was challenged to reconsider his perspective on time.

He was planning out how to spend his later years, yet as a Christian, he said he believed in eternal life. He was rationing how much time he would give without putting faith in that promise—time was ruling his plans rather than God. This man and his wife later decided to adopt two more young children, trusting that they were not wasting limited time.

In American culture, this is a radical way of living. For Christians, maybe it shouldn't be.

Being aware of time isn't inherently wrong. It can help us make choices that honor God and other people, so that we spend our time in ways that love both well. But we need to

consciously examine how our expectations about time shape our behavior to determine if we're really doing that.

Are we looking to our watches to help us chase down the American Dream and live a life of personal success? Or are we trusting that when we pursue God, time will give way for worthier ideals? If American Christians are going to faithfully put God first, we need to make sure we're looking to Him for guidance at least as often as we check the time.

Turn

I have no one to turn to anymore
 And I no longer believe that
 College is shaping a better version of me
 It came as a shock, but
 Friendships are a good investment
 Is a lie
 I can only rely on myself
 In 30 years, I will tell my children that
 I have my priorities straight because
 What I do
 Defines everything about
 Who I am
 I tell you this:
 Once upon a time
 People trusted God to provide
 But this is not true for my generation
 We have to make something of ourselves
 Parents, professors, people tell us
 The dream is to be comfortable
 I cannot conclude that
 I have everything I need
 In the future,
 I am still isolated, directionless
 No longer can it be said that
 I have been called to a greater purpose
 It has become clear that
 I am not worthy or worthwhile
 So it is foolish to believe that
 God hears my prayers ²⁵

When I walked into Friday Night Fellowship
 My life turned downside up ²⁶

²⁵ Thank you to Susan Hendricks for publishing the template I used to get this poem started.
<https://www.susanhendricks.com/articles/write-your-own-reverse-poem>

²⁶ Now read the poem again from the bottom line up.

Dear Dr. Religious Studies Professor,

Today was weird.

First, as I'm sure you heard (it would have been hard not to), there was a street preacher in Red Square today. Not the "you're all sinners who will burn in Hell" guy from before – this was a new one. I won't repeat what he said. Some of it was genuinely hateful and some of it was Scripture-supported but lacking the relevant context. He wanted to shock people out of complacency, but his methods also inspired fear, aggression, and resistance. That's not good news for the gospel. And the crowd's response was equally disheartening. Students chanted things like "Jesus died for porn." I mean... really?

Three hours later, I was sitting at a seminar on world missions with a couple hundred other Christian college students. We talked about God's mission to bring all people into a multinational, multiethnic family of equals, about building cross-cultural friendships, about the history of foreign missions, and more. I even learned that the origin of U.S. Protestant foreign missions is generally attributed to the five-person Haystack Prayer meeting – a group of freshman college students who were earnestly seeking God together.

Basically, I had two radically different encounters with Christianity and college students in less than eight hours. The whiplash has given me a lot to consider, including the work we've been doing in class.

In class, we're learning to think critically about how religious ideas shape American culture. As shifting religious ideas merge with the Dialectic, they become ideological frameworks which affect the way we perceive the world, regardless of our religious background. That matters because frameworks unconsciously shape our approach to concepts. In doing so, frameworks also shape the possible discussions we can have on these subjects.

But while we're grappling with the tensions between American culture and Christianity in a broad, abstract sense, we haven't explored how these tensions play out in concrete examples. Our discussions so far can't explain my whiplash today; some things don't fit neatly into these frameworks. And if we don't grapple with the real-world implications of what we've learned, that knowledge will have little to no impact once this course ends.

Right now, most of us are religious illiterates. We lack even a basic understanding of the beliefs of major religions or religious denominations which differ from those of our parents or ourselves. As such, we risk making assumptions that disrespect and dehumanize people of faith, including students in our own classroom.

That's a problem: for you, as our professor; for non-religious and religious students in our class; and for our university as a learning institution. Students and educators have a shared responsibility to make each classroom a brave space where we can talk about tricky subjects while respecting a diversity of beliefs. If we don't first understand what the people

affected by these subjects experience, then co-creating that kind of classroom will prove difficult or impossible.

To address these concerns, I propose a research project where we explore the relationship between organized student religious groups and public universities, as well as the treatment of religious curriculum on these campuses. By exploring the ways that the political values of separating church and state and protecting religious liberties collide, we will gain a deeper understanding of the values, privileges, and challenges that religious students navigate every day.

I acknowledge that students hold an incredibly wide range of religious beliefs, even within a particular group. It is unfortunately easy to mischaracterize real people, and this project faces the real risk of extrapolating too much. I would argue, however, that some shared foundational knowledge is better than the assumptions we carried into class with us.

We need to understand the experiences of religious students in order to discuss these issues with respect and nuance in class and on campus. More research is a feasible starting point: we will examine specific conflicts or experiences which affect college students that illuminate larger religious, cultural, and institutional forces. As a result, we will be able to 1) better contextualize what we've studied in this course, 2) humanize the experiences of people with different beliefs, and 3) open a conversation about the role and treatment of religious students on our campus.

This project is not only appropriate but necessary. I invite your feedback as we work together to build a more nuanced and respectful classroom for all students.

Sincerely,

One of your students



Status Report

Jeremy – I'm a bit stuck on the next piece. These notes are mostly for myself, but if you have any insights, please let me know!

I want it to be another personal piece. Not sure of the genre yet.

I haven't written it yet because I'm still trying to decide what it should be. I have a few memories that would fit here within the larger story that I'm telling through the personal pieces. I could write about one of them or combine a few into one piece if I found the right genre.

Possibilities:

- Fall Retreat, fall of junior year – this one affected me a lot, but raises ethical questions for me on if I should include it
- Tuesday night of my Student Spring Impact trip, spring of junior year – not necessarily that relevant to American culture, but very relevant to my own experiences; this was a significant personal shift even though I'd been surrounded by Christian beliefs my whole life
- Meeting Sammie, June of junior year – this would be a school and community-oriented piece, and probably the lightest of these options
- Praying about the CCF internship, fall of senior year – similar to the SSI story, but maybe a bit less vulnerable and more accessible

It feels important to put something here chronologically. SO MUCH changed once I joined CCF that I really don't want to skip over that period of time. These are the stories that came to mind first, but there are many more.

Some thoughts and hesitations, though:

1. Even though I've positioned myself as writing from my own experiences, it feels somewhat wrong to write about ones that wouldn't be accessible or "understood" fairly easily by someone else, even if they really happened and are important to me. Most of what I've written in the other pieces is a bit more "universally-Christian" so you can follow them with only a basic grasp of Christian beliefs. But one of these stories, even though it was really impactful for me and relates to my topic, would be harder to describe. That means it could mislead people about God or Christianity, which is the last thing I want. I think it's important for people to encounter certain ideas in the context of a relationship so that they can process with someone, and that's not guaranteed for my readers. I think I have to ethically consider more than just "this relates to my topic."
2. (That's part of why I've been vague about what some of those stories are about. I'd be happy to talk through them with you in person, but I think it could be irresponsible to just list them.... I don't know, maybe I'm overthinking this.)
3. (Basically, I don't want to cheapen God, but I also don't want to facilitate false assumptions based on what I am and am not saying in one piece.)
4. Most of these stories are pretty personal. I don't usually mind that, but since this is something I'm submitting for academic credit... I'm still trying to find the balance. I do think my experiences are relevant to the subject of this project, but they also aren't the subject of this project. The stories listed above also relate more to me than to American culture, though I could find ways to address that.
5. Finding the right genre for any of these could be a challenge.

Honestly, maybe I should turn all of these notes into a piece and then include it in true Brechtian fashion. Then the reader gets a glimpse of all the things I'm thinking about while writing. I could tell a version of one of the above stories as the next piece.

Poured Out in Stanislaus

phone interruption no why far grief
busy stress much tired always people
sad want alone cry talk rest
dry face walk back pretend smile
friend seen hug thanks pray truth
quiet sit good be with listen

tops look still when they're spinning really fast

"You love me."
When I finally said that out loud
"I am Your daughter."
When that finally became real
"You have a plan for me."
That was the first time
I experienced real freedom

Origins

A Cut-Up Poem ^{27 28}

In the beginning God

Genesis 1 is ancient cosmology

Ancient cosmology is function-oriented

In the beginning God created

"Create" (Hebrew "bārā' ") concerns functions

Earth, formless and empty

Darkness, over the surface of the deep

Spirit of God, hovering over the waters

The beginning state in Genesis 1 is nonfunctional

And God

He separated light from darkness

And God

He separated land from sea

And God

He made plants bear seed according to their kinds

Days one to three in Genesis 1 establish functions

And God

He created two great lights to govern day and night

And God

He created sea creatures and birds to be fruitful, to increase, to fill

And God

He ordered the land to produce living creatures according to their kinds

Days four to six in Genesis 1 install functionaries

²⁷ All of the straight text in this piece is either directly quoted or paraphrased from Genesis 1-2 (NIV).

²⁸ All of the italicized text in this piece is directly quoted from the chapter titles of a fascinating read: Walton, John H. *The Lost World of Genesis One: Ancient Cosmology and the Origins Debate*, InterVarsity Press, 2009.

And God
 God said, "Let us make mankind
 in our image, in our likeness"
 He created mankind
 in his own image, the image of God
 He blessed them and said to them,
 "Be fruitful and increase in number;
 fill the earth and subdue it"

The cosmos is a temple

God blessed the seventh day
 and made it holy because
 on it he rested

Divine rest is in a temple

*The seven days of Genesis 1 relate to
 cosmic temple inauguration*

*The seven days of Genesis 1 do not
 concern material origins*

The heavens and earth completed
 God saw all that he had made,
 and it was very good

*The difference in origin accounts
 in science and scripture is
 metaphysical in nature*

*Current debate about intelligent
 design ultimately concerns purpose
 Scientific explanations of origins
 can be viewed in light of purpose,
 and if so, are unobjectionable*

*Resulting theology in this view of
 Genesis 1 is stronger, not weaker*

Excerpt from "So Will I (100 Billion X)"

Hillsong UNITED

God of creation
 There at the start
 Before the beginning of time
 With no point of reference
 You spoke to the dark
 And fleshed out the wonder of light

And as You speak
 A hundred billion galaxies are born
 In the vapor of Your breath the planets form
 If the stars were made to worship so will I
 I can see Your heart in everything You've made
 Every burning star
 A signal fire of grace
 If creation sings Your praises so will I

God of Your promise
 You don't speak in vain
 No syllable empty or void
 For once You have spoken
 All nature and science
 Follow the sound of Your voice

And as You speak
 A hundred billion creatures catch Your breath
 Evolving in pursuit of what You said
 If it all reveals Your nature so will I
 I can see Your heart in everything You say
 Every painted sky
 A canvas of Your grace
 If creation still obeys You so will I
 So will I
 So will I

If the stars were made to worship so will I
 If the mountains bow in reverence so will I
 If the oceans roar Your greatness so will I
 For if everything exists to lift You high so will I
 If the wind goes where You send it so will I
 If the rocks cry out in silence so will I
 If the sum of all our praises still falls shy
 Then we'll sing again a hundred billion times....

Free Speech

Jesus is a feminist so why isn't the church | Christians are inauthentic | I believe in science | missionaries are colonizers | **we** live in the now but not yet | all religions ultimately lead to the same thing | y'all need Jesus | the best lies are half-truths | your schoolwork should come before God | why do Christians hate gays | a church is just a building | I'm against organized religion | whatever you believe is fine but you **can't** go around converting people | Jesus loves you | the Bible is a list of rules | Christians are regular people too | heaven is just clouds and harps and people singing and I want no part of it | it's pointless to **talk** about religion | God's justice is better than human justice | is it okay for me to swear | Jesus died for porn | what does God's voice sound like | what about the people who never hear **about** God | I have no idea what the Bible says | miracles definitely aren't real | does getting baptized really matter | repent or you will go to hell | now I'm an atheist and I'm jaded | do you have **any** prayer requests | that's your truth | God is dead | the Bible is outdated | we have to come from a place **of** love or we have the wrong motives | why is there so much suffering in the world | it doesn't matter what I believe | **this** doesn't affect me | Christians are sexist | being a good person is all that matters | I've had bad experiences with the church | Christians are responsible for so much violence throughout history | what even is sin | God gives us the freedom to choose | I don't even know what to believe | you have to read the Bible in context | I don't believe **in** sin | oh my God | make disciples who make disciples who make disciples | punch the Devil kick the Satan | is it okay to pray to the Holy Spirit | I don't think our world is broken | Jesus broke down barriers of race and **class** | we have so much work to do | people just want to feel like they're part of something bigger than themselves | I can't believe in something without proof | blind faith is stupid | the greatest challenge facing the world today is that people don't want to listen to each other²⁹

²⁹All of these are real statements or my best approximation of real statements that I've seen or overheard at Western Washington University

Book Reviews

A Terrible "How-To" Guide

For a book that supposedly describes the way to eternal life, the Bible is the worst instruction manual I've ever seen. There's a bunch of lists in there of things not to do and not a whole lot of things that you're supposed to do. If you're already a good person, you don't need the Bible.

Inappropriate for Children

Song of Songs contains sexual imagery and references that are inappropriate for children. No children should be allowed access to this book. Parents must know what their children are reading!

The "One True Faith" is Elitist

You don't need to read the Bible to know that the Christian faith leads to treachery, murder, extreme sexism, discrimination against anyone not white, straight, and cisgender, the destruction of human history across the world, and genocide.³⁰

Long and Boring

I'm a completionist, so I usually start at the beginning of a book and finish it even if it's boring. So when I wanted to read the Bible, I started with Genesis and planned to read it straight through. But seriously, Leviticus is rough. I'm stubborn, and even I couldn't get through that. Would not recommend.

Obituaries

Scriptural Literacy

Trusted counsellor

Scriptural Literacy, seemingly ageless, quietly went to be with her Lord on March 13th, 2007.³¹

Scriptural Literacy was born around 300 B.C. in Alexandria, Egypt to Ptolemy Philadelphus and Seventy Scholars.³²

Scriptural Literacy worked tirelessly for many years to teach, rebuke, correct, and train³³ others as an active member of the Church. She often faced seasons of mischaracterization and neglect, particularly by those who were intimidated by her vast library. But those who took the time to know her on a deeper level often left her presence feeling encouraged and equipped, knowing they had heard from God through her.

Scriptural Literacy is survived by just two sons, John 3:16 and Jeremiah 29:11.

She was preceded in death by her husband, Scripture in Context, as well as most of her children and grandchildren.

Funeral services will be conducted Another Day, When I Remember, at Home, Nowhere.

Her epitaph reads: *Heaven and earth will pass away, and now I guess my words will pass away, too.*³⁴

We will always carry her memory in our hearts.

³⁰ This text adapted from a real Facebook comment posted on May 21st, 2019.

³¹ Publication date of Stephen Prothero's *Religious Literacy*, a fascinating book about the decline of religious literacy in the United States.

³² A reference to the Septuagint.

³³ See 2 Timothy 3:16-17.

³⁴ See Matthew 24:35.

Communion II

Nine o'clock after Friday Night Fellowship. Still reflecting on Julie's sermon. She suffered so much. He suffered so much.

I'm walking home alone. The others wanted to play soccer but I'm tired and anyway I like to be alone. I get to Red Square and stop.



Fisher Fountain is mesmerizing. The water glimmers with reflections from the lamps and the lights. Somehow it's rainbowic even though the lamps aren't.

I remember and I try to take a picture like the one I had before so I pull out my phone to snap a wide shot. I take a few of them. I check to see how they look. That's when I notice.

This time there's someone in the picture. I'm not alone like I'd thought. Tonight is different.

And yet it feels okay. I'm supposed to go talk to him.

I don't want to interrupt his journaling but I walk up to him anyway and then he sees me so I have to be bold. I ask if there's anything he'd like me to pray for.

He blinks, then asks what ministry I'm in and invites me to sit down. We swap stories. He's been following Jesus for about nine months now. It's his first Good Friday. He just watched *The Passion of the Christ*. He cried three times.

He shares how he met Jesus and we talk and talk and exchange names and shake hands. I learn so much about this brother I just met. I get to pray for him.

It gets cold so we walk back across campus. He gives me a hug and says thank you, that this meant a lot.

I think we both go home and journal.

Every time I have one of these encounters, I can't help but praise God for the way that He works.

And I think of that girl circling a fountain four years ago.

And I think of the irony that in moments like these, when I let go of trying to figure out who I am and let God show me instead, I feel the most like myself.

An Open Letter to Campus Christian Fellowship

Dear CCF Family,

During opening weekend of my freshman year at Western, two ladies knocked on my door to give me a cookie and invite me to CCF Kickoff. I took the cookie, but I didn't go. I also signed up for CCF at the Red Square Info Fair, but when a CoreFa texted me a few times that week asking to meet up, I blew her off. It seemed to me that CCF people were pushy and that I was too busy for that kind of community. So instead of joining CCF, I spent my first two years of college moving further and further away from God, isolating myself from what He wanted for me and from any friends who could have pointed me back in the right direction. I hit a low point the summer before my junior year. I was convinced that the rest of college was something I had to survive, not something I could enjoy.

I was so lost, but in that moment, God spoke to me in an unexpected way and reminded me that He was still pursuing me if I was willing to turn back toward Him. As a result, I began praying regularly for the first time in my life, asking Him for guidance. He led me here, to CCF. I am now so grateful to this community for modelling what real committed friendship looks like, both with God and with each other. So many of you are world-changers. You may not be able to change the whole world on your own, but you've changed my whole world. Thank you!

I write all of this because sometimes when I remind people that this is only my second year in CCF, they ask if I regret not joining sooner. And in a way, yes, because this community is full of people I love and I would love to have had more time with them. But it took me two years of struggling to do everything on my own to learn how much I needed God. That experience prepared me to dive headfirst into CCF and really see the opportunities I've been given since as a gift.

Looking back, I think there are three main things that God has taught me in these last two years. I'd like to share those with you.

Number 1 – God's work in people is not on a time schedule. It's never too late for you to ask for His forgiveness, to accept His love, to surrender to His will, to join His community. He can use any season in your life, including the ones where it feels like you're not experiencing crazy spiritual growth, to prepare you for the good things He has planned. It's also never too late for a friend or an older student or a skeptical professor. Many people on our campus don't know much about what Jesus is like, so don't assume they'll say "no" to him without ever giving them the opportunity to say "yes."

If God is not on a time schedule, that also means it's never too early to start praying for something. For example, pray about the CCF internship. Don't just joke about that, actually do it. It's never too early to talk with God about what He has in store for you, especially because He legitimately cares about what you enjoy. He knows you better than you think.

Number 2 – Your spiritual growth is based on the magnitude of your “yes” to God. One of our CCF axioms is that “You rarely grow when you’re comfortable.” God will give you plenty of opportunities to get outside your comfort zone if you let Him. Sure, that can sound scary, but what “getting outside your comfort zone” really means is leaning more fully on the always-good, all-powerful Creator of everything and everyone. When we put ourselves in situations where we have to depend on Him, we help create space for the Holy Spirit to work powerfully in and through us. That's not something to shy away from, it's something to pray for! If you're consistently giving Him an unconditional “yes,” you will grow even in seasons where it feels like you've spiritually flatlined. Some of the best advice I've ever been given is to make this commitment every morning: “God, right now I am saying yes to whatever you have for me today.” If you hold yourself accountable, He will use that “yes” for so much good.

Number 3 – Do the unexpected. Jesus was a radical figure in His culture, and we should be too. The average Western student is not expecting a Spirit-empowered prayer warrior to start a conversation with them about who they are and what they care about, much less someone who wants to commit to an ongoing friendship with them. That's radical in our culture. But people really need deep friendships, and we can offer them our time and care. So talk to strangers, especially people who are nothing like you. Ask people if you can pray for them. Be vulnerable about what's hard in your life. And don't hide your relationship with Jesus. When we surprise others by loving them well, we create opportunities for God to change their whole world.

No matter how many times you say no to God, He will always be excited about the times you say yes. And when you do, by His love, the power of the Holy Spirit, and your faith, He won't just surprise the people around you – He'll surprise you, too.

With love from your sister in Christ,

Cassie Engvall

The Next Chapter

I had a brief crisis at the end of my senior year of high school. Through a series of lessons in my AP Literature class, I came to believe that I was not someone who could defy the cultural status quo of the people around me. For some people, this might not have seemed like a big deal. But I so desperately wanted my life to be different. I didn't know how, exactly. I just didn't want to do the things that everyone else did; I wanted to make choices that surprised others and myself. I didn't necessarily want to overthrow my culture, but I wanted to live inside it in a way that didn't make sense at first glance.

In the midst of this crisis, I left a sticky note for my teacher to find, asking him if I should become a teacher. It was partly a question of if my plans were truly my own and partly a question of if I could do that responsibility justice. It wasn't a question he could answer, and I knew he would ask me about it the next day. When he did, I couldn't articulate what I was feeling. I shrugged and gave a noncommittal answer.

He still has that note. I know because he had my sister take a picture of it with my graduation announcement.

I did, of course, go on to study education in college, among other things. Part of me wonders how much I ever really wanted to become a high school teacher and how much that was just the obvious thing to do for a girl from a family of teachers who has always loved school. Becoming a teacher makes a lot of sense for someone from my particular institutional nest. I've received a lot of support from friends, family, and former teachers who have encouraged me to go that route. But for now, I'm not.



Photo credit: Claire Engvall,
used with permission

After graduation, I'll be completing a ten-month internship with Campus Christian Fellowship at Western, learning what it takes to do full-time ministry with college students. Maybe this decision isn't entirely countercultural either; after all, Christian community has its own culture, and I have certainly been influenced by it. And so far, ministry work is not all that different from teaching to me. It combines the skills I have gained in college with all of the best parts of education and following Jesus. I get to have deep, personal relationships with students, meeting with them one-on-one or in groups every week. We get to ask difficult theological questions and explore them. We get to learn from each other by sharing details from our everyday lives. We get to build true, committed friendships. We get to hold each other accountable as equals who worship the same God. Our only measuring stick is our own spiritual growth, not comparing ourselves to other people or taking standardized tests. I get to watch firsthand as this ministry transforms students the way it has transformed me.

Now, when I explain my future plans to others, some scoff. They see ministry as a temporary detour before I move on to a Proper Adult Career that allows me to live comfortably and support myself. In a capitalist American culture, vocational Christian ministry (at least as a missionary to college students) makes little sense. Teaching college students about God, relationships, and themselves appears to be a far less valuable contribution to society than teaching high school students about theatre and English literature. At least, that's what it seems like from the responses I've received.

I think, though, that I may have found my true calling as a different kind of teacher, one with a deceptively difficult, emotionally-demanding job that will require me to learn and grow every year for the rest of my life.

I don't usually like to work with binaries, but I think here, they are appropriate. Either Jesus was who he claimed to be, or he wasn't. Either what he said was true, or it wasn't. Either he rose from the dead, or he didn't. But if he was who he claimed to be, and if everything he said was true, and if he's alive today, then Christian ministry might be among the single most important jobs on Earth.

That, or it's not true, and I'm wasting my time; but even then, I'm not really wasting my time. Real friendships, growth, and service come out of this work. Even if I

were to spend a lifetime in Christian ministry only to learn that God is not real, I doubt I would regret it. And I very much doubt that God is not real.

Jesus was countercultural in his time. Maybe my decision to pursue full-time vocational ministry is countercultural. Maybe not. It's hard to tell, and if I take away any one thing from this project, it's that trying to live like Jesus in American culture is much more difficult and complicated than it seems at first glance. Fortunately, though, my research doesn't really end here. I will be navigating these tensions for the rest of my life.

And while I know that will be hard at times, I also know that I won't have to do it alone. For that, I am so grateful.

Then Jesus came to them and said, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age."

Matthew 28:18-20 (NIV)