At Harvard's packed Science Center, college students from all over the city show their religious enthusiasm at a weekly event called RealLife Boston, sponsored by Campus Crusade for Christ. (Photos / Mark Ostow)

God on the Quad

New England's liberal college campuses have become fertile ground for the evangelical movement, which is attracting students in record numbers. But after they graduate, will they keep the faith?

By Neil Swidey, Globe Staff, 11/30/2003

It's the fall student activities fair at MIT, and the place is packed. Bright-eyed, bewildered freshmen snake through the aisles of the Johnson Athletic Center, past tables for the Hippocratic Society and the Vegetarian Group, the College Republicans and the Green Party, the Science Fiction Society and the Shakespeare Ensemble. Upperclassmen from about 250 student organizations are on the hunt for new blood, and they're using snazzy multimedia presentations and 3 Musketeers bars and Italian ice and all kinds of cheesy swag to get noticed. Mostly, the freshmen keep moving, leaving the recruiters munching on their own candy bars like overstocked homeowners at the end of a slow Halloween night.

To find the big, engaged crowds, you have to go to the corner of the gym, where there is a sea of black T-shirts that read "I once was lost, but now am . . . FOUND." The students wearing them are evangelical Christians, part of a tradition that is more Bible Belt than Boston Brahmin. They are not shy about telling you how beginning a personal relationship with Jesus Christ can change your life, the same way it changed theirs. And how much fun this whole God thing can be.

There are 15 evangelical Christian fellowship groups at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology alone. This is a pretty stunning development for a university where science has
always been god, where efficiency and rationality are embedded in the DNA of the cold granite
campus. Hundreds of MIT students are involved in these fellowships -- blacks, whites,
Hispanics, and Asians, especially Asians. Some of the groups are associated with powerhouse
national evangelical organizations, like Campus Crusade for Christ and InterVarsity Christian
Fellowship. Others are more home-grown. Either way, the ranks are multiplying.

"When I came to MIT, I was expecting it to be full of nerds -- people who don't really put
together science and religion," says Benjamin Brooks, a senior from Paterson, New Jersey, who
belongs to the MIT chapter of the evangelical group Chi Alpha. "I was really surprised -- and
still am -- by the volume of Christian fellowship here."

It's the same on campuses across the Boston area. At Harvard University, "there are probably
more evangelicals than at any time since the 17th century," says the Rev. Peter J. Gomes,
religious historian and minister of the university's Memorial Church, who arrived on campus in
1970. "And I don't think I have ever seen a wider range of Christian fellowship activity."

After lagging far behind the rest of the nation, where a June Gallup Poll found that 41 percent of
Americans identified themselves as "evangelical" or "born-again," New England is beginning to
close the gap, with congregations sprouting in rented schools and office parks. Nowhere is that
more true than at Boston's elite, soaked-in-secularism colleges, although you have to leave
campus to find the strongest evidence.

On a warm Sunday evening in September, one of those amphibious Duck Tour vehicles
trundling tourists slows as it approaches Park Street Church. The tour guide notes that nearly 200
years ago, William Lloyd Garrison delivered his first antislavery speech at this church, which sits
across from Boston Common. The brick structure with the 217-foot steeple looks a lot like those
historic churches that dot the Freedom Trail -- important, well preserved, and about as relevant to
today's world as powdered wigs and mutton. But the people filing into Park Street Church tell a
different story. Instead of middle-aged sightseers clutching guidebooks, this crowd is young, tan,
and diverse. And they're here to talk -- and sing -- about Jesus.

Park Street is the flagship church for college evangelicals from about 20 campuses in the Boston
area. Ten years ago, the church's traditional Sunday night service was attracting only 40 people
and was about to be canceled. Church leaders instead decided to refashion it to suit college
students and partnered with Campus Crusade and InterVarsity. These days, more than 1,000
students show up at Park Street most Sunday evenings. Church leaders have had to expand to
two services.

It's a young show for a young crowd. The band -- electric and acoustic guitarists, drummer,
keyboard player, tambourine-shaking lead singers -- is fanned out in front of the altar. The
college students in the pews -- women in sundresses and jeans, guys sporting fresh buzz cuts and
puka-shell chokers -- clap and sway to the music. Lyrics, superimposed on images of cliffs and
forests, flash on a screen behind the band, PowerPoint style. "You make me move, Jesus/Every
breath I take, I breathe in You!"
Associate minister Daniel Harrell, dressed in green khakis and a yellow Izod shirt, stands up to
deliver his sermon. His easy sense of humor and rounded North Carolina accent make for a
relaxing environment. Still, there can be no soft-peddling the central doctrines of this brand of
Christianity. Evangelicals believe the Bible should be interpreted literally and relied on
uniformly for answers to questions of faith and personal behavior. Premarital sex? Getting
drunk? Homosexuality? All forbidden and not open to debate. While peaceful coexistence with
other religions is preached, so is the message that eternal salvation is open only to those who line
up behind them and Jesus Christ.

Yet in this hub of liberal, I'm-OK-you're-OK-we're-all-OK higher education, the pull grows
stronger for this conservative, our-way-is-the-highway evangelism.

EVANGELICALS ON LOCAL CAMPUSES tend to fall into one of three categories: those who
came with it, those who came with something else, and those who wanted nothing to do with it.

Christina "Tina" Teng of Long Island, New York, is a senior at Harvard majoring in English
literature. She stands 5-foot-9 and has black, shoulder-length hair. She signs her e-mails, "in
HIM -- Tina." Her parents both came to the United States from Taiwan, where they had been
evangelized by Christian missionaries. Teng grew up on Long Island moored to the local
Chinese church. "For the longest time," she says, "I thought all Chinese were Christians and all
Christians were Chinese."

She came to Harvard looking for a community that would nourish her evangelical faith. But she
wanted to branch out, so she opted for the Harvard-Radcliffe Christian Fellowship, a presence on
campus since the 1940s, rather than its upstart offshoot, the Asian-American Christian
Fellowship.

Asians, particularly from Korea and China, have become a roaring engine of growth for campus
evangelical groups. InterVarsity, the national group with which the Harvard-Radcliffe fellowship
and its offshoot are affiliated, has seen the number of its Asian student members grow 300
percent since 1986.

Some of these students, like Teng, come from deeply evangelical families. Others had immigrant
parents who adopted Christianity more as a means of assimilation. These parents are often
horrified to see their children make it to the Ivy League only to spend more time feeding their
faith than growing their GPA.

Teng is now a co-leader of her 60-student fellowship. They meet in small Bible study groups and
in large gatherings for lectures, prayer, and song. They often share meals in the dining halls,
share strategies for defending their faith, and share the struggle to stay on the right path.

How is life at Harvard different for her? For one thing, "I don't drink, and I'm not having sex
with my nonexistent boyfriend," Teng says, chuckling. More to the point, she says, "It's a life
lived for Jesus rather than just yourself. Life is not all about getting a good job." After graduation
in May, she plans to work full-time for InterVarsity.
Danielle DiTullio from Stoneham is in her third year at Northeastern University. She has an electric smile and wears a stud in her nose and her dirty-blond hair pulled back. She grew up in Stoneham, marinated in Catholic culture -- church every Sunday, parochial school all the way through. "But," she says, "it never really connected with me."

As a freshman at Northeastern, she met a group of women in her dormitory who invited her to Bible study. "I held off for a while, not knowing if it was cultish," DiTullio says. "All I knew about evangelicals was that they were people who hand out pamphlets and yell at you." Yet DiTullio found herself attracted to their passion and eventually realized they were not a cult.

They were also patient. "They prayed for me to come to Jesus," she says. "They prayed for a whole year."

Their prayers worked. She went to a meeting at the end of her freshman year, then a worship service, and later a citywide Campus Crusade meeting. "I could literally feel my heart grow," she says.

Her involvement deepened last year, though her parents remain concerned. "We're still trying to get through it," DiTullio says.

Fred Lee is a second-year doctoral student in electrical engineering at MIT. He wears big glasses and a bigger, near permanent grin. He came to MIT with a predisposition against organized religion, in favor of science. "My parents were very against religion," he says, "especially my dad."

Yet the undergraduate years are often when the Big Questions move to the forefront. And so it was with Lee. He became friends with some Christians on campus, and they got into discussions about faith and life. When they invited him to join their fellowship group, he resisted. Then one day in his junior year, a friend handed him a book called The Case for Christ, a defense of Christianity by former Chicago Tribune investigative journalist Lee Strobel. The book persuaded him that the Bible is true. Lee joined a fellowship and called his mom. "I told her, 'I've become a Christian. But please don't tell Dad.' " (His father eventually came around.)

How has being reborn changed Fred Lee? He says he feels God at work in his relationships and in his answered prayers, even "in the science I study at MIT." This connection with Christ has given Lee new friends, new purpose, and new confidence. He successfully auditioned for MIT's Christian a cappella group. "I would never be randomly singing or even think about singing, much less in a group, before I was a Christian," he says. "After discovering Jesus, I wanted to sing all the time."

In a postmodern world, where students are searching for authenticity, these student-centered, open-invitation evangelical fellowships hold great appeal for those who feel alienated from the top-down approach of mainline religion and the chaotic and sometimes cold world they see around them.
And with so many demands on their time, plenty of students find a clarifying power in the fact that these fellowships won't settle for anything less than complete commitment. "The central message is: Christianity impacts your entire life, from how you relate with your family to the classes you choose," says 30-year-old Dakota Pippins, who joined the Harvard-Radcliffe Christian Fellowship as an undergraduate and eventually dropped his high-tech career aspirations in favor of pursuing a Harvard Divinity School degree and joining the staff of InterVarsity. "That means giving up church compartmentalization, where you go to church on Sunday and then have the rest of your life. That's not attractive to college students. With everything you can spend your time doing on campus, if it's going to be worth giving an hour a week to, it's got to be worth a whole lot more."

Peter Gomes sits in his dark office in Memorial Church, whose white spire shoots up defiantly from the center of Harvard Yard. Gomes is wearing an elegant three-piece suit, bow tie, and gold-chain pocket watch. Squinting behind small gold spectacles, he speaks in his mannered baritone, which The New Yorker once called "three parts James Earl Jones, one part John Houseman."

Gomes, whose mother hailed from Boston's black aristocracy, has spent many of his 34 years at Harvard defending the right of evangelical groups to play a robust role in campus life, no matter how off-putting their activities have occasionally been to the university establishment, no matter how off-putting Gomes himself has occasionally been to the evangelicals for whom he has fought.

"My job has always been to remind people, even if they didn't want to hear it, that Christians belong here because this is our institution," says Gomes, a Baptist minister who is Harvard's longest-serving Plummer Professor of Christian Morals. "It may not look that way, but it was founded by us, for us, and we have kept it going, even in its most secular and pluralistic environment."

When he arrived on campus, Gomes recalls, the evangelicals were "rather beleaguered -- a small group of confessing Christians fighting godless Harvard." The university's push to diversify changed that. "People tend to think of affirmative action as only affecting racial minorities," he says, "but the change in Harvard demographics in the late '70s and early '80s meant that a lot of Midwestern white-bread Protestant Christian evangelicals at whom Harvard would never have looked in the past, and who would have never looked at Harvard, suddenly became members of the university."

Over the last decade, the evangelical scene has itself become more diverse. This brand of Christianity is particularly well suited to campus life, since it is propelled by "parachurch" groups like InterVarsity and Campus Crusade that don't recognize denominational lines. In fact, there is no uniform definition of "evangelical." Some define it merely as a style of expressing beliefs, incorporating a wide range of Protestants and even some Catholics. Others emphasize central building blocks: a conversion experience leading to a personal relationship with Jesus Christ, an acceptance of the Bible as the inerrant word of God, and a commitment to save souls by spreading the Word. This elasticity makes it impossible to determine a precise number of
American evangelicals, though several surveys have estimated it to be at least a third of the US population.

Whatever the definition, the evangelical presence on campus is a big, rowdy tent. Many students buy into all the tenets of the national parachurches, no matter how incompatible they may be with the ethos of the Eastern liberal arts college. Other students function more like "cafeteria Catholics," picking and choosing the tenets they can get behind.

And somewhere along the way, evangelical Christianity -- which a generation earlier had been a mark of embarrassment, a sign that you had checked your brain at the gate -- became not just tolerated but cool.

You can see this in the throngs of students from around Boston who cram into Harvard's Science Center on Friday nights to sing, "We are hungry for more of You/We are thirsty, oh Jesus." The event is called RealLife Boston, which is Campus Crusade's name for its 500-student Boston-area ministry, and the SRO crowd is made up of well-built athletes, attractive faces, even artsy types with chin hair and trendy black glasses. The emcee is Aaron Byrd, an easygoing junior from Abilene, Texas, who plays safety on the Harvard football team.

How did evangelicals get this hip?

Part of it is marketing. The whole RealLife approach, for instance, came from a marketing firm that Campus Crusade hired in the 1990s to help it expand its footprint in Boston. There are catchy print ads (one features a pair of wedding rings and the message "For the best sex, slip on one of these") and flashy websites (everystudent.com, godquad.com). The Boston University chapter of Chi Alpha holds regular "The Gospel According to The Simpsons" gatherings.

But a bigger reason for their new coolness involves Buddhists, Muslims, and Hindus. When students from those religions began arriving on campus in larger numbers and continued to practice their traditions in public, others on campus were intrigued.

"It's very chic to be a believer now," says Gomes. "In a place which is so dispassionate, so rational, and in many ways so conformist intellectually, if you want to break out of the pack, you say your prayers in public. It is the example of religious practice elsewhere that has emboldened American evangelicals to exercise their own practice."

Yet it is the evangelicals, and their history of straying over that murky line between evangelizing and proselytizing, who have tended to make Harvard's secular establishment most uneasy. Gomes says that over the years he has been the evangelicals' "only institutional friend." That has occasionally made for some uncomfortable moments, none more so than in 1992 when a small group of evangelical Christians called for his resignation. Their demand came after Gomes, who had been on the stage for the inaugurations of both Ronald Reagan and George Herbert Walker Bush and had been sought out by the likes of the Rev. Billy Graham, denounced a bout of homophobic incidents on campus and, in the process, announced that he was gay.
omosexuality has become the defining issue for evangelical groups, replacing the cleavage points of the past: abortion, race, predestination. Unlike fundamentalists, who historically have sought separation from the rest of impure society, "evangelicals thrive on being engaged with the world but feeling different from it," says Christian Smith, professor of sociology at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. With common ground on many other issues, homosexuality is increasingly what makes evangelicals different.

Smith's exhaustive surveys, detailed in his book *Christian America: What Evangelicals Really Want*, dispel the myth of evangelicals walking in lockstep with the religious right. He found that large majorities of conservative Christians do not believe public schools should require prayer in the classroom and do not favor a complete ban on abortion. But he found they were far more likely than other Americans to believe that gay rights groups have too much power and to object to having a homosexual for a neighbor.

Not that homosexuality is an issue that evangelicals on Boston campuses generally like to talk about publicly. As these Christian groups have become larger and more mainstream, distancing themselves from the controversial Boston Church of Christ and dumping bullhorn proselytizing in favor of one-on-one evangelizing, they've taken on more respectability on campus. Getting into rows over gay rights threatens their newfound seat at the table, and they know that. So leaders, who have picked up on the campus language of inclusion, tend to stress intergroup harmony in public while enforcing intragroup line-toeing in private.

For the most part, that works. And then one day everything erupts into full view, as it did at Tufts University three years ago, and it gets ugly fast.

Julie Catalano arrived as a freshman at Tufts in 1997 with a loose liberal-Protestant identity and confusion about her sexual orientation. About the latter, she confided in a friend from her dorm. The friend was a member of the Tufts Christian Fellowship, an InterVarsity chapter, and she invited Catalano to a group meeting.

"The guest speaker was an ex-lesbian," Catalano recalls, laughing. "That's how I got involved."

Within a few months, the fellowship became just about Catalano's entire social network on campus. And she was a true believer. She told her Jewish roommate that she couldn't get to heaven without converting to Christianity, and even drew a picture of her descending into hell.

As for her sexual identity crisis, she says she followed the plan put forward by the group's student leaders and the InterVarsity advisers: lots of prayer, some holy oils, and lengthy discussion during meetings about how she was doing. "I got so worn down by all the questions and focus on me," Catalano says, "that by the beginning of sophomore year, I said, 'OK, leave me alone. I'm straight!' " She says that even though she wasn't having sex of any kind, she felt more scrutiny than some others in the group who were having heterosexual sex and then repenting for it.

By her junior year, she knew she was a lesbian but didn't know how to square that with the group that had become her campus family. She says she became so depressed that she planned her own
suicide. After a non-Christian friend counseled her, she told the fellowship advisers that she was a lesbian but wanted to continue with the group and advance into senior leadership. They said she could stay in the group but could not be a leader, since the fellowship's statement of faith was clear on homosexuality.

A messy series of events followed. Catalano filed a claim of discrimination with the Tufts student judiciary, which stripped the fellowship of its recognition. Outside advocacy groups and the national media jumped on the story. The fellowship was reinstated. More protests. Finally, when the smoke cleared, both sides felt they had lost.

In subsequent years, similar, though less explosive, controversies arose on other campuses -- Harvard, Rutgers, the University of North Carolina -- in which critics pushed, ultimately unsuccessfully, for the de-recognition of Christian fellowships on the grounds of discrimination.

Today, Catalano, a petite 24-year-old teacher with blue eyes and a bright face, has no doubts about her sexual orientation and no hesitation in proclaiming: "These fellowships are dangerous for gay students." Even for heterosexual students, she argues, they can be worrisome by "creating a safety zone where students are not grappling with life's big questions because everything is black and white."

Curtis Chang, who with his wife served as Catalano's fellowship advisers at Tufts, has also come away from the experience more hardened. He left InterVarsity -- "campus ministry is a young man's game," says the 35-year-old new father -- and he is now a pastor of an 800-member evangelical congregation in Sunnyvale, California. He says he feels terrible to hear that Catalano was suicidal, but he notes that she never mentioned anything about it to her closest friends in the group. As for charges of double standards, Chang says that Catalano would have been allowed to be a leader if she accepted the Bible's prohibition on homosexuality and premarital sex, even if somewhere along the way she "strayed" and engaged in homosexual sex but then repented for it, just like heterosexual students.

But Chang says the incident exposes much bigger stakes, with the viability of what he calls "educated evangelicals" hanging in the balance. A native of Taiwan and 1990 graduate of Harvard, Chang says educated evangelicals feel at home in the university world and want to be considered full members. So they're quick to distance themselves from Bible-thumping, anti-intellectual fundamentalists. Instead, educated evangelicals stress their more progressive politics and nuanced theology.

"Being drawn into conflicts over homosexuality profoundly discomforts us, for we fear that our hard-earned distance will evaporate under the public glare," he argues. During the Tufts controversy, he says, he watched as other conservative Christians who share his views on homosexuality remained silent "out of fear they would be persecuted next." Three years later, he's come to believe that "the price of admission" for educated evangelicals in a place like Boston is ultimately too high.

Homosexuality is a defining issue for evangelicals, Chang says, because "it calls into question what the authority is governing your beliefs and your group. Is it changing public opinion or is it
Scripture?" He argues that the debate is really a table-setter for the biggest issues to come, when genetic cloning and manipulation of human biology take center stage. "At root is: Do we all have the right to self-define?"

He fears that if evangelicals cede too much ground on homosexuality in the battle to preserve their welcome in intellectual hothouses like Boston, they may ultimately sacrifice their ability to win the war.

t's a steamy September morning as I make my way to the headquarters of Campus Crusade for Christ in Orlando, Florida. The car radio crackles with the southern gospel sounds of AM 1520 Christian Heritage Radio: "I know that Jesus will be on the way."

Campus Crusade began in 1951 when the self-described former pagan Bill Bright, who died in July, had his vision to turn college students into ambassadors for Christ. Today, Campus Crusade is one of the world's largest Christian organizations, with 50,000 student members and 27,000 full-time staff, most of whom fund-raise to cover their own salaries. Campus Crusade is on about 1,000 US campuses and another 240 overseas, and the $450-million-a-year organization is consistently rated one of the nation's best-run religious charities. In 1999, Crusade moved into its new headquarters, which features twin rotundas, 275 acres of Bermuda grass, and 40 soft-focus original prints donated by artist/committed Christian/shopping mall magnate Thomas Kinkade.

Like most evangelical college ministry groups, Crusade seems to live in two worlds simultaneously. There are the field workers who, especially in places like Boston, speak of collaboration and dialogue. Then there is the gloves-off approach of the home office, which girds for a hostile world.

One large display at Crusade's Orlando headquarters contrasts the lives of John Mott and Karl Marx. It notes that Mott found God in college and eventually led 30,000 student missionaries worldwide. Marx, we are reminded, lost God and went on to hatch the ideology upon which communism would be built. "Up to 150 million people have died under communism," reads a text panel next to images of the Mai Lai massacre, Fidel Castro, and the skeletal remains from mass graves.

I ask Chris Kellum, my tall, personable tour guide, if there is any connection between Mott and Campus Crusade. "It's just an example of how one student can make a difference for good or bad," he replies. "John Mott came across some Christian friends. Karl Marx came across some friends interested in philosophy. A college campus is a time when people set the course of their lives."

We move on to a display headlined "The Bible calls it the Truth. The university calls it Trash. Is Jesus the Way or Intolerant?" The display contains a series of outrageous quotes from unnamed professors, such as: "Forget everything you learned about the New Testament. Jesus was homosexual and a magician."

"Are these comments reflective of what is happening on campuses today?" I ask Kellum.
"They're not uncommon," he says. He recalls an incident from his own undergrad days at the University of Colorado: "I'm a believer in creationism. In my psychology class, the professor was saying that our hands are shaped like this because the ape's hands are shaped that way. And I went, 'OK.' But then I realized that doesn't match up with what the Bible teaches."

More and more, Crusade is looking globally to spread the word. It has divided the world's 6 billion people into 6,000 MPTAs, or "million people target areas." Crusade now has a presence in 4,475. One of its most effective recruitment tools is Jesus, a feature-length film that Crusade made in 1980 and has since translated into more than 800 languages and dialects, making it the most translated and distributed film in the world.

But the approaches that work in less developed parts of the world just don't cut it in Boston. Patrick McLeod, Crusade's Boston metro director, who is based at Harvard, says his goal is to get evangelical Christianity out of the academic backwater. For his own doctoral program at Boston University, McLeod is studying the intersection of science and religion.

Does the growth on Boston campuses put the field workers here on a collision course with the front office? Gomes, who calls McLeod the best Crusade staffer he's seen at Harvard, says the national groups are gambling. "We in the Ivy League are big prizes for them," Gomes says. "They cannot be seen to be ineffective. But the more people come to places like this, the more what they bring here is tempered by what they find here."

A word you hear often from the leaders of Crusade and other evangelical groups is "trajectory." By focusing on students while they're in college, the evangelicals hope to launch them on a course that will lead them to build their lives around Christ. If there's a dream trajectory that leaders have in mind, it is represented by Steve Douglass, 58, who took over for Bright as president of Campus Crusade in 2001. Here was a guy who graduated at the top of his class at MIT (bachelor's) and Harvard (MBA) but found that, as he puts it, "success didn't satisfy." In 1969, for his MBA research project, he created a new business model for Campus Crusade, which he had joined at Harvard the year before. Bright heard about the plan and liked it so much that he asked Douglass to come aboard to implement it.

Douglass says he had no hesitation in saying yes. He just dreaded telling his Harvard professors. He lowered the boom at a faculty dinner honoring him and a handful of other top students. "Their eyes averted," he recalls. "They coughed. I realized they were thinking, 'Where did we go wrong? Does this man realize he is about to graduate from the high temple of capitalism?'"

Yet for every Steve Douglass, there are many more students whose intense involvement slackens after commencement. That's when all the attributes that made the evangelical groups so appealing to students -- their premium on tight-knit social circles, their student-run, non-hierarchical approach, their funky, late-night culture -- can begin to work against them in meeting the needs of the post-college crowd. To keep them in the fold, the groups try to serve as feeders for evangelical churches in the area. It's hardly a seamless transition, though, and these bustling churches have their own continuity problems. Park Street Church sees its congregation turn over by half every three years.
In the end, the evangelical groups have resigned themselves to a certain level of fall-off among graduates. That's acceptable, because next fall, on just about every campus, there will be a new batch of bright-eyed, bewildered freshmen snaking through a student activities fair. And for now at least, no matter what kind of candy bars are being handed out, they know they'll find plenty of hungry souls.

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