

God's Work Matters

I had always wondered what had happened to Paul (not his real name), an international student from Africa. I had come to believe that the time he had spent with campus ministry at All Saints had not really meant much. This week I realized I was wrong. Seeds of faith and friendship had actually been planted.

As usual, I sit in my office with the door open so I can say hello to whomever walks in. The church door opened and I looked up. To my astonishment and complete amazement, in walked Paul. It had been several years since he had come to visit. I had thought our campus ministry work had not mattered; I found out just how much it actually had.

Paul came back for more than one reason. He came to say that he missed All Saints and wanted us to know how thankful he is for all the time and love we gave him while he was a student at Slippery Rock University. His eyes shone as he recalled happy holiday meals at our home; how he felt so accepted, along with the many other international students who came to All Saints activities; how he deeply appreciated our nonstop encouragement during all of his struggles to survive financially, emotionally and spiritually.

Paul also came in to say that he was sorry. He apologized for just dropping out of our lives. He knew we cared. He knew that we were worried about him. He knew that every time we would see him at the annual SRU International Dinner, where he voluntarily promised he would be back soon, we worried because he did not. He apologized because he knew All Saints loved him like family and really wanted to be sure he was okay. We especially missed time with him in worship.

Paul went on to describe his present life. He's been married but that did not last. He is full of regrets. He now lives with his family. He stays in touch with many former international students who had come to SRU and ASLC. He is also in contact with his former best friend, who now lives back home in Africa. As he talked about his broken marriage, and his deep care for his former girlfriend, his eyes welled up with tears. Pain filled his face. Guilt and remorse were almost too much to bear.

Paul said he has not been in church. Instead, he listens to services on his smart phone. He wants to listen to God's Word. He is searching for the "right" church. He listened to the words we shared: that he become a member of a church no matter how busy his job keeps him; that he needs to go to his church for confession and absolution, because his whole soul is hurting with the pain he carries – pain he could take to Jesus. He said he would do that. He realizes he needs forgiveness.

Just when it seemed that campus ministry did not matter, Paul's visit showed that it does. We held hands before he left to drive South to his job. He and I prayed together. He said he will stay in touch, he will go to church, and he will ask God to give him His strength.

As he drove away, he laughingly and smilingly called out that he'd tell all the "boys" he stays close to from the old days when he was a student. He will tell them to call us to say hello.

We know that this won't be his last visit. He had driven all night to pick up belongings he had kept in Slippery Rock. He wanted to see his old campus. Most of all, he wanted to share from his heart with my older All Saints – the place where he became family. I believe he will return.

It's especially priceless to have Paul's visit. This visit is a reminder that God's Word matters. It grows no matter what the challenges are in a student's life.

All Saints will greet this year's college students with Welcome Boxes. Since we cannot serve student meals due to the virus, we can give the students a treat, which says we're here for them. Now, and in all the years to come.

We thank God that His Holy Spirit keeps them forever. His Word matters.

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