

Leadership with a Soul

Making faith part of your skill set

By Dr. Todd Murphy

If you're reading this magazine, you're probably a person who has big dreams about what you want to do in this world. You've experienced success in most things you've attempted in your life, and for those successes, you've gained a certain amount of recognition. Others know who you are and look up to you. How does that make you feel? Perhaps you simply enjoy it. Maybe it surprises you and makes you uncomfortable. You're just being yourself. Or maybe you realize that you are in a unique position, and with your position comes a certain responsibility. Student leaders in the Fellowship of Christian Athletes have experienced these emotions at one time or another. Their response has been to reach out to classmates and share with them what has been a positive influence in their lives: their faith.

Allen Nessler, FCA president at **Buchholz High School** in Gainesville, was motivated to get involved because he saw many of his classmates struggling. According to Nessler, many students wrestling with issues such as loneliness and trust deal with them by turning to drugs and alcohol, which only makes their problems worse. "They know their life's a mess, but they don't know anything better," Nessler says. Students in FCA try to help by offering a more constructive and permanent spiritual alternative.

FCA's goals and standards tend to be unique among groups that have a spiritual focus. For example, while many groups might measure their success by projects completed, money raised, or attendance at meetings, FCA looks for the positive impact on the lives of students who get involved. Maggie Keating, secretary of the outreach committee of the **University of Florida's** FCA chapter, says numbers are important because they want to help as many people as possible. However, what matters to her most is that the weekly meetings provide a "safe and warm environment" for those who attend, she says. "It's where you can be honest with your peers and yourself," Keating says.

Because their mission is so people-oriented, most of the challenges revolve around figuring out how to successfully communicate and build relationships. Since they have a spiritual foundation, they feel they're accountable to God to love and respect others not only in what they're trying to do, but also in how they go about doing it. This means they can't push people but have to respect them and allow them to

make their own decisions. They realize they have to care deeply, getting to know people before presuming to give advice.

Therefore, their primary approach is to try to use athletics as a bridge. Teammates bond through shared successes, failures, joys, and heartbreaks. It's in the context of this bond that FCA students show their concern for others by caring enough to find out what's going on in a person's life—listening to their struggles and trying to help by sharing how faith has worked for them.

Nessler believes that one of the primary obstacles they face as a spiritually focused



COURTESY UF FCA

Row Your Boat Ashore: University of Florida FCA members find time to share their faith, mentor high schoolers, grow spiritually, and sometimes just have fun.

group is that they're easily misunderstood. "People might see us out in front of the school praying, and to them it looks strange. It scares them," he says. This can cause people to react negatively when someone from FCA tries to share with them. They might feel they're being preached to or judged. As a result, FCA students stick with their approach of taking the time to get to know people, building relationships with them, and showing they care before they try to share their faith.

FCA's spiritual foundation also shapes how they structure leadership within the organization. The official leadership structure of an FCA chapter includes a president, vice president, treasurer, and secretary. However, Nessler says, "Your leadership role comes from who you are, not the office you hold." All those who hold a leadership post work together as equals on a team. Everyone is able to offer input. The team evaluates the ideas and comes up with a plan together. If

everyone isn't on board with something, they don't follow through with it.

FCA leaders model what they want to see in each of their chapters. They believe that if they expect to see students caring for and encouraging one another, they need to be the same thing.

Members of each leadership team come together not only to plan and strategize, but also to provide opportunities for sharing and encouragement. In addition, the leadership structure ensures that everyone is mentored and encouraged—even as they mentor and encourage those they try to lead. At Buchholz, Nessler sees that members receive guidance, help, and encouragement. In turn, he gets guidance and encouragement from Keating who is responsible for staying in touch with him and five other Gainesville-area leaders. She usually meets or talks with them once or twice a week, helping with whatever they might need. "I

go to the leadership meetings and make sure they're on the right track. I'm kind of just a resource for them," she says.

Many who are part of spiritually focused student organizations get involved because they're looking for a combination of things that only a faith-based group can provide. Nessler and Keating found this at FCA. As Nessler put it, "We wanted a place to have fun. But not just fun; fun with a mission. And not just a mission: a mission to help others."

Contact Keating at maggiel@ufl.edu, or contact Buchholz High School FCA Advisor Perry Shenk at 352-955-6702 or pshenk@bellsouth.net.

Dr. Todd Murphy received his Ph.D. in organizational communication from Northwestern University, Ill., where he was an instructor in Northwestern's Undergraduate Leadership Program. Murphy serves as a pastor at St. Andrews Episcopal Missionary Church in Gainesville, Fla.



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