

## Article

# To Be Safe and Seen: BIPOC Gen Z Engagement in Evangelical Campus Ministries

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**Abstract:** This paper investigates the Gen Z counter-demographic of the religious nones on college and university campuses by focusing on BIPOC students and the stories that they tell about why they actively engage in evangelical campus ministries during their college years. This is carried out by being attentive to the racially segregated campus ministry context and the preponderance of “white spaces” in colleges and universities, including in campus ministries. Data for this study come from the Landscape Study of Chaplaincy and Campus Ministry (LSCCM 2019–2022) in the United States. Like other students in campus ministries, we find that BIPOC students who are “churched” with a Christian upbringing seek out campus ministries that function as a “home away from home”, where they can find authentic belonging—genuine connections and acceptance among like-minded Christians. For BIPOC students, however, this search for authentic belonging included a search for a campus ministry where they could be “safe and seen” for both their ethnoracial and Christian selves.

**Keywords:** evangelical Christian; campus ministry; Generation Z; racial diversity; BIPOC; belonging



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## 1. Introduction

How is it that in the era of religious “nones”, a portion of emerging adults in the United States not only identify as religious when they come into adulthood but choose to spend time in college actively involved with a campus ministry? This paper answers this question by focusing on an often-neglected student demographic—Generation Zs (Gen Zs) who are Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) and their religious engagement in evangelical campus ministries, which make up the largest share of campus ministries in US colleges and universities. It answers why BIPOC Gen Zs engage in evangelical campus ministries by listening to the stories that they tell about why and how they became involved in campus ministries and where they find “home” on the college campus. This is carried out by paying special attention to how race shapes BIPOC students’ religious engagement amidst the segregated and white spaces that predominate the college and university landscape, including the terrain of evangelical campus ministries.

### *Gen Zs on the College Campus*

Increasing numbers of “nones” (those who report no religious affiliation) make up today’s Gen Z demographic, and this is nowhere more apparent than on the college campus.<sup>1</sup> Since the year 2000, the proportion of religious “nones” has soared, making up nearly 30% at 4-year colleges and a little over 40% in universities in the 2019 American Freshman Survey. Though only about half identify as atheists or agnostics, student disaffiliation from formal religious institutions represents a growing challenge for campus ministries (*The American Freshman: National Norms Fall 2019*). It is also of concern for student affairs as religious affiliation has been associated with positive student outcomes, and faith communities have traditionally functioned as a major source of supportive networks in college (*Bryant 2007; Kim 2004, 2006; Park 2018; Pfund and Miller-Perrin 2019; Rennick et al.*

2013). This community support is even more important for today's Gen Zs who are going through an unprecedented mental health crisis and loneliness epidemic (Demarinis 2020). According to the Healthy Minds Survey, one-third of college students experience psychological difficulties and 10% have suicidal thoughts (Soni 2019). Loneliness has also become a major social problem for Gen Zs—the first digital native generation more familiar with connecting through their thumbs and screens than in person. Questions that students commonly ask on college campuses today are: “How can I belong?”, “How do I make friends?” (Bui et al. 2022; Soni 2019). Meanwhile, traditional evangelical campus ministries, which make up the majority of campus ministries on college and university campuses, have been suffering from an image problem. Particularly since Trump's ascendancy, evangelicalism has become increasingly associated with racism and general intolerance, evident in part from the rise of white Christian nationalism to the growing culture wars led by conservative Christians against the 1619 project, CRT, and “diversity curriculum” in schools throughout the nation (Gorski and Perry 2022; Kim 2023).

Indeed, a growing body of research suggests that the rise of the religiously disaffiliated, particularly apparent among Gen Zs, is partly a backlash against the intolerant politics of the religious right (Batchelder 2020; Braunstein et al. 2022; Kim 2023; Manalang 2021). As the most racially diverse generation yet, Gen Zs tend to be politically progressive and activist and turned off by hierarchy, inequality, and intolerance (Kaplan 2020; Katz et al. 2021; Rue 2018; Twenge 2017, 2023).

Coinciding with the rise in evangelicalism's association with racism and general intolerance is the racially and ethnically diversifying college and university landscape. With post-1965 immigration and changes in Civil Rights legislation, historically and predominantly white American college and university campuses have become more demographically diverse (The Chronicle of Higher Education 2022). Researchers predict that the number of white high school graduates will continue to decrease, while the population of Asian and Latinx college applicants will grow (Kim 2014). In California, the demographic bellwether for the rest of the US, public universities are becoming significantly Asian and Latinx.<sup>2</sup> In 2021, the University of California admitted “its largest and most diverse undergraduate class ever” with 43% of the admitted California freshmen making up underrepresented racial and ethnic groups. For the 2021 school year, Latinxs were the largest group admitted (37%), followed by Asian Americans (34%), white students (20%), and Black students (5%). These demographic shifts parallel the growth of an international student population on university and college campuses across the US (roughly 5%), which is primarily Asian, with over half coming from China and India.<sup>3</sup> The future of the student demographic on college and university campuses will only be more racially diverse with the majority of the students being BIPOC.

## 2. Literature

### *Evangelical Campus Ministry Engagement*

Work on young adults' engagement in evangelical campus ministries is sparse, but what exists points to three main explanations for their religious engagement. First, students may engage in campus ministries as part of their spiritual or personal identity development. For example, Bryant (2011) found that some students remain religious throughout their college years and into early adulthood because they are able to identify values found within the Christian faith that affirm their sense of self, particularly as they strive to develop their own faith and religious engagement vis-à-vis their parents. Second, students who are already evangelical may engage in campus ministries because campus ministries provide a familiar and comfortable space in a new college environment (Kim 2004, 2006; Small and Bowman 2011). Third, students may participate in campus ministries because of the various resources that they may provide. Campus ministries can connect students to mental health resources (Davidson et al. 2020), help students to make friends and cultivate social capital (Moran et al. 2007), and enable students who are already evangelical to enhance their identity and status within a religious context and accrue cultural capital

(Moran 2007). One study even found a relationship between religious observance and an overall sense of satisfaction with college for students (Mooney 2010). In short, students engage in campus ministries as part of their self and spiritual identity development, for comfort and community, and the various resources that campus ministry may provide.

These existing studies on young adults' engagement in evangelical campus ministries shed light on what may broadly motivate students to participate in evangelical campus ministries. None, however, take race seriously in their analysis of religious engagement among today's Gen Zs. Studies on Gen Zs' religious engagement also invariably focus the narrative on white Gen Zs. The literature on Gen Z evangelicals, what little that exists, is centered on white students and neglects BIPOC Gen Zs. Implicit or explicit, the focus is on white students and BIPOC students are discussed, if at all, as a supplement to the main conversation centered around white students. This is particularly problematic given Gen Zs' racially diverse demographic (approximately half are BIPOC) and the racially diverse yet divided evangelical campus milieu. The few studies that consider racial diversity and campus ministry engagement suggest that race and the racial landscape clearly affect the choices and opportunities that students have to engage in campus ministries (Kim 2004, 2006, 2015; Park 2013, 2018).

As the college campus has become more racially diverse, so too have the evangelical campus ministries. Even still, the campus ministry community remains largely racially segregated, much like the broader Christian landscape. Most campus ministries, like the churches in their local communities, are racially homogenous (Dougherty et al. 2020; Emerson and Smith 2000; Kim 2004, 2006, 2015, 2023). Following this pattern of racial homogeneity, one of the main ways that national campus evangelical organizations such as InterVarsity, Cru, and Navigators have responded to a growing racially diverse student body is by creating separate ethnic niche ministries within their organizations.

For example, depending on the racial makeup of the campus, InterVarsity has separate ministries: Black Campus Ministry, LaFe (for Latinx students), and Asian American Ministries. At the turn of the 21st century, independent Asian American campus ministries were founded by Asian Americans for Asian Americans (e.g., Asian American Christian Fellowship, Koinonia Campus Mission). In spite of their efforts to be more racially inclusive, these campus ministries tend to function similarly to other ethnic niche ministries and are racially homogeneous.

Although racially homogenous campus ministries predominate, multiracial campus ministries, like multiracial congregations, also exist (Dougherty et al. 2020; Edwards and Kim 2019, 2023; Kim 2023). Having a demographically multiracial community, however, does not mean all is well (Barron 2016; Christerson et al. 2005; Edwards 2019; Edwards and Kim 2019, 2023; Kim 2023). A "peek below the surface" of numerically multiracial churches "reveals they are not necessarily spaces that foster equality, justice, or belonging" (Edwards 2019, p. 417). As a testament to this on the college campus, some of the largest campus evangelical ministries that have become more racially diverse in recent years are currently going through a "civil war" over the issue of racism and racial justice post-BLM (Black Lives Matter) and Trump's ascendancy (Kim 2023; Yee 2021).

Existing studies on young adults' engagement in campus Christian life fail to account for this racially diverse but segregated and divided structural context of Gen Zs' religious engagement. They also fall short in accounting for the racialized structural context of US colleges and universities. As various studies in higher education show, many US colleges and universities continue to be quintessentially "white spaces", terrains of whiteness, which constrain BIPOC students' development and success in college (Bonilla-Silva and Peoples 2022; Briscoe et al. 2022; Cabrera et al. 2017; Duran et al. 2022; Gusa 2010; Sanchez 2021).

White spaces are public spaces such as neighborhoods, schools, or workplaces that are "overwhelmingly white", which can be perceived as being "informally off limits" for people who are not white, e.g., Black people (Anderson 2015, p. 10). The historically white colleges and universities (HWCUs) in the US are some of these "overwhelmingly white" public spaces that are formally open to everyone, yet informally can be perceived as being

spaces primarily for white people (Bonilla-Silva and Peoples 2022; Briscoe and Jones 2022; Cabrera et al. 2017; Duran et al. 2022; Gusa 2010; Moore 2008, 2020). Whiteness shapes the history, traditions, symbols, curriculum, demography, and overall climate of these colleges and universities. HWCUs are “white spaces”—they are not spaces where everyone belongs equally (Bonilla-Silva and Peoples 2022, p. 1491). Similarly, there is a plethora of research that describes how the evangelical church, including the many evangelical campus ministries on college campuses, are also primarily white spaces that mainly support white people and their wellbeing as opposed to BIPOC (Christerson et al. 2005; Curtis 2021; Edwards and Kim 2019, 2023; Emerson and Smith 2000; Jennings 2020; Jones 2020; Jun et al. 2018; Kim 2004, 2006, 2015, 2023).

Given the clear lack of in-depth study on students’ engagement in campus ministries that center BIPOC students and takes the racialized structural context of college campuses and evangelicalism seriously, this study examines BIPOC Gen Z college students’ engagement in evangelical campus ministries by being attentive to the racially diverse yet segregated campus ministry context and the preponderance of “white spaces” in colleges and universities, including in campus ministries.

### 3. Data and Methods

Using data from the Landscape Study of Chaplaincy and Campus Ministry (LSCCM 2019–2022) in the United States, which included a range of campus ministry denominations, 90 in-depth interviews with students, ministry staff, and directors of evangelical campus ministries were analyzed.<sup>4</sup> Interview data used for this study include 52 interviews with student leaders and 38 interviews with directors, ministers, and staff of evangelical campus ministries across the nation. The perspectives of both students and directors and staff from campus ministries studied are included in the data set. Approximately 60% of the sample included people who identified themselves as BIPOC and/or mixed and 40% included those who identified themselves as “white only”. Most of the interview data with students came from students involved in evangelical campus ministries on the West Coast, which were more racially diverse. They included one liberal arts college, a private university, and three public universities. The evangelical campus ministries represented in the study include both national university ministries, such as Cru, InterVarsity, and Navigators, and regional campus ministries such as Koinonia Campus Mission, as well as ministries specific to the college or to a local church. To increase the representation of BIPOC students in the study and account for the diversity of campus ministries in the contemporary college landscape, ethnic-specific campus ministries for Black, Latinx, and Asian American students were also purposefully included in the study. The directors of these various national, regional, and local evangelical campus ministries were also interviewed for the study.

Data were collected between 2020 and 2021 during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic. All interviews were conducted via Zoom. Prior to an interview, participants were sent surveys that asked a few demographic questions about themselves and their campus ministries along with a consent form. Interviews tended to last about 60–90 min. All participants consented to be interviewed. Students who were referred by campus ministry staff as active members or leaders of their campus ministry were interviewed. The main questions, which were developed as part of the larger LSCCM project, discussed in each interview included the following: the participant’s spiritual journey from high school to college, how the participant became involved with the campus ministry, what attracted them to their ministry and what they appreciate about it, what they feel could be improved about their ministry, the participant’s perspective on the ministry’s racial demographic makeup, the participant’s perspective on how race impacts the ministry or their choice in which ministry to become involved with, where the participant feels at home in college, and, lastly, what challenges they feel students are facing today in college.

Focusing on BIPOC Gen Zs, responses to these questions were analyzed to see how they varied, if at all, by the race of the interview participants as well as the racial composi-

tion of the campus ministry to understand BIPOC Gen Z's religious engagement. Surveys were collected through Qualtrics. Interview data were coded and analyzed using NVivo, a qualitative data analysis software.

#### 4. Results

We find that BIPOC students who are already churched (having an experience of growing up in a Christian household or churchgoing community and familiar with Christianity) participate in evangelical campus ministries as part of their search for a “home away from home” during their college years. As the classical functional theories in sociology may suggest, campus ministries have a stabilizing function. Students who are already familiar with the Christian faith and norms engage in campus ministries because they provide them a place of familiarity and comfort, a home away from home, for students adjusting to their new lives on the college campus (Durkheim [1912] 1995; Kim 2004, 2006). Specifically, we find that these campus ministry homes are attractive because they can function as important sites of authentic belonging. Like other students involved in campus ministries, BIPOC students who were under-represented on their predominantly white college campuses sought a Christian community where they could make genuine friendships and connections, one that would accept and support them as they are. Unlike white students, however, we find that BIPOC students' search for authentic belonging included a search for a campus ministry where they could be “safe and seen” for both their ethnoracial and Christian selves. They sought a Christian community on campus where they could be “safe” and affirmed for who they are ethnoracially and religiously.

##### 4.1. Churched BIPOC Home Seekers

Regardless of race, there were no new converts to the faith among the student leaders and active members of evangelical campus ministries that were interviewed in our study. All of the students interviewed that engaged in an evangelical ministry in college had at least some prior church experience or would have described themselves as Christian before entering college. What we have is a kind of “circulation of saints”—Christians reaffiliating and circulating among existing evangelical congregations, in this case, from churches to campus ministries (Bibby and Brinkerhoff 1983). Students who are already Christian-inclined and familiar with the faith were engaged in evangelical campus ministries.

Like other students, BIPOC students that actively participated in campus ministries came from Christian backgrounds. They grew up going to church with their family or at least had a strong familiarity with Christianity from those around them. More often than not, BIPOC students sought out a campus ministry experience, knowing that they appreciated their involvement in church or ministry during high school or because they had relationships with people involved in specific ministries present at their college. Some students had friends or family in the ministry, so they knew about it before entering college, others were looking to find a Christian environment to support their faith, and still others were searching for a sense of community, a feeling easily filled by campus ministries given their familiarity with church practices.

A Korean American student, Paul, who was studying to be a computer scientist and participated in a Korean American campus ministry typified BIPOC students who saw their participation in campus ministry as part of their ongoing journey as Christians being involved in ministry.<sup>5</sup> This is how Paul responded when asked about his spiritual journey and how he became actively involved in his campus ministry, Koinonia Campus Mission (KCM):

I actually was born in the church. I have been going to church all my life and going through high school, it was the same thing... I have always been very involved and I always enjoyed just serving and hosting events and just helping out with overall logistics of the church. So coming into college, I was also looking for a campus ministry...



Paul grew up in the church and enjoyed participating in Christian community and expected to do the same once he came to college. He “checked out” KCM, among other campus ministries, as soon as he got to his campus.

Another experience that was common for the BIPOC students in our study was a desire to develop a faith of their own by participating in campus ministry. Choosing to engage in a faith community on campus was part of their desire to grow in their faith and develop a faith of their own in relation to their parents and the Christian community that they grew up in. Trey, an African American student explains this experience—why participating in campus ministry was “really critical” for him:

It was really critical, I would say. I have always grown up calling myself a Christian, my family is Christian and whatnot, but I didn’t really know what that meant—to have like a personal relationship with God . . . And so coming into college, I knew that I wanted to really find out this whole Christianity thing for myself and not just because like, my family is (Christian), you know.

Thus, even though he was a busy engineering major and a student-athlete at his large public university with plenty of alternative student activities that he could engage in, he made sure that he found a campus ministry early on so that he could develop a faith of his own.

Additionally, just as students are approached by members of Greek life organizations and other student clubs, participants discuss ways in which members of certain campus ministries “outreached”—reached out and encouraged them to join the group. One staff member of a COGIC (Church of God in Christ) campus ministry in the Midwest identifying as a Black male shares: “Fraternities and sororities and other clubs and other groups, are going to be there presenting themselves to them. And we want to make sure that we’re there presenting ourselves to them as well, as much as possible”. Thus, part of the reason why students who are already church or familiar with the Christian faith participate in campus ministries is because campus ministries do their part in outreaching—taking steps to present themselves and attract students to their campus ministries. All of the campus ministries in our study participated in student organization fairs where various student groups introduce themselves to potential members on campus. They did this in addition to the various other ways that student organizations attract members, e.g., passing out flyers, offering free food, posting various events on social media, tabling on popular walkways on campus, and using existing friendship networks to invite newcomers to their campus ministries.

Thus, a significant reason why BIPOC students participate in campus ministry is that they are already Christian-inclined and seeking out a Christian community upon or even prior to matriculating at a college. Meanwhile, campus ministries are more than eager and ready to receive them. What then, are these BIPOC Gen Z college students looking for in a campus ministry home? What about a particular campus ministry draws BIPOC students in and makes them feel at home in a marketplace full of campus ministries?

#### *4.2. Seeking Authentic Belonging: To Be Safe and Seen*

Regardless of race, church Gen Zs sought a campus ministry “home”, where they could experience authentic belonging. They were seeking a genuine community where they could make “real” friendships and deep connections (as opposed to shallow or “fake” relationships), one that would accept them as they are and genuinely care for them.

A bi-racial African American student, Darren, explains how finding this authentic community was crucial in his decision to commit to his campus ministry among the various other campus ministries that he visited in his first year in college. Although he did not grow up Baptist, he decided to commit to participating in Challenge, a Baptist campus ministry, because he met people, in particular a campus ministry staffer who also happened to be bi-racial, that genuinely expressed interest in him. Darren shares:

She was so excited to get to know me. Like, it wasn’t just a, “Oh, here’s the information for the night and whatnot”, but like, she was like, “Where are you

from? How many brothers do you have? What's your background?"... And then also she wasn't afraid to just spend the time just talking to me... She wasn't like, "Okay, see ya, now I am going to talk to other people". She was very focused in on me in that moment. And the first time I talked with some of the other people (in other student groups)... it was almost like a business transaction kind of thing. Like, we are trying to get numbers, trying to get people. Whereas this was very personal... She wanted to get to know who Darren was.

Another African American male student who is close friends with Darren and also attends Challenge explains why he too decided to join Challenge, one of the few racially diverse campus ministries at his university. It was because he was able to find genuine belonging—intimate and transparent friendships at a deep level with other Christian peers, including Darren.

The degree of like intimacy and transparency that I share with my friends in college, most of them who are specifically in Challenge, it is just much deeper and it is much more... than anything I have ever had... I definitely feel like the strongest sense of belonging really.

Amidst the backdrop of a loneliness epidemic, virtual realities, and superficial ties, BIPOC students, like the two students that we just heard from who were already Christian-inclined, sought a campus ministry where they could find genuine connections and support with peers and potential mentors while being themselves. This was a universal impulse among the students in our study regardless of the student's race, ethnicity, or gender, region, and the racial composition of their campus ministries—whether the students were involved in multiracial or more racially homogenous campus ministries.

Like everyone else, BIPOC students sought a campus ministry where they could find genuine belonging—a community where they matter and can be supported and cared for, as they are for their whole selves. That said, what only the BIPOC students, specifically those who are demographically under-represented on their college campuses, talked about wanting in their search for authentic belonging was a "safe" space. In a college landscape, including campus ministries, predominated by white spaces, under-represented BIPOC students' search for authentic belonging and genuine connections included a search for a "safe" space where they could be "seen" and known for their full ethnoracial *and* Christian selves.

To understand why underrepresented Black, Latinx, and Asian American students in our study talked specifically about wanting a campus ministry home that is "safe" and where they can be "seen" is to first consider the racial terrain of their college campus. Although the demographics of the college and university campuses in our study varied and included two of the most racially diverse universities in the country, the culture, history, and institutional structure of the campuses were predominantly white. Despite the racial diversity of many of these campuses, the main spaces were white spaces, and the majority of the student organizations were "white spaces", informally and implicitly perceived by those who are BIPOC as spaces primarily for white people ([Anderson 2015](#); [Bonilla-Silva and Peoples 2022](#)).

In this predominantly white terrain, including the campus ministry landscape, being in a space where under-represented BIPOC students can be "safe and seen" for their ethnoracial selves was an imperative part of their search for genuine belonging in campus ministries. BIPOC students want to be safe in a genuine community where they can be "seen" and known for who they are, for their ethnoracial selves versus just as Christians. In short, they want to be "safe and seen" for *both* their ethnoracial and Christian selves, which is something that white students could take for granted in their campus ministries. This was a unique aspect of BIPOC students' search for authentic belonging on the college campus through campus ministries in the era of a loneliness epidemic and racial strife, during a global pandemic no less.

To be "safe and seen" was the primary reason that BIPOC students at large secular university campuses gave for why they chose to participate in an ethnic campus ministry

where their ethnoracial group was the clear majority such as InterVarsity's Black Campus Ministry and LaFe. It was also why a handful of Black students at a Christian college that had mandatory chapel and various university-sponsored campus ministry activities decided to start a separate "diverse" campus ministry primarily for Black students. It is also why Asian American students who were the demographic minority on the same Christian campus decided to participate in Koinonia Campus Mission, a campus ministry that is primarily Korean American. The following BIPOC students discuss why they sought to participate in an ethnoracial campus ministry of their own over participating in other campus ministries that are formally open to everyone.<sup>6</sup>

#### 4.3. *To Be Safe*

LaFe is an ethnic campus ministry for Latinx students within InterVarsity Christian Fellowship, which is one of the large nationwide evangelical campus ministries in the US. Maya, who self-describes herself as Black, Latinx, and Indigenous, is a student who participates in one of the chapters of LaFe at a large private university on the West Coast that is predominantly white but also significantly Asian. Maya explains her campus racial demographic in her own view and how she feels Black and Hispanic students are a clear minority in the racial topography: "It is predominantly white, but there are also a lot of Asian people. ... I would say that Black and Hispanic students are definitely the minority."

As a sociology major interested in studying race relations, Maya sees people who look like her in her major classes. This is not the case, however, in her general education classes, which include a broader student body. In such general spaces for "everyone", she "definitely feels like the minority". Maya explains:

I tend to take classes that focus around race relations and stuff. So, you know, those types of classes cater to a certain demographic, like people who are interested in race tend to be like BIPOC. So. . . I don't feel like the minority there but like for my general education classes (where) like everyone is taking those classes. . . I definitely feel like the minority.

In these main and general spaces where she is clearly the minority, Maya experiences various racial microaggressions and general unease for being who she is, even a sense of inferiority, which is not good for her mental health. When asked why a separate campus ministry for Latinx students like LaFe is needed when there is already an InterVarsity chapter on her campus that is open to everyone, Maya shared the following:

I would say (LaFe) is needed because you find a lot of microaggressions. Whether students want to or not. . . it comes off as racist. . . And like the other person doesn't see it, but you do. And there's this constant feeling of inferiority. . . and like a lot of that can become very unhealthy, very fast. So, I think that by creating a safe space and a place where Latinx students can congregate is really healthy and we can kind of let our guard down. . . Because when you're in a predominantly white institution, being a BIPOC, you always have to have your guard up, you always have to be on your A game. You have to work twice as hard to get like half of what white students are getting. . . So creating that safe space allows us to let our guard down and connect with people who have the same perspective as us and the same struggles as us.

In the general spaces of a predominantly white institution, including the "main" InterVarsity space that is open to everyone, BIPOC students feel like they need to have their guard up. They are in a battle to preserve their mental health and defend their self-worth and dignity as a people. They have to deal with racist microaggressions and general unease for their ethnoracial selves, where things can get "unhealthy" very fast. As such, safe spaces where Latinx students can relax, be themselves, and not have their guard up and defend their self-worth can be vital.

Kim, who is a Nigerian American and president of BCM at another large university on the West Coast shares what InterVarsity's Black Campus Ministry (BCM) offers for the



Black students on her campus. BCM offers students a “safe space” for Black students on a campus full of campus groups, including campus ministries like InterVarsity, that are predominantly white and/or Asian. For Kim, InterVarsity’s BCM offers a “safe space” not just from the broader predominantly white and Asian university campus, but also within InterVarsity, which is also largely white and Asian. She explains:

Because there’s BCM, Black students can feel safe being a part of InterVarsity . . . because I think a lot of campus fellowships can be very dominated by a certain type of person. For example, at (university) there are a lot of white people, a lot of Asian people. So naturally a lot of campus fellowships are predominantly white, predominantly Asian. So . . . it is nice for a larger fellowship to have spaces for less represented or underrepresented minority groups to feel like they have a space.

BCM, while open to other races and ethnicities, is an intentional “safe space” for Black students at a predominantly white and Asian campus. Kim explains further: “we are inviting of people who are not Black, but at the same time, I think it’s important to keep it as a safe space for Black students to feel comfortable because that’s the purpose of BCM”. BCM, by design, is a “safe space” for Black students.

At a historically and predominantly white Christian college campus also on the West Coast, BIPOC students shared similar stories about needing a “safe space”. As one of these students shared, “There aren’t a lot of spaces that are built for people that look like us” on campus. As such, safe spaces are an important part of students’ search for authentic belonging. Lisa, the president of a campus ministry that operates as a safe space, particularly for Black students, explains why such a space is needed at a Christian college that already has a university campus ministry and various chapel services that are open to everyone:

It’s been hard being at (names the college). . . just because there aren’t a lot of spaces that are built for people that look like us . . . . It’s a very like white Jesus culture. . . like. . . “If you’re anything but white and Christian, why are you here?” . . . “You’re not the Aryan race, why are you here? This school was not meant for you, and if you’re here, you’re here because of (affirmative action) or to get your reparations.”

In such a “very white school” where being white and Christian are synonymous, Lisa, who is Black, had trouble finding a Christian community that suited her. She explains: “I didn’t find any student ministry that really, really clicked with me where I was like, this is my community”. Thus, she decided to help develop a small Bible study and worship space primarily for Black students. The only way that she could find a campus ministry community that looked like her and was “safe” at her college was to create it.

In a separate “safe” Black campus ministry space, Lisa and other Black students did not have to worry about racial microaggressions to blatant racism such as people asking them if they could pet their hair “as if they were a pet” or having the “Confederate flag waving” in front of their face on campus. They did not have to explain why the murder of yet another Black person by police officers was weighing heavily on their souls, disrupting their studies and their overall sense of emotional and physical safety on campus.

Compared to Black and Latinx students, Asian American students at the large universities on the West Coast where they were a significant numerical majority did not specifically talk about wanting or needing to be “safe” in their campus ministries. They did not use the language of a campus ministry as a “safe space”. The Asian American students at the aforementioned Christian college where they were the clear numerical minority, however, did. This is what James, one of the leaders of the sole Asian American campus ministry, Koinonia Campus Mission (KCM), on campus, shared about why their campus ministry is needed at a Christian college that already has various student clubs and Christian gatherings that are open to everyone:

There is kind of like this insecurity within myself and I am sure with, you know (other) Asians too... We kind of feel like... not a part of other clubs or we feel like unsafe. So, we need to gather together. And I think sometimes we can kind of be cliquey because of that, but I think we are just trying to be safe together.

Feeling insecure about being Asian and feeling unsafe being who they are in the “white” spaces on campus, students like James take time out of their lives to participate in a campus ministry that is predominantly Asian American, even at the risk of being criticized for being “cliquey”. The “other clubs” that James mentions that dominate his predominantly white Christian campus are historically White Greek life, which are quintessentially white and exclusive spaces. Ironically, these white clubs are not similarly accused of being racially “cliquey” at his school. Thus, on a campus with a preponderance of white spaces, white clubs, and “white Jesus culture”, Asian American Christian students, like the other under-represented BIPOC students, gather separately in their effort to be “safe together”.

#### 4.4. *To Be Seen*

A common theme in BIPOC students’ descriptions of their desired “safe space” was a space where they could be “seen”. For BIPOC students seeking authentic belonging, being in a “safe space” significantly meant being in a space where they could be “seen” and known for their full ethnoracial selves, something that they could not fully and ordinarily experience on the broader campus, including in the non-ethnic specific Christian campus groups that are formally open to everyone.

Being in predominantly “white spaces”, an elementary feature of being “seen” is being able to visibly see others who look like you significantly represented in the group. Maya, from LaFe, explains the value of being part of a small Bible study group for Latinx students like LaFe: “Being at a predominantly white institution... like while you’re in class and walking around, you don’t really see other Latinx students. So, it can be hard...” As such, being at a LaFe gathering, a room full of people that not only know her by name but also look like her has been a tremendous comfort.

This was the case for Melinda as well, who also leads a chapter of LaFe at another university on the West Coast. She shares what drew her specifically to LaFe:

(In) the fellowships that I saw, I didn’t see any Mexicans there or Hispanics... I didn’t see any other person at the table, besides, you know, there was one table that I went to that was just like white girls. And so, I mean, that’s fine, I’m not saying that I could never be in a fellowship with those kinds of people because that’s ridiculous. But, I feel that it does weigh a little bit in the fact that InterVarsity had the Latino fellowship.

Not seeing other Mexican Americans, people that looked like her, in the Christian fellowship groups on campus, made an impression on her that InterVarsity had a small group, LaFe, just for Latinx students. Although she could certainly be in a fellowship with other people who are not Latinx, e.g., “white girls”, it made a difference that she could find a campus ministry where she could “see” other people like herself. It also helped that the IVCF staffer who oversees LaFe is also a Mexican American, a Latina like herself.

Besides seeing others that look like them significantly represented in the group, the next and more profound level of being “seen”, critical for authentic belonging, is to be more fully known for their ethnoracial selves versus just as Christians. In LaFe, Latinx students like Melinda can be part of a campus ministry home where being Latinx and Christian align. In fact, that is the de facto function of LaFe. As Melinda shares, while LaFe is open to anyone who is interested in joining, it is intended to be “a welcome space for people who are of Latino heritage”. It is a separate Christian space where someone like her can “say things”, “eat things”, and share “whatever that are familiar” with those who are of Latinx heritage. It is where she says she can “just like be with people who have the same experience” that “know where I am coming from”. She explains in more detail why places like LaFe feel like home for her in college:

I think it's just the places (like LaFe) where there are people that get me... sharing the experience of, you know, like childhood too. And even things like the types of punishments that you get, like getting beat with the chancla (slipper), or like the candy that you ate or, you know, elote, stuff like that... It's really awesome.

White students can expect that their ethnoracial identity and faith will be mutually supported and normative in the campus ministries that predominate their college campus. Students like Melinda cannot expect the same. Thus, being able to share her Latinx identity and background in the Christian community and having her Latinx heritage and Christian faith align in places like LaFe is precious. It is indeed “really awesome”, especially as a STEM major in a broader university context where very few people look like her.

Campus ministries like LaFe are also attractive to Latinx students because they are able to have Bible studies and discussions catered specifically to being both Latinx and Christian. Bible studies and faith discussions in LaFe explore what it means to be not just a “Christian”, but a Christian of Latinx heritage. Carlos, a president of another chapter of LaFe on the West Coast, explains how his chapter of LaFe, a small Bible study group for Latinx students, helps him to be who he is, someone who is both a Mexican and Christian. Carlos explains, “I am a Mexican Christian. I identify as both almost simultaneously”. As such, Carlos appreciates that LaFe lets him and other Latinx students at his predominantly white campus be seen and known as both Latinx and Christian. In fact, the mission of LaFe, as he puts it, is to provide a “community that has like that love for Christ and also has that Latino perspective”. Thus, Carlos shares how his LaFe small group spent the year talking about “the Brown church and what that means, being able to see the Bible through that Latino perspective”. This included serious conversations on how they could decolonize their faith from the European Christian influence and embrace a “Brown theology”, a Christian faith informed by their Latinx heritage. Their discussions centered around a book called by just that name: *Brown Church: Five Centuries of Latina/o Social Justice, Theology, and Identity*.

While students in LaFe can discuss Brown theology and learn about how they can embrace being Latinx Christians, they can enjoy hanging out with other Latinx Christians sharing familiar experiences and stories, and eating, in Carlos' words “tacos and tamales” or “pan dulce y cafecito”. The following is how one of LaFe's events was advertised on Carlos' campus: “LaFe: Home away from Home—A homestyle afternoon with the family food, drinks, and fun of our Latinx culture”. In LaFe, Latinx students can find a home and belonging in an authentic community where being both Latinx and Christian align—where it is affirmed, supported, and celebrated. Carlos could not find this kind of community in the other campus ministries at his college. LaFe is the only campus ministry that is specially catered to Latinx Christian students at his large historically white secular campus known for having dozens of different campus ministries.

Similarly, Korean American students involved in KCM at the predominantly white Christian campus that already has a plethora of Christian communities and events decided to start a campus ministry primarily for Korean American students because they wanted a space where being Korean American and Christian could be shared without explanation or hesitation. Having to inhabit predominantly white spaces with a plethora of white clubs and “white Jesus culture”, Korean American Christians wanted a space of their own, what a student called a “haven”, where they could be seen, known, and affirmed for being both Korean American and Christians. The president of KCM at the Christian college which we previously discussed explains why a separate space like KCM is needed at his Christian campus and what draws students to KCM:

As Korean Americans, we all have this distinct kind of past and beginning. Whether it be with first gen Korean parents, having the mentality of like, “Go to school or get straight A's”,... having strict parents, or going to school and... being discriminated for our Korean lunches and the way they smell, things like that. We kind of all have these similar kinds of experiences that include discrimination and maybe even suffering, maybe I am getting bullied for my race... (so we)

gather at this kind of haven, for a lack of better words, where we can share the similarity of being Korean American and Christian. I think that is really what is binding us together.

Since all of the Korean American students in our study grew up in a Korean American church, the experience of growing up attending a Korean American church is yet another point of similarity and bonding experience that draws Korean American students to choose to participate in KCM over the predominantly white campus groups and events that are offered at the Christian college with a “white Jesus culture”. They can be seen and known for being both Korean American and Christian in a “haven”-like space offered by KCM.

When discussing their reasons for participating in an ethnic-specific campus ministry, such as LaFe, BCM, or KCM, various under-represented BIPOC students pointed out that it is not that they “can’t” participate in white spaces, including in white Christian spaces. As Melinda noted before, it would be “ridiculous” to think otherwise. In fact, participating in cross-racial spaces is something that under-represented BIPOC students are more than familiar with attending predominantly white institutions. Interacting cross-racially in white spaces is a must, and they are more than accustomed to it. However, they would not be able to do so while being their full ethnoracial Christian selves. This was particularly evident for BIPOC students who first tried participating in a predominantly white campus ministry, Cru, but then eventually found themselves in a campus ministry where they could be with other co-racial Christians.

Kim, the president of a BCM chapter, shares why she started to get more involved in BCM when she was already participating in Cru, a predominantly white campus ministry on her campus. She explains why she realized Cru was not the community for her:

(I) kind of realized Cru wasn’t the community for me, because I didn’t feel very seen, or like anyone could relate to me. I was like one of the only Black people in Cru. So naturally, like, I just didn’t really feel comfortable there after some time. Then, that’s how I started to get more involved in BCM and InterVarsity.

Kim emphasizes that she did not get more involved in BCM because Cru did something wrong. In fact, she says she made really good friends there, but the point was that she did not “feel very seen” for who she was as “the only Black” person in Cru. She had to do more bending, assimilating, and accommodating within Cru’s de facto “white culture”. People were not meeting her as she was and accommodating her as a Black woman who grew up worshipping in the Black church. She explains further:

This is not to dog Cru at all or people that are in Cru because I made really good friends that are still my friends today through Cru, and learned so much and grew in faith with the resources that Cru provided. But, I guess my thing was just that I kind of realized that. . . I was doing more assimilating to mainstream culture than people were trying to relate to who I am as a person. . . It was a lot of me bending to mainstream culture, white culture essentially, than there was like people trying to meet me where I was.

There was nothing wrong with Cru as a Christian campus ministry. Kim enjoyed the Bible studies and grew a lot as a Christian there. However, she could not be her full self—a Black Nigerian American woman who grew up in the Black church. She felt she had to “hold back” aspects of her ethnoracial self and could not be her “whole complete self”. She continues on about what she realized having first participated in Cru before joining BCM:

I realized like the side of myself that I presented to people (at Cru), I don’t feel like is really my whole complete self. And in that sense, I felt like I was holding back a lot of who I am to people in terms of. . . like how I talk, think, what my interests (are), . . . what I spend my time doing. . . I was holding a lot of myself back. And so people didn’t really know fully me, like my friends (did), for example, from high school days (who were all Black). And so I realized that I needed to find a community where I felt like I could walk with God and also bring my full self to the table in my relationships.

Kim, therefore, stopped attending Cru and joined BCM in her freshman year because she could be more herself at BCM, including worshiping in the Black church tradition, and find people who would know her more fully and authentically in return. She could bring her “full self to the table” in her “walk with God” in BCM. She could be unapologetically Black and Christian.

Another Black student from the same large public university, John, also found himself participating in BCM after having first participated in Cru. He shared a similar journey of seeking a campus ministry home where he could be more fully seen, where he would not have to compromise who he is as a Black man. Again, John noted that it is not that he could not participate in Cru, which he described as a nice Christian community with good teaching:

Coming to college, I was just a part of Cru. . . Everyone was cool, I knew that I was the only Black person, I mean I wasn't ignorant. . . It didn't really bug me because I had been in similar environments before, just being in things like AP classes and stuff like that. . . So, getting there, had a good time there. They were teaching good lessons, went to some retreats. . . People liked me, they were cool with me. . . They have a nice community that was always trying to do everything together. . . It's not a problem.

There is nothing wrong with Cru. It is a nice Christian community with good teaching. However, as John learned more about his Black identity and living in a community with other African Americans, and the “Black experience”, he had a change of thought:

But then as I became a second year, I also became the Resident Assistant for the African diaspora living learning community on campus, that's basically a way a lot of Black people, if they want to live amongst other Black people, can apply for. . . And so, I became the resident assistant for that, and I think that that's where a lot of my learning about my Black identity, how that looks like, how we are on a predominantly white campus, and just thinking about things like that.

Living in a community with other Black students and thinking about what it means to be Black in a predominantly white campus, John eventually stopped attending Cru.

I was just like, there's nothing inherently wrong, but. . . When I learned more about what it means to be Black, what it means to other people, like the Black experience of other people. . ., I was just like. . . I don't know if I am quite going back to Cru.

Instead of going back to Cru, John found himself attending BCM, thanks to one of his buddies, who is also Black who invited him to join a BCM Bible study for Black men on campus. At BCM he was able to have Bible studies with a group of other Black men and worship in the Black church tradition, which he grew up in. Again, like Kim, he stressed that it was not that he could not find a community through Cru, but it was simply not a community where he could more fully and authentically connect with others and be “seen” for who he is as a Black man. John shares more about the value of having a separate space with other Black men where he can be more genuine about himself and his experiences as a Black man.

Just the importance of being able to understand people's experiences and identities, having that understanding about Black people having inherently underlying lived experiences that we just get when we see one another. And so being able to be a part of the community like that, and feeling like I don't necessarily have to put up as much of a front in a group, even if it is a Bible study because we're all sinners and stuff like that but there's just parts that are easier to explain among other Black men.

Although he could very well connect with other Christians, John wanted to be part of a campus ministry where he could be his more complete self as a Black man and a Christian



with others who share underlying Black identities and experiences. At BCM, he could be both safe and seen as Black and Christian.

To have authentic belonging in campus ministries, the reason why under-represented BIPOC students would choose to participate in a Latinx, Black, or Asian American campus ministry is to be in a faith community where they can safely and unapologetically be who they are, ethnoracially and religiously.

## 5. Discussion

### *"You Have to Belong before You Believe"*

A campus pastor who we interviewed for the LSCCM study that has over 30 years of experience in campus ministry shared the above quote when asked what wisdom or insight he may have gained from his long career in campus ministry. In order for students to believe and grow in their faith, they have to first feel like they "belong" to the campus ministry. The takeaway for religious leaders is that students first need to "belong" before they can commit to participating in a campus ministry. Building on this insight, the BIPOC students in our study needed to first feel like they belonged, specifically that they could authentically belong, before committing to participate in their campus ministries.

Regardless of race, students who were already church and Christian-inclined sought a campus ministry where they could find authentic belonging—"real" community with friends and mentors who genuinely cared for them and supported them as they are. Focusing on the stories that BIPOC students in particular shared regarding their journey to campus ministries, what we found, however, is that this search for authentic belonging included a distinctive search for a campus ministry home where BIPOC students who were also under-represented on their predominantly white campus could be "safe and seen". In contrast to white students, these BIPOC students talked about the critical need to be "safe" and "seen" for who they are in their search for a campus ministry home. They wanted a Christian space where their ethn racial identities and faith could align and be affirmed without qualification, hesitation, or trepidation—where it could be taken for granted, as it is for white students.

In predominantly white spaces where BIPOC Christian students were not equally safe nor seen, they sought campus ministry homes where they could naturally and simultaneously embrace who they are, ethnoracially and religiously.

## 6. Conclusions

### *You Have to First Be Safe and Seen*

The importance of first being "safe and seen" for BIPOC students to feel like they can belong revises the axiom that you have to first belong before you believe. Before students can feel like they belong and believe, they need to first and foremost feel safe. Before students can feel like they can authentically belong, they need to first feel "seen" for who they are both for their ethn racial and religious selves.

In this climate where diversity is both celebrated and assaulted in a campus ecology predominated with white spaces, our study suggests that religious organizations and student affairs should encourage the cultivation of these separate spaces where under-represented BIPOC students can find "havens" and refuge. In these pockets of authentic belonging, they can hope to nurture a faith of their own and remain a counter-demographic to the rising numbers of Gen Z nones. Moreover, we know that these separate spaces can function as important sites of belonging, which are crucial for the psychological, social, and academic well-being of BIPOC students during their college years. Until the main university spaces are truly inclusive spaces, our study suggests that campus ministry and student life leaders should consider creating and supporting more of these "safe spaces" where under-represented BIPOC students can be "safe" and "seen" for their full selves, where both their religious as well as ethn racial identities can be affirmed.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> According to Gallup’s 2020 estimates, 31% of millennials have no religious affiliation while 33% of Generation Z (the portion of Gen Z that has reached adulthood) have no religious preference. <https://news.gallup.com/poll/341963/church-membership-falls-below-majority-first-time.aspx> (accessed on 15 July 2023).
- <sup>2</sup> <https://apnews.com/article/education-race-and-ethnicity-79f7d0e7eb812ce36538b9e112c38956> (accessed on 15 July 2023).
- <sup>3</sup> <https://opendoorsdata.org/data/international-students/enrollment-trends/> (accessed on 15 July 2023).
- <sup>4</sup> I (first author) am one of the co-investigators of the Landscape Study of Chaplaincy and Campus Ministry (LSCCM) in the United States that included a team of sociologists and religious studies professors and graduate students across the country. I helped collect interview and survey data for the project focusing particularly on evangelicals in one of the several regions covered in the study. My positionality as a researcher is a woman of color personally and academically familiar with a variety of evangelical organizations, including campus ministries. While the LSCCM team conducted interviews with individuals involved in a variety of different religious communities on campus (e.g., Jewish student groups, Muslim Student Associations, mainline Protestant campus ministries), the data for this paper rely primarily on interview data collected from those involved in evangelical campus ministries.
- <sup>5</sup> Pseudonyms are used throughout the paper to protect interview participants’ identity.
- <sup>6</sup> Given space constraints, we are unable to discuss the few under-represented BIPOC students that participated in campus ministries that are formally open to all. However, what we can share is that the few BIPOC students that did participate in these communities were able to do so because they were often able to find “pockets” of safe spaces where they could be seen more fully for their ethnoracial selves.

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