

PARENTS *progress*

Traveling partners

Messiah College community walks alongside students as they ask and answer tough questions about their faith

Messiah College Pastor Eldon Fry remembers a bump in the road of his spiritual journey. He was struggling with a serious question about a faith issue. He obsessed about finding the answer and spent hours searching for it. Ironically, while Fry recalls the unsettling sense of doubt, he no longer recalls the question that caused it. He recounts, "At one point, I began to realize that the answer was not going to change my faith. I was learning in the search."

Questions are certainly a normal and expected aspect of the educational process. College students are encouraged to challenge theories and debate viewpoints in the classroom. But what happens at a place like Messiah College where learning and faith are purposefully intertwined? What if questions posed during intellectual pursuits also challenge personal faith convictions?

Fry, along with his colleagues David Weaver-Zercher, chair of the Department of Biblical and Religious Studies, and Brian



Weekly chapel services are just one of the out-of-classroom experiences that students and alumni cite as significantly shaping their spiritual development at Messiah.

Smith, teaching pastor and senior lecturer in Bible, agree that the Messiah College community is uniquely prepared to walk alongside students as they seek answers to tough questions about their faith. They also agree that doubt, as Derek Melleby writes in his article "Affirming Doubt: Helping Students Ask and Answer Tough Questions," is "not the antithesis of faith, but rather, having doubts and asking tough questions about God is vital to Christian maturation."

We asked Fry, Weaver-Zercher, and Smith to share written reflections about the role doubt plays in shaping personal faith convictions. They responded as educators, parents, and willing traveling partners for students navigating bumps in the road of their spiritual journeys.

Derek Melleby, director of the College Transition Initiative for the Center for Parent/Youth Understanding, writes, "The college years are a time of settling in on central convictions that will give shape to students' lives for the rest of their lives. It is during this time that students take owner-*

ship of what they believe and ask the big questions about life, the universe, and everything in the context of a competitive learning environment." In your experience, what tends to be students' reactions to being confronted with questions that challenge their convictions?

Weaver-Zercher: Students' reactions can be quite diverse. Some students simply shut down and refuse to engage these sorts of questions. They may do enough reading to pass a test, but they don't give new and challenging ideas a chance to shape their thinking. The ideas they encounter remain academic issues, and never become existential ones. Other students become angry. They quickly dig in to defend their views and sometimes vilify others who hold different beliefs. Or, on the other hand, they may become disenchanted with their parents and churches who they feel never allowed them to encounter and consider other points of view. Still other students become invigorated by the new ideas they encounter. It's not unusual to have students say that a particular class or idea came at exactly the right

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IMPORTANT DATES

SEMESTER EXAMS

Dec. 17—20

WINTER BREAK

Dec. 21—Jan. 8

J-TERM BEGINS

Jan. 9

REV. DR. MARTIN LUTHER KING JR. DAY

Jan. 21

J-TERM RECESS

Jan. 31—Feb. 3

SPRING CLASSES START

Feb. 4

SPRING RECESS

March 14—24

DECEMBER 2007

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President

Kim S. Phipps

Co-chairs of the Messiah College Parents Council

Chris '79 and Heidi '81 Bingaman

Director of Alumni and Parent Relations

Randy Ness '77

Editor

Beth L. Lorow, Assistant Director
of Public Relations

Contributors

Heidi Bingaman '81, Co-chair of
Parents Council

Deb Danielson, Counselor, Engle Center
for Counseling and Health Services

Patrick McCullough '02

Rachel Pease, Director of Annual Giving
Evie Telfer, Associate College Pastor

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ents of Messiah College students.

Any questions or feedback regarding this
publication may be directed to Beth L. Lorow,
Office of Marketing and Public Relations,
Messiah College, Box 3020, Grantham, PA
17027

Phone: (717) 691-6027

Fax: (717) 796-5371

E-mail: progress@messiah.edu

Any questions regarding the Messiah
College Parents Council may be directed
to Chris '79 and Heidi '81 Bingaman,
Co-chairs, Phone: (570) 374-5704.

www.messiah.edu



From the president

Dear Parents:

Throughout this fall semester, I hope that you have experienced genuine Messiah College hospitality while visiting your son or daughter on campus. Between move-in day, Family Weekend, and Homecoming, I have enjoyed meeting many students and their families. Thank you for entrusting your child's education to the Messiah College community. We are privileged to be a partner in your child's educational journey.

This issue of *Parents Progress* highlights the level of spiritual care we strive to provide our students as they pursue their academic studies. In the feature article, educators from the Department of Biblical and Religious Studies and members of our campus ministries staff provide thoughtful insights about the importance of helping students ask and answer tough faith questions, about how Messiah is uniquely equipped to assist students with that process, and about the important role that parents play, even from afar.

In addition to caring for your child spiritually, the Messiah College community is committed to providing a safe living and learning environment for students. To that end, we have added another communication tool to help us disseminate information quickly and broadly to campus in times of emergency. I encourage you to read more about our text message alert system, which was launched this fall, on page 4.

This issue of *Parents Progress* is probably coming at a busy time as you prepare for the upcoming holidays. Perhaps you are



even making special plans for when your child is home for Christmas break. Deb Danielson, counselor in the Engle Center for Counseling and Health Services, has some helpful advice as you anticipate welcoming your son or daughter home after being apart for several months. Chris '79 and Heidi '81 Bingaman, co-chairs of Parents Council, also share how their family manages expectations when their daughters (and often their friends too!) arrive home on break.

I wish you and your family a restful and joyful season as we celebrate the birth of our Savior and the miracle of Christmas!

Warm regards,

Kim S. Phipps
President



THANK YOU!

So far this fall, current parents have pledged more than \$40,000 through the Phonathon program. These dollars are used for:

- Scholarships and financial aid
- Cutting-edge technology in classrooms and labs
- Funding for study abroad opportunities
- Grants for student research
- And much more!

It's not too late to make your gift! When the phone rings at your house, please consider a gift of any amount to the Student Impact Fund. Every gift makes an impact!

Contact Rachel Pease, director of annual giving, at rpease@messiah.edu or 717-796-5066 if you have any questions about the Student Impact Fund at Messiah College.

Home for the holidays: *A parent's guide to a smooth winter break*

By Deb Danielson

It will soon be time to welcome your student home for the holidays, and, as you look forward with anticipation to having several weeks of family time together, it's also important to remember that you have spent most of the last three and a half months living apart. It's normal to experience a few bumps as you all readjust to living together again. Here are a few tips to help smooth the way:

Exchange holiday "wish lists" before your student comes home.

Your idea of the perfect holiday break with your student might be spending "together time," having long talks about college life, and visiting relatives who haven't seen your student since the summer. You might also think that this is a great time to schedule those practical things your student needs, like dentist and eye doctor appointments. However, your student's picture of the ideal holiday break might not look like that at all! Certainly she wants to spend time with you, but probably high on her list of holiday break "musts" are sleeping until noon, days spent lounging around and enjoying her freedom from exams and due dates, followed by plenty of late nights out of the house having fun with friends. Because expectations may differ, having an enjoyable

break with your student will probably involve some give and take on both sides. The best time to talk about this is before she comes home. Let her know what your wishes and expectations are, and ask her to tell you hers. If some changes in expectations need to be negotiated, it is helpful to have these conversations before she comes home.

Give your student some time to catch up on sleep and "decompress" when he first comes home.

With less than a week between the end of final exams and Christmas day, your student may not be ready to jump right into the flurry of holiday activities when he first comes home. For most students, the last few weeks of a semester are usually a blur of too much stress and not enough sleep. The holiday break will be happier for all of you if it begins with giving your student some extra time to rest and recuperate.

Try to give your student adequate notice of any appointments or family activities she must attend while she is home.

She's been managing her own calendar for the last semester and is out of the habit of checking with you before she makes plans. There won't be much holiday cheer in the

house when you discover your student has already made plans for a big holiday reunion party with her friends on the same night you've invited the relatives for Grandma's surprise birthday dinner.

Enjoy having your "child" back home again, but let him know you also understand he is now an adult.

Your student has spent the last three and a half months setting his own curfew, making most of his own decisions, and generally managing his own life. This now feels normal to him, but it might not feel normal to you! It's easy for parents to slip back into familiar habits and expectations when their student comes home for the holidays. But it's important to recognize and support your student's developing independence. The past semester has given him an opportunity to work on the skills he needs to take charge of his life as an independent young adult. Holiday break also provides you with the opportunity to demonstrate through your actions that you understand and support his developing independence. Parental rules that were understandable when he was in high school, such as setting a curfew, may no longer be a very good fit for a young adult who has been making that decision on his own since being away at college.

How one family manages the joys, challenges, and surprises of college breaks

With two daughters in college and another living in Arizona, Parents Council Co-chairs Chris '79 and Heidi '81 Bingaman know a thing or two about making the most of family times

By Heidi Bingaman '81



The Bingaman family, clockwise from the center: Heidi '81, Lindsey '08, Leah, Chris '79, Audrey, and Emily '05

When my husband Chris and I hear the Michael Buble song "Home," we get nostalgic about our three daughters coming home. Emily graduated from Messiah College and is living in Arizona; Lindsey is a senior at Messiah College; and Leah is a freshman at Geneva College. Chris and I always anticipate great family times together when our daughters return home. In order to make the most of these visits, however, expectations need to be managed—both theirs and ours.

Here are a few basic principles that have worked well for us as our daughters have come and gone from our home since their high school graduations:

- Communicate about your child's expectations and your own expectations before your college student arrives home for a visit.

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Messiah implements text message alert system

Recognizing that the widespread prevalence of cellular phones (*USA Today* reports that 95% of college students have one) offers a means of communicating quickly and broadly to the campus population, Messiah College is now utilizing text messaging as an additional communication tool during emergencies.

The tragedy at Virginia Tech was still fresh in everyone's minds when alumnus Jim Washok '94 approached the College and offered to donate the services of his mobile technology company, OTAir, to launch a text message alert system for Messiah. The benefits of such an alert system are the rate and extent at which the messages can reach a broad audience and the ability to create notification groups. These group designations allow the crisis management team to communicate an alert about an isolated issue via text message to a specific residence hall, campus (Grantham, Philadelphia, or Harrisburg), or athletic team.

Communicating via text messaging is just one outlet that the College would utilize in an emergency. "Of course, the College would continue to use its web site, mass e-mails, voice mails, posted signs, and word of mouth to communicate during an emergency situation," says Kathie Shafer, vice president of operations and crisis controller. "But, even if only one student in a class receives a text message alert, he or she can notify an entire classroom of the situation. The word of mouth potential with this type of alert system adds considerable additional value."

Since late August, more than 750 students and employees have subscribed to the alert system. Registrations are ongoing, so please encourage your son or daughter to register their cell phone number via MC Square, if they haven't already.

To read more about the text message alert system and some of the College's other emergency protocols, visit www.messiah.edu/emergency.

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- Lower your expectations of family life when your son or daughter returns home. As parents, Chris and I include them in all family activities, but we don't expect them to be involved in everything we do. We are selective about the family events that we urge them to be involved in so they will likely join us for the important gatherings, and we give them the liberty to skip the events that aren't as important to us. We allow them some freedom to determine their own schedules.
- Be flexible. If they change their plans at the last minute, bring extra friends home, or decide not to come home after all, be prepared to adjust. College students seem to change their plans constantly. It is the nature of the beast, so be flexible!
- Accommodate and include their friends when you can. A lot of relationship building goes on during this time that provides a basis for future interaction with your child. Getting to know their friends goes a long way in remaining connected.
- Seize the moment. That rich moment of conversation or that shared activity with your son or daughter will probably not occur at the most convenient time for you. But these moments are fleeting. Be prepared to be available.

Since life seems to move forward at record speed, let's seize the moment when our children return home. Embrace the simple joys of being together. Minimize the challenges that accompany the changing family dynamic and ask God for wisdom and grace through the process.

To read more good advice from the Bingamans, go to www.messiah.edu/parents.

Asking good questions

By Patrick McCullough '02



Before coming to Messiah College, I rode a religious roller coaster that took me from a "nominal Catholic" childhood to Unitarian Universalism and finally made me a fervently fundamentalist

evangelist in my public high school. When I came to Messiah as a Bible major, I thought that I would simply be gaining knowledge of Bible content, because I thought I already had a solid understanding about how to read Scripture. This interpretive rug would soon be pulled out from under me.

I quickly discovered, for example, that not all devout Christians believed evolution to be a dirty word. In fact, my professors helped me realize that when I focused on certain "litmus test" issues like evolution, I missed out on a deeper meaning in the biblical text. Instead of being in awe of the transcendent God who is yet imminent with humanity, I was bothering myself with modern questions of science that were of no concern when the opening chapters of Genesis were first composed.

After reassessing my theological bearings, I began to shift into a new understanding of my faith and academic career. I found a perfect fit for myself in the revivalistic Anabaptism of the College's founding denomination, the Brethren in Christ. A new instructor at the time, and a gracious personal mentor, Brian Smith prodded me in questions of faith. My advisor, Professor Michael Cosby, pushed me in interesting academic directions. Eventually, I realized that my desire (perhaps God-given) was to emulate these and other faculty in the Department of Biblical and Religious Studies by becoming an educator and mentor for Christian undergraduate students. I am now pursuing doctoral work because I hope to do for my students what my professors did for me: challenge collective assumptions about the Bible and explore the richness of faith by asking a lot of very good questions.

McCullough will graduate from Fuller Theological Seminary in 2008 with an M.Div.

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time for them, when they were finding their former views less and less meaningful. For these students, the new ideas they encounter at a place like Messiah come as welcome resources for sustaining a vibrant, living faith.

Theologian Alister McGrath suggests, “Doubt is probably a permanent feature of the Christian life. It’s like some kind of spiritual growing pain. Sometimes it recedes into the background; at other times it comes to the forefront, making its presence felt with a vengeance.” Why do you think college (even a Christian college like Messiah) is a likely environment for students to experience doubt about their faith?

Weaver-Zercher: At Messiah, there’s no way to separate one’s faith from the life of the mind—because we seek to integrate faith and learning. And just as faith can shape one’s learning, so too can learning shape—and even challenge—one’s faith. Sometimes students find that their “high school” faith, when examined, needs to undergo a transformation to remain meaningful.

Smith: When we are confronted with something new, something that contradicts or challenges our own perceptions or perspectives, we naturally begin to doubt. So doubt is both a by-product and a frequent component of the educational growth process. It’s no wonder that Messiah College is a “likely environment” for doubt, for we are asking our students to think deeply about the most essential questions of human existence. That doesn’t mean, however, that we should look for doubt or celebrate its arrival. I put on my pastoral hat when I see students struggling with doubt, and I try to walk alongside them and remind them of two marvelous biblical stories: the father of the possessed boy in Mark 9 (“I believe; help my unbelief!”) and Jesus in Gethsemane hours before the crucifixion (Matthew 26:39: “My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me...”). Even Jesus seems to have wondered about his capacity to face what lay ahead; perhaps our response to doubt should mirror his—prayer and a steadfast obedience to God (neither of which are always easy!)

How is Messiah College uniquely prepared to assist students with doubt or questioning on their spiritual journey?

Smith: We were not made to be compartmentalized into people who do good academic work with our minds and then worship God with our hearts in the evenings and on weekends. Jesus calls us to love God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength. That sounds to me like holistic worship, and it’s how our educational model is structured. More concretely, I know many faculty, staff, and administrators who meet with students regularly to walk with them through the valleys and peaks of being a Christian.

Fry: Messiah College emphasizes community. I believe it is essential to have people who are not distraught when questions or doubts arise but are helpful in coming alongside and even asking questions that will guide the student’s search. The emphasis on intentionality and hospitality gives students the space to explore and learn, but to do it within a supportive community that will embrace them as they learn.

In his article, Melleby also says, “Students need space to be heard and to begin to put their faith into their own words.” What are some of the places on Messiah’s campus where students can do this?

Smith: Believe it or not, the classroom is a wonderful place for this to happen. It’s not easy, because many classmates don’t know one another well, and it often takes some time to develop the comfort and rapport necessary for honesty in these matters. But the classroom is an important place for this work because it is where students acquire the biblical and theological vocabulary necessary to “put their faith in their own words.”

Fry: Recent national surveys as well as responses by our own alumni community consistently reveal that students highly value classroom experiences and mentors (faculty, staff, parents, churches) who are willing to share from their lives and allow students to integrate principles into their own lives. At Messiah especially, there are numerous out-of-classroom experiences that are often mentioned as significant in students’ spiritual development: Issachar’s Loft,

residence hall-based Life Groups, the Collaboratory, service opportunities through the Agapé Center for Service and Learning, external programs like study abroad, the worship community, and even the structure of weekly chapels are examples of programs that invite conversation about life application of faith issues.

What role can/should parents play in helping their student wrestle with faith issues? What advice do you have for parents?

Weaver-Zercher: As a parent myself, I know how hard it is to take the long view, so I’m preaching to myself when I say: don’t try to rush this searching process for your children. They need to find a faith that they can truly own. In the majority of cases, their owned faith will end up looking a lot like that of their parents—not always, but often.

I would also encourage parents to avoid thinking they did “something wrong” if their children’s faith becomes unsettled. In fact, it might be the opposite—that the parents did something right to allow their children the freedom to think and explore.

Fry: As a parent, I found it was important to listen, pray for, and encourage my children in this process. I think for the most part my children and other students want me to be reassuring of the process, model my continued educational and faith growth, and be there for them without becoming reactionary. I needed to trust my children, trust those positive influences (faculty, staff, others) around them, trust the process, and trust God.

Smith: Be patient with your child as she ventures through this magnificent and occasionally unsettling life of faith. And look for ways to learn from her—sometimes the things she needs most are a good listener and traveling partner.

Alumnus Patrick McCullough reflects on how Messiah College helped him explore the richness of his faith. See page 4.

**Read more about the College Transition Initiative and the Center for Parent/Youth Understanding at www.cpyu.org.*



Fry



Weaver-Zercher



Smith

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Prayer and praise

Praise

- Praise for the incarnation (God is with us!)
- Thank God for a meaningful and challenging semester in chapel
- The good work our student leaders are doing

Prayer

- The summer mission teams that will be meeting for preparation this spring
- The continuing development of student leaders
- Safety, wisdom, and divine appointments for students studying abroad during J-Term and spring term
- Continued guidance and inspiration as the College Ministries office works on a spiritual formation model for the campus
- The Jubilee conference, a yearly conference focused on faith and vocation, in January
- The women's retreat in February
- Preparations for the Spring Break Service Projects and Service Day.



The screenshot shows the Messiah College website homepage. At the top, there is a navigation bar with links for Home, About, Academics, Admissions, Athletics, Events, Ministries, Offices, Philadelphia Campus, and Give to Messiah. Below the navigation bar is the Messiah College logo and the tagline "Intellect. Character. Christian Faith." The main content area is divided into several sections: a left sidebar with navigation links (Prospective Students, Parents, Alumni, Community, Current Students, Refer a Student, The Bridge Online, Library, Virtual Campus Tour, Job Openings), a central "News" section with articles like "College earns food safety distinction" and "Alum to compete in 2008 Olympics", a "Falcon Scoreboard" section for Women's Volleyball, and an "Upcoming Events" section for "Dead Man Walking" theatre production. On the right side, there are several promotional buttons: "Apply Now", "Student blog", "Schedule a visit", "request information", and "Give to MESSIAH". At the bottom, there is a footer with contact information and a copyright notice for 2007.

The Messiah College home page and admissions web site underwent a transformation over the summer. The enhancements include the addition of photo essays, video, student blogs, a national ad gallery, and other improved content and features designed to engage prospective students and their families more effectively.

visit us at messiah.edu