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On a Christian Mission to the Top

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For a while last winter, Tim Havens, a recent graduate of Brown University and now an evangelical missionary there, had to lead his morning prayer group in a stairwell of the campus chapel. That was because workers were clattering in to remake the lower floor for a display of American Indian art, and a Buddhist student group was chanting in the small sanctuary upstairs.

Like most of the Ivy League universities, Brown was founded by Protestant ministers as an expressly Christian college. But over the years it gradually shed its religious affiliation and became a secular institution, as did the other Ivies. In addition to Buddhists, the Brown chaplain's office now recognizes "heathen/pagan" as a "faith community."

But these days evangelical students like those in Mr. Havens's prayer group are becoming a conspicuous presence at Brown. Of a student body of 5,700, about 400 participate in one of three evangelical student groups - more than the number of active mainline Protestants, the campus chaplain says. And these students are in the vanguard of a larger social shift not just on campuses but also at golf resorts and in boardrooms; they are part of an expanding beachhead of evangelicals in the American elite.

The growing power and influence of evangelical Christians is manifest everywhere these days, from the best-seller lists to the White House, but in fact their share of the general population has not changed much in half a century. Most pollsters agree that people who identify themselves as white evangelical Christians make up about a quarter of the population, just as they have for decades.

What has changed is the class status of evangelicals. In 1929, the theologian [H. Richard Niebuhr](#) described born-again Christianity as the "religion of the disinherited." But over the last 40 years, evangelicals have pulled steadily closer in income and education to mainline Protestants in the historically affluent establishment denominations. In the process they have overturned the old social pecking order in which "Episcopalian," for example, was a code word for upper class, and "fundamentalist" or "evangelical" shorthand for lower.

Evangelical Christians are now increasingly likely to be college graduates and in the top income brackets. Evangelical C.E.O.'s pray together on monthly conference calls, evangelical investment bankers study the Bible over lunch on Wall Street and deep-pocketed evangelical donors gather at golf courses for conferences restricted to those who give more than \$200,000 annually to Christian causes.

Their growing wealth and education help explain the new influence of evangelicals in American culture and politics. Their buying power fuels the booming market for Christian books, music and films. Their rising income has paid for construction of vast mega-churches in suburbs across the country. Their charitable contributions finance dozens of mission agencies, religious broadcasters and international service groups.

On [The Chronicle of Philanthropy's](#) latest list of the 400 top charities, [Campus Crusade for Christ](#), an evangelical student group, raised more from private donors than the Boy Scouts of America, the Public Broadcasting Service and Easter Seals.

Now a few affluent evangelicals are directing their attention and money at some of the tallest citadels of the secular elite: Ivy League universities. Three years ago a group of evangelical Ivy League alumni formed [the Christian Union](#), an organization intended to "reclaim the Ivy League for Christ," according to its fund-raising materials, and to "shape the hearts and minds of many thousands who graduate from these schools and who become the elites in other American cultural institutions."

The Christian Union has bought and maintains new evangelical student centers at Brown, Princeton and Cornell, and has plans to establish a center on every Ivy League campus. In April, 450 students, alumni and supporters met in Princeton for an "Ivy League Congress on Faith and Action." A keynote speaker was Charles W. Colson, the born-again Watergate felon turned evangelical thinker.

[Matt Bennett](#), founder of the Christian Union, told the conference, "I love these universities - Princeton and all the others, my alma mater, Cornell - but it really grieves me and really hurts me to think of where they are now."

The Christian Union's immediate goal, he said, was to recruit campus missionaries. "What is happening now is good," Mr. Bennett said, "but it is like a finger in the dike of keeping back the flood of immorality."

And trends in the Ivy League today could shape the culture for decades to come, he said. "So many leaders come out of these campuses. Seven of the nine Supreme Court justices are Ivy League grads; four of the seven Massachusetts Supreme Court justices; Christian ministry leaders; so many presidents, as you know; leaders of business - they are everywhere."

He added, "If we are going to change the world, we have got, by God's power, to see these campuses radically changed."

An Outsider on Campus Mr. Havens, who graduated from Brown last year, is the kind of missionary the Christian Union hopes to enlist. An evangelical from what he calls a "solidly middle class" family in the Midwest, he would have been an anomaly at Brown a couple of

generations ago. He applied there, he said, out of a sense of "nonconformity" and despite his mother's preference that he attend a Christian college.

"She just was nervous about, and rightfully so, what was going to happen to me freshman year," Mr. Havens recalled.

When he arrived at Brown, in Providence, R.I., Mr. Havens was astounded to find that the biggest campus social event of the fall was the annual SexPowerGod dance, sponsored by the [Lesbian Gay Bisexual Transgender Queer Alliance](#) and advertised with dining-hall displays depicting pairs of naked men or women. "Why do they have to put God in the name?" he said. "It seems kind of disrespectful."

Mr. Havens found himself a double outsider of sorts. In addition to being devoted to his faith, he was a scholarship student at a university where half the students can afford \$45,000 in tuition and fees without recourse to financial aid and where, he said, many tend to "spend money like water."

But his modest means did not stand out as much as his efforts to guard his morals. He did not drink, and he almost never cursed. And he was determined to stay "pure" until marriage, though he did not lack for attention from female students. Just as his mother feared, Mr. Havens, a broad-shouldered former wrestler with tousled brown hair and a guileless smile, wavered some his freshman year and dated several classmates.

"I was just like, 'Oh, I can get this girl to like me,' " he recalled. " 'Oh, she likes me; she's cute.' And so it was a lot of fairly short and meaningless relationships. It was pretty destructive."

In his sophomore year, though, his evangelical a cappella singing group, a Christian twist on an old Ivy League tradition, interceded. With its support, he rededicated himself to serving God, and by his senior year he was running his own Bible-study group, hoping to inoculate first-year students against the temptations he had faced. They challenged one another, Mr. Havens said, "committing to remain sexually pure, both in a physical sense and in avoiding pornography and ogling women and like that."

Mr. Havens is now living in a house owned and supported by the Christian Union and is trying to reach not just other evangelicals but nonbelievers as well.

Prayers in the Boardrooms

The Christian Union is the brainchild of Matt Bennett, 40, who earned bachelor's and master's degrees at Cornell and later directed the Campus Crusade for Christ at Princeton. Mr. Bennett, tall and soft-spoken, with a Texas drawl that waxes and wanes depending on the company he is in, said he got the idea during a 40-day water-and-juice fast, when he heard God speaking to him one night in a dream.

"He was speaking to me very strongly that he wanted to see an increasing and dramatic spiritual revival in a place like Princeton," Mr. Bennett said.

While working for Campus Crusade, Mr. Bennett had discovered that it was hard to recruit evangelicals to minister to the elite colleges of the Northeast because the environment was alien to them and the campuses often far from their homes. He also found that the evangelical ministries were hobbled without adequate salaries to attract professional staff members and without centers of their own where students could gather, socialize and study the Bible. Jews had [Hillel Houses](#), and Roman Catholics had [Newman Centers](#).

He thought evangelicals should have their own houses, too, and began a furious round of fund-raising to buy or build some. An early benefactor was his twin brother, Monty, who had taken over the [Dallas hotel empire](#) their father built from a single Holiday Inn and who had donated a three-story Victorian in a neighborhood near Brown.

To raise more money, Matt Bennett has followed a grapevine of affluent evangelicals around the country, winding up even in places where evangelicals would have been a rarity just a few decades ago. In Manhattan, for example, he visited Wall Street boardrooms and met with the founder of Socrates in the City, a roundtable for religious intellectuals that gathers monthly at places like the Algonquin Hotel and the Metropolitan Club.

Those meetings introduced him to an even more promising pool of like-minded Christians, the New Canaan Group, a Friday morning prayer breakfast typically attended by more than a hundred investment bankers and other professionals. The breakfasts started in the Connecticut home of a partner in Goldman, Sachs but grew so large that they had to move to a local church. Like many other evangelicals, some members attend churches that adhere to evangelical doctrine but that remain affiliated with mainline denominations.

Other donors to the Christian Union are members of local elites across the Bible Belt. Not long ago, for example, Mr. Bennett paid a visit to Montgomery, Ala., for lunch with Julian L. McPhillips Jr., a wealthy Princeton alumnus and the managing partner of a local law firm. Mr. Bennett, wearing an orange Princeton tie, said he wanted to raise enough money for the Christian Union to hire someone to run a "healing ministry" for students with depression, eating disorders or drug or alcohol addiction.

Mr. McPhillips, who shares Mr. Bennett's belief in the potential of faith healing, remarked that he had once cured an employee's migraine headaches just by praying for him. "We joke in my office that we don't need health insurance," he told Mr. Bennett before writing a check for \$1,000.

Mr. Bennett's database has so far grown to about 5,000 names gathered by word of mouth alone. They are mostly Ivy League graduates whose regular alumni contributions he hopes to channel into the Christian Union. And these Ivy League evangelicals, in turn, are just a small fraction of the large number of their affluent fellow believers.

Gaining on the Mainline

Their commitment to their faith is confounding a long-held assumption that, like earlier generations of Baptists or Pentecostals, prosperous evangelicals would abandon their religious ties or trade them for membership in establishment churches. Instead, they have kept their traditionalist beliefs, and their churches have even attracted new members from among the well-off.

Meanwhile, evangelical Protestants are pulling closer to their mainline counterparts in class and education. As late as 1965, for example, a white mainline Protestant was two and a half times as likely to have a college degree as a white evangelical, according to an analysis by [Prof. Corwin E. Smidt](#), a political scientist at [Calvin College](#), an evangelical institution in Grand Rapids, Mich. But by 2000, a mainline Protestant was only 65 percent more likely to have the same degree. And since 1985, the percentage of incoming freshmen at highly selective private universities who said they were born-again also rose by half, to 11 or 12 percent each year from 7.3 percent, according to the [Higher Education Research Institute](#) at the University of California, Los Angeles.

To many evangelical Christians, the reason for their increasing worldly success and cultural influence is obvious: God's will at work. Some also credit leaders like the midcentury intellectual Carl F. H. Henry, who helped to found a [large and influential seminary](#), a [glossy evangelical Christian magazine](#) and the [National Association of Evangelicals](#), a powerful umbrella group that now includes 51 denominations. Dr. Henry and his followers implored believers to look beyond their churches and fight for a place in the American mainstream.

There were also demographic forces at work, beginning with the G.I. Bill, which sent a pioneering generation of evangelicals to college. Probably the greatest boost to the prosperity of evangelicals as a group came with the Sun Belt expansion of the 1970's and the Texas oil boom, which brought new wealth and businesses to the regions where evangelical churches had been most heavily concentrated.

The most striking example of change in how evangelicals see themselves and their place in the world may be the [Assemblies of God](#), a Pentecostal denomination. It was founded in Hot Springs, Ark., in 1914 by rural and working-class Christians who believed that the Holy Spirit had moved them to speak in tongues. Shunned by established churches, they became a sect of outsiders, and their preachers condemned worldly temptations like dancing, movies, jewelry and swimming in public pools. But like the Southern Baptists and other conservative denominations, the Assemblies gradually dropped their separatist strictures as their membership prospered and spread.

As the denomination grew, Assemblies preachers began speaking not only of heavenly rewards but also of the material blessings God might provide in this world. The notion was controversial in some evangelical circles but became widespread nonetheless, and it made the Assemblies' faith more compatible with an upwardly mobile middle class.

By the 1970's, Assemblies churches were sprouting up in affluent suburbs across the country. Recent surveys by [Margaret Poloma](#), a historian at the University of Akron in Ohio, found Assemblies members more educated and better off than the general public.

As they flourished, evangelical entrepreneurs and strivers built a distinctly evangelical business culture of prayer meetings, self-help books and business associations. In some cities outside the Northeast, evangelical business owners list their names in Christian yellow pages.

The rise of evangelicals has also coincided with the gradual shift of most of them from the Democratic Party to the Republican and their growing political activism. The conservative Christian political movement seldom developed in poor, rural Bible Belt towns. Instead, its wellsprings were places like the Rev. Ed Young's booming mega-church in suburban Houston or the [Rev. Timothy LaHaye's](#) in Orange County, Calif., where evangelical professionals and businessmen had the wherewithal to push back against the secular culture by organizing boycotts, electing school board members and lobbying for conservative judicial appointments.

'A Bunch of Heathens'

Mr. Havens, the Brown missionary, is part of the upsurge of well-educated born-again Christians. He grew up in one of the few white households in a poor black neighborhood of St. Louis, where his parents had moved to start a church, which failed to take off. Mr. Havens's father never graduated from college. After being laid off from his job at a marketing company two years ago, he now works in an insurance company's software and systems department. Tim Havens's mother home-schooled the family's six children for at least a few years each.

Mr. Havens got through Brown on scholarships and loans, and at graduation was \$25,000 in debt. To return to campus for his missionary year and pay his expenses, he needed to raise an additional \$36,000, and on the advice of Geoff Freeman, the head of the Brown branch of Campus Crusade, he did his fund-raising in St. Louis.

"It is easy to sell New England in the Midwest," as Mr. Freeman put it later. Midwesterners, he said, see New Englanders as "a bunch of heathens."

So Mr. Havens drove home each day from a summer job at a stone supply warehouse to work the phone from his cluttered childhood bedroom. He told potential donors that many of the American-born students at Brown had never even been to church, to say nothing of the students from Asia or the Middle East. "In a sense, it is pre-Christian," he explained.

Among his family's friends, however, encouragement was easier to come by than cash. As the summer came to a close, Mr. Havens was still \$6,000 short. He decided to give himself a pay cut and go back to Brown with what he had raised, trusting God to take care of his needs just as he always had when money seemed scarce during college.

"God owns the cattle on a thousand hills," he often told himself. "God has plenty of money."

Thanks to the Christian Union, Mr. Haven's present quarters as a ministry intern at Brown are actually more upscale than his home in St. Louis. On Friday nights, he is a host for a Bible-study and dinner party for 70 or 80 Christian students, who serve themselves heaping plates of pasta before breaking into study groups. Afterward, they regroup in the living room for board games and goofy improvisation contests, all free of profanity and even double entendre.

Lately, though, Mr. Havens has been contemplating steps that would take him away from Brown and campus ministry. After a chaste romance - "I didn't kiss her until I asked her to marry me," he said - he recently became engaged to a missionary colleague, Liz Chalmers. He has been thinking about how to support the children they hope to have.

And he has been considering the example of his future father-in-law, Daniel Chalmers, a Baptist missionary to the Philippines who ended up building power plants there and making a small fortune. Mr. Chalmers has been a steady donor to Christian causes, and he bought a plot of land in Oregon, where he plans to build a retreat center.

"God has always used wealthy people to help the church," Mr. Havens said. He pointed out that in the Bible, rich believers helped support the apostles, just as donors to the Christian Union are investing strategically in the Ivy League today.

With those examples and his own father in mind, Mr. Havens chose medicine over campus ministry. He scored well on his medical school entrance exams and, after another year at Brown, he will head to St. Louis University School of Medicine. At the Christian Union conference in April, he was pleased to hear doctors talk about praying with their patients and traveling as medical missionaries.

He is looking forward to having the money a medical degree can bring, and especially to putting his children through college without the scholarships and part-time jobs he needed. But whether he becomes rich, he said, "will depend on how much I keep."

Like other evangelicals of his generation, he means to take his faith with him as he makes his way in the world. He said his roommates at Brown had always predicted that he would "sell out" - loosen up about his faith and adopt their taste for new cars, new clothes and the other trappings of the upper class.

He didn't at Brown and he thinks he never will.

"So far so good," he said. But he admitted, "I don't have any money yet."