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## Building Christ-based Relationships, Disciples, and Sharing the Gospel of Jesus Christ at Illinois State University

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The Cru logo, featuring the word "Cru" in a white, stylized, serif font against a solid red background.

# Building Christ-based relationships, disciples, and sharing the Gospel of Jesus Christ at Illinois State University.

Tuesday, March 6<sup>th</sup>, 2012

by Cassandra Jordan

***“My heart and my soul, I give You control. Consume me from the inside out Lord.”***

*Figure 1  
The Cru band plays the closing song at a weekly meeting.*

## Introduction

Cru, previously called Campus Crusade for Christ, is an inter-denominational campus ministry with the overarching goal of sharing the Gospel of Jesus Christ with all nations (Newswire 2011). As a national movement, Cru was created in 1951 by Bill Bright in California and quickly blossomed and spread over the country. There are Cru movements located all over the United States, mostly on university and college campuses, spreading to over

180 countries as well as employing over 22,000 staff people worldwide (Interview with Matt Sfura on 2.21.12).

The Cru movement at Illinois State University (ISU) in Normal, Illinois is the focus of this research. Each week there are a plethora of dorm Bible studies, leader Bible studies, and unofficial ‘hang outs.’ In addition to the small group meetings, there is also a weekly meeting, similar, but not the same as, a church worship service on Thursday evenings. Although the number of participants fluctuate week by week, between seventy five and one hundred people attended the events where I was present. To get an in-depth look at the movement, I focused my interviews and interactions with leaders and members who actively participated each week within the ISU Cru.



Through interviews, casual conversations, and attending weekly meetings, I learned that Cru actively seeks to “turn lost students into Christ-centered laborers” (Campus Crusade for Christ International 2012). Evangelism or sharing of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, discipleship, and the urge to spiritually grow in their relationship with Jesus Christ were integral themes for every member I talked to, so much so that spiritual multiplication and the quality growth in relationships between members and personal growth could epitomize the ISU Cru movement.

## Ethnographic Methods

My first interaction with a Cru member was with Jeremy Sauder, who took pictures included in this photo-essay and introduced me to everyone I interviewed. During my research, I attended three weekly meetings, which are Thursdays at 8:30 PM, attended one female Bible Study at Manchester Hall, and conducted several one-on-one informative interviews.

As this is a visual ethnography, I wanted to accurately represent the ISU Cru

movement through images. I bought and distributed four disposable cameras to three males and one female in the group (David Koch, Jeremy Sauder, Eric Floberg, and Mamie Norcross). I asked each of them to take pictures of important people, places, and events pertaining to Cru and their faith. After each had their assigned camera for one week, I had them developed and was able to discuss the pictures and events with the men to ascertain the significance of most images. Mamie, the one female who had a camera, was able to explain the pictures she took during our interview. Jeremy spent additional time helping me understand the evangelizing tools that Cru uses in order to help share their faith, which will be explained later.

I conducted interviews also with different leaders with the ISU Cru movement: Matt Sfura (a Cru staff member), Jeremy, Eric, Mamie, as well as Jennifer Ziermann. Each interview ranged from one hour to three hours in length. I

talked to Jeremy more frequently and he helped me narrow down the images from nearly one hundred to ten in a subsequent interview. Jennifer and Mamie then collaborated to help me choose the final eight images for the photo essay. The successful collaboration between the ISU Cru members and me added meaning and excitement for the project by all concerned.



*Figure 2  
Jeremy introduces Soularium to me during an interview. Soularium is a picture-based tool that helps believers to share their faith in Jesus Christ to a non-believer. By asking key questions about faith, the believer can engage in one-on-one spiritual dialogues with non-Christians.*

## Assumptions and Early Hypotheses

I began this research very eager to see what other college-aged Christians were doing in their relationship with Jesus Christ. I was expecting a Christian social group that gave Christians at Illinois State University opportunities to spend time with others who shared their faith through weekly activities and small group Bible studies. The college atmosphere is a time of questioning previous beliefs. Young students are away from their parents for the first time, and students are free to question previously-held beliefs and ideals, including religious practices.

According to some scholars, the number of Christians on college campuses is diminishing and those trends are now impossible to ignore (French 2010, p. 235). The study reveals a decline in the percentage of students frequently attending regular church services as well as other religious activities. David French argues that there is a steep moral decline with many



Figure 3: "God gives us the Bible.  
It is his personality written out for us."

—Jennifer, while leading the  
Manchester Bible Study.  
*Picture taken by Mamie.*

different pressures in a changing time period in a young student. However, French concludes:

If there is one firewall against the temptations of hedonism and the dispiriting Christian stigma, it is vibrant Christian ministries on campus. Groups like Intervarsity Christian Fellowship, Campus Crusade for Christ, and Reformed University Fellowship offer students a refuge that enriches their lives, provides peer accountability, and builds a sense of friendship and community that stands as an alternative to the mainstream university community (French 2010, p. 245).

Religious fellowship groups give a safe, moral outlet for the conflicted and vulnerable college student. As a Christian myself who has participated in religious fellowship groups at Illinois Wesleyan University, seeing a scholar find hope in different campus ministries was very uplifting.

Before getting to know the group, I had the understanding that the Cru, as a para-church movement, would have similar functions and beliefs as other Christian churches (Turner 2008). Dan Yarnell suggests that there are different elements to being a church in the 21<sup>st</sup> century: worship, "shared life in fellowship," "regular engagement with the Scripture," and discipleship, among others (Yarnell 2008, p. 9-11). Christians, including college ministries, are called to express their faith and love in worship of God and his son, Jesus Christ. Each community worshipping allows the group to "express itself with a local



accent” while still being reminded that they are a part of a larger group of Christians worldwide expressing their faith (Yarnell 2008, p. 10). Worship is only one small part of a Christian church/para-church. Sharing life together and building relationships through discipleship creates a “real sense of mission since God’s aim was always to create a people, a nation, a community of Jesus and the Spirit” (Yarnell 2008, p. 10). Growing in love and friendship with fellow community members and with God is the priority in Yarnell’s version of a Christian community.

Just as important is the call to study the Scripture because Christians are a people of the Bible. The Bible is God’s word and the basis for Christian faith. Through Biblical study, believers are given the opportunity to grow in their relationship with Jesus Christ, allowing the Scripture to mold and shape lives “is crucial to the process of enabling us to fulfill the mandate to maturity and the commission to go to all nations in God’s mission” (Yarnell 2008, p. 11).

The great commission to share the Gospel with all nations is accomplished by making disciples and leading people through their faith journeys. Yarnell asserts that without discipleship, it is like “Christianity without Christ” (Yarnell 2008, p. 11).

The founder of Campus Crusade for Christ, Bill Bright, created this movement and focused on discipleship and evangelism. He sent staff members out to “help build movement everywhere” so that “everyone will know someone who truly follows Jesus” (Turner 2008, p. 236). Initial academic research about the Cru movement and other similar ministries revealed that the ISU Cru movement is a biblically-driven Christian group that focuses on building relationships, discipleship and sharing faith with non-believers. Before meeting the group, I assumed that the ISU Cru campus movement would be a Christian outlet in a secular state school.

Presentation of Data

Campus Crusade for Christ is a movement that is based on relationships between people at the same time as ascribing as much honor and glory to God as possible in life. Constantly applying the Gospel to their lives is why Eric calls Cru a movement. Cru is not simply a social group made up of Christians, but a “fun, loving group of

college students after the heart of Jesus, living in community and loving one another” (Interview with Eric on 2.24.12). College is a unique time when young adults test and call into question their previously held beliefs. During an interview with Jeremy on 2.11.12, we discussed that college is an open time for non-believers

and a unique opportunity for Cru members, as well as other Christians, to evangelize others. When Jeremy entered college, he sought out Cru as a way of challenging his faith and growing spiritually; however, not all incoming students know what they want regarding their faith. Cru takes an active step with incoming freshman, as they try to share their beliefs

and their faith in Jesus Christ with the larger ISU campus. Evangelism is a way that Cru members, including Jeremy and the other leaders with whom I spoke, spread the Gospel to students who are uncertain about their path. Jeremy, Eric, Mamie, and Jennifer then summarized that it was the Holy Spirit working through each one of them to soften the hearts of non-believers to let in the word of Jesus Christ.

Cru members use a variety of methods to share their faith with new people. Some are as simple as spiritual surveys, followed by asking if that person would like to know God

more. Knowing God Personally is the booklet that ties together every Cru movement on a national level. Cru members can use this booklet to share the beliefs that all Cru members share to begin a conversation with other people. Another favorite tool to begin a spiritual conversation with students who are not yet in Cru is Soularium.

During a second interview with Jeremy on 2.25.12, I asked him to start a spiritual conversation using Soularium. Many times, these cards would be used to get to know where a person stands personally and spiritually. He asked questions like: What three pictures describe your life right now,

what three pictures describe where you want your life to be, what image best describes your faith right now, and what image illustrates where you want your faith to go? Every question was followed by an explanation of each reason. Jeremy then described two pictures to me – the lizard biting the hands that hold it and the baby bird, comfortably nestled in cupped hands. Both image (Figure 4) are different ways people come to think of God. The lizard biting back the hand that holds it is a common response for how a non-believer views God, but God is like the protective hands that are holding the precious bird. God is there to protect those who believe.



*Figure 4:  
What image  
describes God?*

*“This image tells me  
God is nurturing,  
loving, caring and He  
is holding me even  
when I am incapable  
of caring for myself.”  
(My Soularium)*

Freshmen students are individually and personally asked if they would like to come to the more informal, fun, yet faith-based Thursday night meetings. There are many students in the ISU Cru movement who attend only the Thursday meetings; however, many more students are inspired to learn more about God and the Gospels through studying the Scriptures. Jennifer claims nearly 70-80% of Cru members also participate in a Bible Study on campus. Studying the Scripture one way for Christians to get to know God personally and leading a Bible study is another way for Cru members to challenge themselves in their journey with Christ. Sharing

knowledge and leading younger believers understand the Scriptures is a big motivation for why Jeremy likes leading Bible Studies. All of the Bible Study leaders also participate in a leader Bible study in order to improve their own knowledge and understanding of the Scripture.

Growing in relationship with Christ and challenging faith is a big reason why both Eric and Jennifer chose Cru as a campus ministry. Jennifer feels that other ministries have the atmosphere of a church and did not challenge her in her faith, but because two people really took an interest, followed up, and truly tried to build a relationship with her, she

joined Cru and her faith has flourished from stagnant to “wanting to share” because she was so “passionate about it” (Interview with Jennifer on 2.24.12).

Eric, one of the Cru musicians, joined the Cru movement at ISU because he wanted to grow in faith and challenge himself. Sharing the Gospel and sharing faith can be intimidating, according to Eric, but Jesus is working through him to share his faith

*Figure 5: Studying the Scripture in a Bible Study is not merely a way to help others know God better, it helps you know God.*



*Left: At the end of a men's leader Bible Study, Jeremy (right) and David (left) pray together over their lives. Picture taken by David Koch.*

*Figure 6: When explaining a passage or faith to someone, it becomes real to **you**.*

*(Interview with Jennifer on 2.24.12)*



*Right: Jennifer is explaining a Bible passage while co-leading the female Manchester Hall Bible Study.*



with other people, not limited to college students. For Eric,

“seeking to make His name known” through evangelism is

one thing that sets Cru apart from other campus ministries.

***Figure 7: Mamie (left) is on a date with a member of the Manchester female Bible Study (right), building a relationship and living life with each other. This friendly outing is a small way of sharing faith and the message of the Gospel. By truly living life with others and sharing discipleship experiences, a discipler equips their disciple in a way that they could do it with others in the future.***



Another important aspect of Cru is the emphasis on the Great Commission – discipleship. Jesus tells Christians to go and make disciples of all nations, and discipleship is an important pillar within Cru. Cru staff *disciple* Cru leaders, etc. By discipling and evangelizing together, a community and relationships are created. Jennifer remarked that if one person disciplined two people, and then those two people disciplined two people, and you repeat this cycle, eventually you will reach the whole world, or in the very

least, every person in the world will know at least one person who is truly faithful. Jennifer calls this discipling Spiritual Multiplication. Throughout discipleship, one intentionally pours themselves and their knowledge into a few people, intentionally growing in their life with God. Equipping a few people with the tools needed so they can do the same in the future is an extremely strategic way of sharing faith.





*Figure 8: Hallelujah! Singing, laughing, praying, and generally praising His name during a weekly meeting. The weekly meetings are the beginning of a journey to help people grow in a relationship with God. This is a top priority, just as the “desire to use lives for something of significance” continues to drive Cru members (Interview with Matt on 2.21.12)*

## Data Analysis

The ethnographic data collected represents a typical active member of the ISU Cru movement who has taken on a leadership role of some kind. Throughout the five interviews, I received the same type of answers for the same types of questions, with the most resounding, important aspects of the movement based on discipleship, evangelism, and truly living lives together. Every member I have talked to

that they are a group of imperfect people, getting together, growing, and living life together. Glorifying God’s name and helping other people have an accurate picture of Jesus to make a healthy, informed decision are goals

that a typical member of Cru adheres to (Interview with Matt on 2.21.12).

Early assumptions and scholarship readings were shown mostly to be true within the context of the ISU Cru movement; however, I found

that the Cru movement is more than just social outreach group for college Christians. The ISU Cru campus ministry has members who are extremely passionate and motivated to share the Glory of the Word. The published scholarship supports my findings that Cru is an outlet for college students that offers friendship and support from other Christians. Friendship and community clearly are main focuses of the Cru movement. Yarnell

suggests that Christians must live life together, go and make disciples, worship, and regularly study the Scripture and Gospels of Jesus Christ.

I observed, in my limited experiences of Cru, members dedicating themselves to living wholesome lives as defined by the Bible. Leaders make a commitment to Cru, discipleship, and evangelism as well as deciding to walk with the Holy Spirit, actively repenting their sin, and being

emotionally, physically, and sexually pure (Interview with Jeremy on 2.11.12).

Cru members, and Christians in general, attempt to live a moral life, and they are supported and held accountable by the Cru members with whom they live life. Through discipleship and sharing their faith, their relationship with God grows and becomes the defining experience that saturates their lives into the future.

## Conclusion

The ISU Cru movement is a Christ-centered evangelistic campus ministry whose members focus on building and living in community with people while creating disciples and sharing faith with an emphasis on evangelism. Early biases were short-sighted because Cru, as a campus ministry movement, was proven to be much more than a social group. Experiencing the Cru movement in person illustrated the ways in which Cru Members believe God is at work in their lives.

Future research could focus on one aspect of Cru leadership instead of leadership in general. In the future, narrowing focus on Cru staff, Bible study leaders or musicians would make for very interesting research. Because of the size of the ISU Cru group, I did not get the chance to talk to non-leaders or freshman. Further questions could ask the effect of evangelism on an individual.

It would be interesting to get a different perspective from members of the group who have not been extremely active within the movement yet, and looking at freshmen, with further research, could show interesting reasons for why students choose to challenge their faith by involving themselves in an organization like Cru. Just as focusing on freshmen would provide slightly different information, looking at musicians would also provide a different outlook on Cru. The musicians could, although I have not asked these questions, express their faith through music. Therefore, looking at two different sub-groups within Cru would provide a new outlook that could help expand my research within the ISU Cru movement.

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