

Student churchgoers self-motivated to rise early Sunday mornings

By MARA LEE
Staff Writer

"God said to attend church pretty

explicitly, and when I look at the reasons why I go to church, I can see why—it's good," Cord Hamrick said.

Hamrick, a sophomore music major from Marietta, Ga., is one of many college students who wake up early Sunday morning to attend church. Though rarer than the sleep-in student, churchgoers have representation on campus. These regulars have differing faiths, backgrounds and motivations.

Some regular attendees, like sophomore history major Angela Crisp, consider themselves only moderately religious. Crisp, a United Methodist from Gastonia, said religion wasn't a daily concern for her. She explained she wasn't certain what dogma her church holds, saying, "I'm not typical of most Methodist youth, or maybe I am, and that's why the United Methodist church is losing members."

"I'm kind of glad that I don't depend on the church to tell me what I believe and when to believe it."

In contrast, David Lanning, a junior French/pre-med major from Raleigh, said, "I consider myself to be really spiritual. Basically everything I believe comes from thought formulated on scripture, not personal opinion. Without proof, belief is nothing."

Lanning said he was a Christian with no particular denomination, though his evangelical church here de-emphasized details of theology and ritual and un-

derlined the necessity of taking Christ as a personal savior.

"Man does not reach salvation through good works but through belief in Jesus Christ as the crucified son of God," Lanning said. "The relationship between man and the Trinity sets Christianity apart as the one true faith."

However, spirituality does not necessarily equal certainty. Ross Cooper, a junior religious studies major from Boone, said, "I'm going through a transitional period of formulating what I think is my essential religious awareness. I've always been interested in religious issues."

"Being a religious studies major really makes you come face to face with how much you accept doctrine. Any belief worth holding is worth being challenged."

"You may not intellectually, historically believe in the virgin birth, but still be able to get symbolic meaning from that," Cooper said. "Transcendent truth is far more important than the literal truth."

Although Cooper hasn't gone to church in the last month, he most recently attended an Eastern Orthodox church. He said its tenets included a belief that one can appeal to saints as intermediaries because the bond is not broken by death. "Eastern Orthodoxy is not legalistic. It's a mystery," he said.

Cooper said they didn't stress doctrines of original sin, a personal savior or a literal devil. "There's no 'my own personal phone line to God.'"

Despite their differences in doctrinal

and personal beliefs, churchgoers tended to echo the same reasons for attendance. Crisp, who only this year began attending a local United Methodist church, stressed its liberality compared to her home church. "The sermons are very positive—how the Scripture can apply to my life."

Crisp finds church a break in material routine. "It's a time where I have to stop and think—a time to slow down," she said.

Hamrick agreed that his time in church was renewing, but also underlined the sense of community. Hamrick, a Christian with no particular denomination, sees faith as a central and daily part of his life. "It's sort of a communion with God of a different sort than when you're just saying your prayers," he said.

"Fellowship—it's real neat to be around people who have the same relationship to God that you do. At this point it turns like an AA meeting."

Sometimes even regulars can feel organized religion isn't helping. Cooper said he hadn't been getting much out of church recently. "Even if I'm unsure what I believe, ideally it should provide a sense of connectedness—with other people, with all of creation, with something beyond that gives meaning to all of it," he said.

Almost all of the attendants were brought up in religious homes. Crisp, for instance, went to church 75 percent of the time until her senior year, when she went half the time, and then her freshman year she didn't go at all.

Lanning said, "I have gone to church regularly since I was three years old, and that didn't change when I came here. Up until two or three years ago I went because I really felt I should—now it's desire."

Cooper is a major exception. Raised liberally Protestant, he went to church sporadically until high school, when he became a Catholic. He attended regularly as a Catholic, and then later as a member of the Eastern Orthodox church. "My mother is religious, but not in a strict dogmatic kind of way. My father claims he's an agnostic," he said.

None of the churchgoers felt attendance made a good Christian, but their ideas of morality and Christianity diverged there. For instance, Hamrick said the essence of Christianity is to be godlike—with assistance. "The help of the Holy Spirit—an ongoing relationship with God is most important," he said.

Hamrick added that morality was built on loving God, the golden rule and watching out for pride.

Lanning also emphasized the personal relationship with the Trinity, but as a source of spiritual peace rather than as a tool for ethical behavior. "Without Christ, real life is not possible," he said. "There is a need in human beings to be subservient to something. It comes from the whole idea of original sin. At the base of it all, there is no such thing as a good human—we are evil, awful, terrible and bad by nature."

Ultimately, Cooper said Christianity could not be reduced to a bumper sticker idea. "It's a whole way of life, rather than any one belief, any one practice." He did try to put morality in a nutshell, saying, "The ability to see beyond yourself is what is necessary before you can really be a good person to other people."

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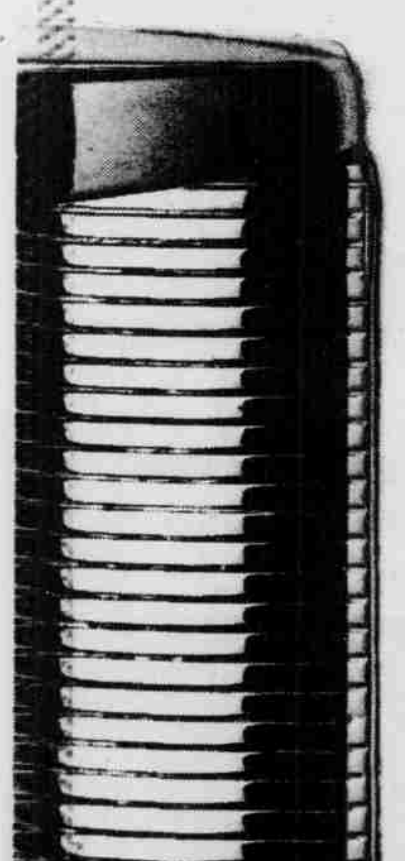
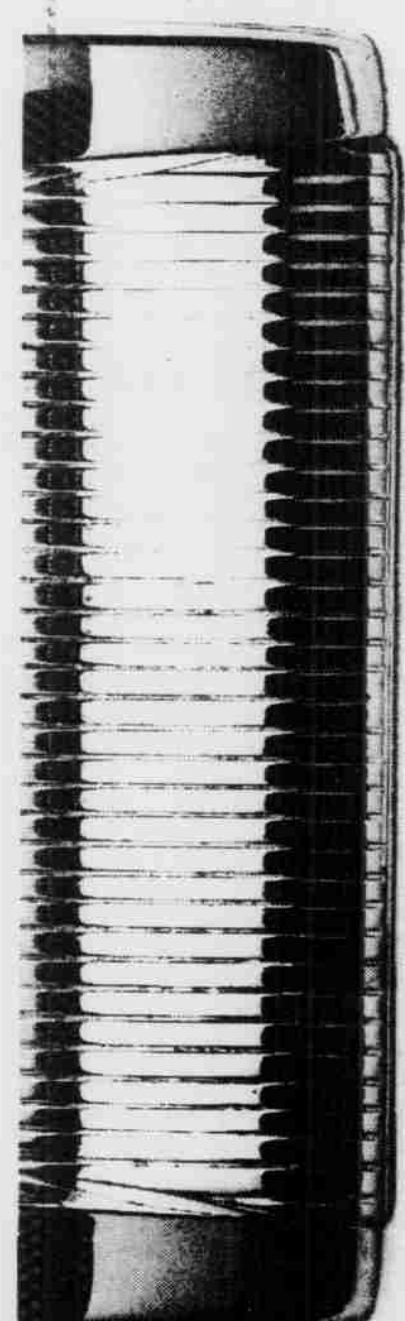
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