Editor’s note: a shorter version of this article appeared in the April 13, 2009 issue of The Mennonite Weekly Review.

Community spirit came in different flavors this year at Rosedale Bible College, as student discipleship groups took turns preparing an evening meal for the whole campus.

Given the opportunity to serve their fellow students, they opted for some exotic fare, including hot chili spiked with homegrown habanero powder (“with lots and lots of meat!”), savory red lentil soup from Turkey, and bannock, also known as fry bread.

Although these small groups are not new on campus, having their members fix a meal is. Dean of students Chris Jones said the idea came from his time as a student at Regent College in Vancouver, British Columbia in the late 90s. “We were placed into small groups and we had to prepare and serve a campus meal of soup and bread.”

Jones said he hopes to see the discipleship groups form “a little bit of community” on campus. He’s also arranged to have each group travel into Columbus once during the year to help The Vineyard Church of Columbus distribute supplies to homeless camps in the city. “Serving in mission together brings people closer together,” he said.

Visiting the homeless camps

This proved to be the case for freshman Diana Geiser’s group, which visited the homeless camps last fall. “We didn’t know each other then,” she said. While riding back to campus in the van, they talked about what it was like to see what people in the camps were going through. “I think it made us be more grateful,” she said. “After that we were a little closer.”
Richard Stein, in his first year at RBC, said visiting the camps was “definitely an eye-opener.” It was amazing, he said, “to see how close we are to that many homeless camps.”

His group helped load up a truck with blankets and other supplies. The camps are made up of temporary shelters – tarps and tents – along railroad tracks and in wooded areas, he said. When they arrived at the camps, they gave people bowls of hot chili, bags of food and other supplies.

The part he liked best was getting to talk with people. “They all had different stories, too,” he said. “Don’t assume they’re homeless because of drugs or alcohol.” One person he spoke with had a job but had lost his apartment to a fire.

“People have rough lives,” said Richard. “Never question anybody’s motives because you don’t know what people have been through.”

Growing together

Members of RBC’s faculty and staff provide regular leadership to the discipleship groups. “Faculty and staff are mature believers who can offer spiritual guidance and wisdom to the students,” said Jones. Having faculty-led discipleship groups creates one opportunity for students to connect with faculty and tap into that wisdom, he said.

He hopes faculty and staff share their own struggles and concerns with their groups as they gather for prayer each week. “It’s a great benefit for students to witness older believers journeying with God.”

Academic dean Phil Weber said his groups have had some really significant times of discussion and prayer together. “One year was often characterized by prayer for family members and things happening off campus that were important to the students.” Another year, he said, tended toward discussion of fundamental issues about faith and what it means to know and love God.

Weber said one of the ways his group gets to know each other “is by taking turns sharing something of our life journey, with an emphasis on the beginnings and development of our relationship with God.” Praying together every week, he said, “just naturally reveals what is on the minds of the students.”

Involvement with a discipleship group has given freshman Doug Root a way to develop new friendships. “It’s been a really good thing,” he said. “It connected me with other people that I wouldn’t normally hang out with.”

Toby Maust, also in his first year at Rosedale, said being in a group that prays together has helped him grow.

“Praying out loud around people was something that was hard for me to do,” he said. “Now, it’s not that big of a deal.”

Diana Geiser likes the discipline of meeting every week, although she admits she doesn’t always feel like going. “You can tell a difference afterward,” she said. “It’s such a positive thing just to get together with the group and
“pray.” She also appreciates that it’s okay to pray “even about the tiny stuff that you think God doesn’t maybe care about. Yet every week we meet together and pray, even if it’s just about little stuff.”

Business manager Alfred Yoder likes trying different approaches to prayer with his group. Once, he brought in a list of the student body and asked his group to pair off and pray for 20 students each. Then they wrote short notes of encouragement, telling each student, “We prayed for you today.”

The next week he asked if they’d gotten any feedback. Students were surprised, he said, by how many people approached them and thanked them.

Richard Stein has found it helpful to be able to open up, admit his shortcomings, and ask for prayer. Knowing that others have been through some of the same things he has makes it easier for him to do that, he said.

He smiled as he described most of his classmates’ “down-home, country upbringing.” He grew up in Baltimore. “It’s really fun being able to communicate with different people, even though we’re on different sides of the spectrum,” he said.

Praying together has helped him in other ways. “I used to be the kind of person that wouldn’t pray out loud,” he said. “Now, being in the prayer group and being around people I’m comfortable with has opened up that part of my prayer life. Prayers don’t have to be filled with heavy-handed words. Short and sweet ones get right to the point.”

Vicki Sairs is communications coordinator at Rosedale Bible College. She lives in London, Ohio, with her husband Reuben and their cat, Chloe. Reuben and Vicki are enjoying their sweet life but they miss their sons.

Refusing to rely on physical/spiritual dichotomies that neatly identify the roots of depression, Kathleen Norris offers a nuanced view of the ancient sin of acedia in her book Acedia and Me. Good definitions of this affliction are hard to come by, so Norris illustrates patterns of acedia in her own life: threads that started with self-loathing that was later covered with an attitude of superiority that kept her from forming life-giving relationships.

Acedia became the deadly sin of sloth, but it first had its place in monastic writings as one of the seven “bad thoughts.” As Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire, men and women fled to the Egyptian desert in search of a faith untainted by worldly power. These desert fathers and mothers described acedia as the “noonday demon”, the overwhelming feeling of restlessness that threatens to distract one from prayer and robs one of inner peace. Instead of resting comfortably in what some have called the “margins” of life—the periods of inactivity that offer rejuvenation for the doing that follows—people overcome by acedia fill their lives with meaningless clutter in order to avoid what has become for them the emptiness of inaction.

I’ve been thinking about a new feature for the Brotherhood Beacon. The best title I’ve come up with so far is “Best of Blogs.” The idea is that we could occasionally collect some of the best writing from CMC bloggers, probably short, paragraph or two selections, for inclusion in the Beacon. I know that there is a lot of writing being done out there online, much of it worthy of sharing with a wider audience. (To be sure, there is much that doesn’t fit that description!) I’m thinking a fairly wide range of content—probably more reflective writings on things like holy days, stages and phases of life (birth, death, and all the milestones in between), relationships, ethics, and the list could go on.

One of the obvious requirements for such a page would be the submission of selections to the editor, either from authors or readers. (I would enjoy finding some material, but I know I don’t have the connections that would be required for good development of the feature). We would need permission from authors; we would need to honor concerns for privacy or safety involving children. And there are probably other questions and issues that I haven’t considered.

At any rate, I’d love to hear from those of you who write and read blogs. Do you think this idea could work? Are those writing and reading blogs ever going to read these questions, or do they consider the printed page hopelessly archaic? Contact me at beacon@olbarn.com. I’d love to hear your ideas.

Following is a short, somewhat academic selection from one whose blog I try to follow—Josiah in North Africa—reflecting on some recent reading.

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