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Common Ground... In pursuit of acceptance "just as I am."

By Steve York with photos by Travis Stanley

Reverend Ted Henry, inspiring students

College years can be tough on students in many ways and especially when it comes to welcoming lifestyle diversity along with peer and institutional acceptance. Unfortunately, issues of faith, gender identity or sexual orientation are some of the areas where differences can foster alienation and a tendency toward social "exclusivity," making it increasingly difficult to find a common setting for supportive communication.

However, there are community leaders, like Reverend Ted Henry, Pastor of Banner Elk's United Methodist Church (UMC) and Chaplain of Lees-McRae College (LMC), who, at the inspiration of a small handful of students, helped take steps to create a place for embracing student diversity and promoting positive outcomes. That safe place is an organization called Common Ground and it is located in the Historic Banner Elk School building.

Common Ground is a 501 (c)3, non-profit organization founded in 2015 and currently under the auspices of Banner Elk UMC operated by a Board of Directors. It is a Registered Student Organization (RSO) with Lees-McRae and, as of last year, has become an official part of the Wesley Foundation of the Methodist Church with plans next year for its own nonprofit status under the larger umbrella of the United Methodist Church.

From humble beginnings in a rent-free, unheated classroom and/or the LMC Alumni House to the more comfortable rented quarters in the historic school's "Lucky 7" classroom, Common Ground has gained strong student popularity and wide community support.

As Reverend Henry explained, "Common Ground is a place for a diversity of students to come together, do homework, enjoy fellowship, have group discussions,

play games, watch movies and, in times when the internet doesn't function well on campus, students can utilize the internet in our space. For some it's become a safe hangout and sort of home-away-from-home."

Additionally, it brings students together to help with local service projects for organizations such as Grandfather Home for Children, The Crossnore School, the Avery County Weekend Backpack Food Program, Feeding Avery Families, and Hospitality House of Boone.

Along with acceptance issues, there may also be cases of alcohol and drug abuse, or sexual and family violence. In those situations, Common Ground refers such cases to the Lees-McRae Counseling Office. And, when the college becomes aware of students dealing with spiritual and religious abuse or struggling with faith issues, the Counseling Office will typically refer those cases to Reverend Henry.

Weekly group meetings are on Thursday evenings and have grown in attendance and diversity over the years. "We have students who are Jewish, Latter Days Saints, atheist and agnostic, and through Common Ground I can make connections (with each of them) and offer a listening non-judgmental ear," Henry noted. "This year we are averaging 20 students each week. So far, our high has been 31 and our low was 14. Common Ground is also a place for me to connect with students I might not be able to connect with as the Pastor of a church or as the Chaplain of the college leading a Sunday night Bible study on campus," he added.

But the reasons for Common Ground's growing success are always best stated by former LMC students:

"Pastor Ted and Common Ground is how I survived college. They gave me a small escape and a place to always be myself and have no fear of being judged in any way. A part of me wishes I had just one more year at school to be able to stay at Common Ground just a little bit longer. Common Ground will always have a place in my heart." (Ellie Eyerly)

"For me, Common Ground has been an incredible resource and space. It has been decorated in a way that utilizes student voice, heightens collaborative discussion, and prioritizes attendees' stress levels for a relaxed environment. Often, just knowing that one has a community of peers available makes the world of difference in emotional security." (Thelma Tatiana Barraza)

"Common Ground has been a welcoming community where I've always felt safe, comfortable, and supported. My favorite parts of the experience were game nights and volunteering. I loved being able to create a community through fun and then give back to the community whenever possible. It was definitely a staple of my college experience." (Dean Wheeler)

Generous donors have helped provide furnishings, a television, and a small refrigerator, as well as actual monetary donations to help pay rent, provide food and support events. In addition, as part of the Wesley Foundation, Common Ground receives a small amount of funding to further help cover rent and some programming. All donations are considered tax-deductible as the law provides. To learn more and/or become a donor, visit www.commonground-lmc.org.

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