

Why students at a Kentucky school are praying and singing around the clock

by [Bob Smietana](#)

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People attend a revival in Hughes Memorial Auditorium on the campus of Asbury University in Wilmore, Kentucky. (Video screengrab)

Last Wednesday, students at Asbury University gathered for their biweekly chapel service in the 1,500-seat Hughes Auditorium.

They sang. They listened to a sermon. They prayed.

Nearly a week later, many of them are still there.

“This has been an extraordinary time for us,” Asbury President Kevin Brown said during a gathering on Monday, more than 120 hours into what participants have referred to as a spiritual revival.

The revival has disrupted life and brought national attention to Asbury, an evangelical Christian school in Wilmore, Kentucky, about a half-hour outside of Lexington. Videos of students singing, weeping, and praying have been posted on social media, leading to both criticism and praise from onlookers. News of the revival has also drawn students and other visitors to the campus to take part in the ongoing prayer and worship.

“We’ve been here in Hughes Auditorium for over a hundred hours — praying, crying, worshipping and uniting — because of Love,” [wrote](#) Alexandra Presta, editor of the Asbury Collegian, the school’s student newspaper, who has been chronicling the services on campus. “We’ve even expanded into Estes Chapel across the street at Asbury Theological Seminary and beyond. I can proclaim that Love boldly because God is Love.”

The ongoing meetings in the chapel have also brought back memories of a similar revival in the 1970s, which is recounted in a [video produced](#) by the university. The gatherings also come at a time when many young people in the US have lost faith in organized religion—with a [recent study](#) finding that 43 percent of adults under 30 say they never attend service.

Officials at Asbury did not respond to requests for comment.

Michael McKenzie, [associate professor of religion and philosophy](#) at Keuka College in upstate New York, said revivals have long been a staple in the Methodist tradition that Asbury belongs to. The school is named for Francis Asbury, a circuit-riding preacher who helped Methodism grow from modest beginnings to the largest Christian group in America during the 1800s.

The denomination often grew through revivals, large group meetings that stressed a personal experience of God and a return to the basics of Christianity. One of the most famous revivals in American history took place in Cane Ridge, Kentucky, about an hour northwest of Asbury, where thousands gathered in 1801.

McKenzie, who has studied early Methodist revivals, said that revivals often happened when people felt things had gone wrong and were trying to recapture something that had been lost.

Online accounts of the meetings at Asbury, he said, seem to “fit all the historical signposts of previous revivals.”

“I think a lot of people sense that America and American Christianity have lost its way,” he said. “And they seem to me that they are looking to get back to Jesus in a profound experiential way.”

Many of the nation’s colleges were founded by church groups that hoped revivals would be a regular experience in the lives of students, said Andrea Turpin, associate professor of history at Baylor University. For some students, she said, the revivals were a place to experience religious conversion, while others may have experienced a deepening of their faith at such revivals.

“You would cancel classes, you’d have prayer meetings and it would sweep through the school about once a year,” said Turpin, who studies religion and higher education.

For Matt Erickson, pastor of Eastbrook Church in Milwaukee, a five-day campus revival at Wheaton College in the mid-1990s was a life-changing event. Erickson had come to the school in hopes of preparing for the ministry, but that calling had faded during his studies.

He recalled that during a campus missions conference, students began coming forward to ask for prayer and for spiritual renewal. That led first to an all-night prayer service and then to a series of evening meetings that ran late into the night. The last evening of the revival was a commissioning service for people who wanted to go into the ministry. Erickson said that experience led many of his friends into the pastorate or other Christian work.

“There was a sense of the presence of God,” he said, adding that it went beyond simply an emotional experience. He said he hopes what’s happening at Asbury can lead students there into lives of service to God and others.

Erickson said he’s been a bit dismayed at some of the social media criticism of the revival—saying it will take time to see if the gatherings lead to real change in people’s lives.

Author and activist Shane Claiborne is also optimistic. Claiborne, who has friends on the Asbury campus, pointed to the revivals of Charles Finney in the 1800s. Many of the people who responded to Finney’s altar calls for salvation also joined the abolitionist movement.

“I believe in social transformation,” he said. “I also believe in personal and spiritual transformation.”

Howard Snyder, a retired professor of the history and theology of mission at nearby Asbury Theological Seminary, which is separate from the university, said revivals can provide hope in difficult times. They become real if they lead to people living out the values of Jesus’ teaching.

“Authentic revivals return the church to what it is supposed to be,” he said in an email. “The people of God faithfully following Jesus.” —Religion News Service