

Footloose Christian colleges get into the swing of things

January 15, 2010

JACKSON, Tenn. (RNS)—Classes are completed for the day. Meetings and work are winding down, and Facebook can provide a study break for only so long. So, what's a restless Christian college student to do?

For undergrads at [Union University](#) in Jackson, Tenn., a walk down to the campus theater provides one solution—dancing to the tunes of Duke Ellington and Cab Calloway.

Inside, young men offer their hand to available girls and take them to the middle of the hopping dance floor.

Like in the 1984 movie *Footloose*, some campuses have had to overcome qualms about dancing.

Beginners practice basic steps, while more advanced dancers take on the more complicated moves, flipping their partners over their heads and through their legs.

At Union, like a growing number of Christian campuses, it don't mean a thing if it ain't got that swing.

Dance fever hit the Southern Baptist campus when two freshmen, Grant Kelly and Brandon Walker, started recruiting students to dance for fun last fall.

The group has grown from just a few friends meeting in a small classroom to about 50 dancers who now take over the theater.

Fans say the swing thing has now taken root in at least 10 Christian colleges in the United States, and foot-function fever is spreading.

But like a scene out of the 1984 movie *Footloose*, some campuses have had to overcome qualms about dancing.

Union's student handbook, for example, says the university "prohibits dancing at any Union University-sponsored event held on campus." Students simply host the dance-offs as unofficial events either on or off campus.

"It's fun and innocent," said Dean of Students Kimberly Thornbury, who said students gave her a heads-up about the events. "The university is not going to hunt people down. That's not the spirit of the policy."

While swing is downright innocent compared to the bump-and-grind moves found on many secular campuses, some Christian school leaders believe dancing could lead to temptation and therefore comes with guidelines attached.

To be sure, many conservative schools like Bob Jones University continue to prohibit all forms of dancing, but some Christian schools have lifted the dancing ban in recent years.

- [Baylor University students](#) were able to boogie in 1996.
- *Wheaton College in Wheaton, Ill., whirled in its new dancing policy in 2003.*
- *In 2006, John Brown University in Siloam Springs, Ark., expanded its dancing policy to allow students to jive at more campus-sponsored dances with gentler genres such as ballroom and swing.*

Randall Balmer, an expert on American evangelicals, said he was a little shocked to learn students on Christian campuses were picking up swing dancing, but sees it as an indicator of shifts within the evangelical subculture.

“What clearly has happened ... is that after 1980, evangelicalism was still a subculture—but it was no longer a counter-culture,” Balmer said.

“With that decreased attention to ‘worldliness,’ some of the taboos have fallen.”

Balmer, who teaches American religious history at New York’s Barnard College and is the author of *Mine Eyes Have Seen the Glory: A Journey into the Evangelical Subculture in America*, says the suspicion of the “outside world” beyond evangelicalism has faded.

“There has been a general loosening of the (fundamentalist) structure of the 1920s and 1930s,” he said. “The dancing is just another evidence of that loosening.”

Still, some schools have reservations.

In Kirkland, Wash., [Northwest University’s](#) dancing policy states the school “recognizes the temptations inherent in the sensuous and erotic nature of some social dancing,” and then sets guidelines to keep dancing off campus.

Those rules haven’t dissuaded Michael Weber, a Northwest student, from dancing for four years. He and his friends go off campus to community centers and dance halls in order stay within the guidelines and still swing.

Weber organizes dance events a couple times a month to encourage students to learn basic moves.

He likes swing because, in his opinion, it’s easier to master than ballroom dancing.

“Swing dancing is easy to learn,” he said. “It’s not as proper.”