

Keeping Pace

The latest news from The Pace Center for Campus and Community Ministry



Students, Aylla, Gerard, Tatyana, and Aaliyah prepare to leave for Belmont Food Pantry.

Letter from the Director

Dear Pace Supporter,

Pace equips students to become servant leaders within their community. One important aspect of this is through volunteering and service. Students at VCU are often a population who require support, whether its help with food, housing, spiritual guidance, or career counseling. But at Pace, we believe students also have innumerable gifts to share with the community. Some of these gifts are as simple as their time and energy.

In a passage sometimes referred to as the Widow's Offering (Mark 12:41-44), Jesus witnessed many rich people putting money in a collection plate, but he focused on a woman who put in only two copper coins. He said, this poor widow has put in more than anyone else. They are giving out of their spare change, but she has given everything she has.

Like the widow, our students are often struggling. They are navigating how to live on their own, learning how to wake up on time, nourishing new social connections, juggling school and work, and discovering that they should have studied a little more for that one exam. Their time and energy are constricted. Even through these moments in their lives, they are giving back to the community through service with joy.

In this issue, we hope to show you the cycle of support that exists at the Pace Center from the students who are serving their peers to the students who are serving the community. Thank you, as always, for supporting our students through your gifts of time, prayer, and money. We could not equip and empower servant leaders without your generosity.

*Rev. Katie Gooch
Director*

Exploring Area Congregations

Student Development and Engagement Coordinator, Rev. Russ Kerr, has a theory: “What students do in the first 72 hours of school is what they will do for the next four years.” Russ spent the summer considering ways he could introduce incoming students to a faith-routine early in their college careers. “We have a whole wealth of open and affirming churches in walking distance and students do not even know that these churches exist,” Russ mused. “How can we get students from their dorm to the church?”

Enter VCU junior, Rachel: “Actually, when I first came to VCU, I was like, ‘Oh man, wouldn't it be cool if I could start a little church club and, like, have some more people other than just me go exploring churches to see what they've got here in Richmond?’” Russ and Rachel got together with a few other students who regularly attended Pace’s religious events and “Church Crawl” was born. Most Sundays, VCU students meet at Pace to walk, bus, or ride to a nearby LGBTQ-affirming area church.

“I probably wouldn’t have visited these churches on my own.” reflected Sydney, a VCU freshman. “I wasn’t raised in a city so when I first got here it was a little terrifying. Going with a group



Students and Rev. Russ at St. John’s United Church of Christ.

makes me feel more comfortable and I’ve gotten to know the city a little better by walking around.”

Russ advertised the event during orientation week and several freshmen began to attend. New students like Sydney confirmed Russ’s suspicions. “It was a good way for me to get out and make friends,” said Sydney. “And it’s also, like, incorporating church into my routine - that’s what I did back home - go to church every Sunday. So I was like: it brings back home”

Now, Church Crawl participants have visited many local denominations, including United Church of Christ, Baptist, Presbyterian Church (USA), Episcopal, and Methodist Churches. “One thing that has really moved me about Church Crawl,” said Russ, “and one reflection that students had, was that for a lot of students, this was the first time that they had ever heard a woman preaching. Some of the students reflected ‘It was really neat seeing myself in the pulpit because I have never seen that before.’”

Church Crawl has given students an opportunity to explore their faith within the safety of a group. “Something I’ve learned from Church Crawl,” junior Bailey reflected, “is how many churches there actually are that are genuinely loving and welcoming of everyone. Looking for churches after starting college was a challenge because it always felt like their message would be, ‘We

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“Everybody does things differently, but in the end, it still has the same aspect of going to church. You're praising God.”

- Sydney, VCU freshman, Criminal Justice major

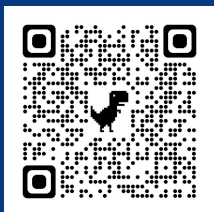
Mentorship Program Update

In 2020, the Pace Center launched its Mentorship Program with the goal of connecting students, who lack professional networks, to adults in the Richmond community (especially with adults in local congregations). Since then, Pace has paired over 30 students with adult professionals. The experience students receive from mentorship can be invaluable to their careers. Due to the amount of time needed to prepare students for a mentor, we have decided to focus our program on Pace student leaders rather than advertising the opportunity to the entire student body.



“I needed shadow hours to apply to VCU’s Dental Hygiene Program. My professors gave us resources, but they weren’t good enough resources. I felt stuck. Pace staff pushed me to talk to a retired dentist who introduced me to a practice. Now I’m shadowing many dental hygienists there. I’m grateful that I get to put these hours on my resume and the amount of networking is honestly amazing - you don’t know how many people you’ll meet!”

- Pre-Dental Hygiene major, Sophie



Find out more about our Mentorship Program and become a Mentor.

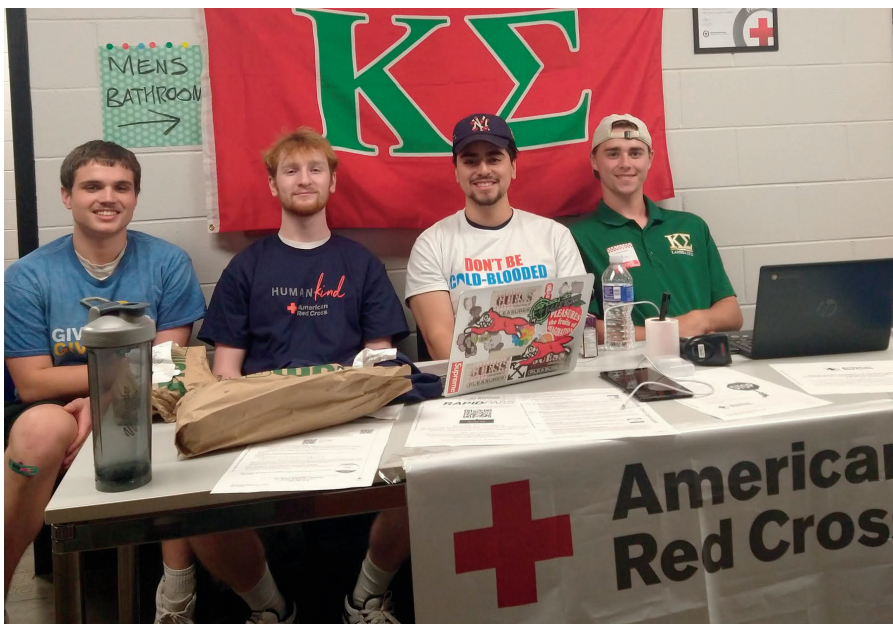


Rev. Russ Kerr and Rev. Kelley Connelley celebrate her final service at Second Presbyterian with students, Bailey + Rachel.

love people, but this group/community is bad and not *actually* welcome here’. I’ve learned that I can feel comfortable and safe in church services of other denominations.” She continued, “I was raised Methodist and still consider myself Methodist, so I was a little hesitant the first time we went to an Episcopal church. Even though I wasn’t used to that environment, I still learned things from the service and felt welcomed.”

Students were also able to debrief after the services and discuss their experiences. “I have been a pretty active participant of Pace’s ministry-focused events for a while,” added sophomore, Mary. “One thing that made this experience special was that after the service, we stopped and had brunch together. One of us at the table previously would have maybe called themselves an atheist. I come from a Catholic background. There was a person there from a Methodist background - all different kinds of backgrounds,” she said. “But we were all able to talk about aspects of the service that we enjoyed or found familiar, aspects that we were surprised by. It felt like a safe space to have conversations and share and explore different representations of faith.”

“I’ve taken away that there’s a lot more out there in the church community than people say there is,” said Sydney. “Everybody does things differently, but in the end, it still has the same aspect of going to church. You’re praising God. You’re thanking him for everything that he does for us. Even though each church does things differently, we’re still there to praise God, so if you look at it like that, it’s all the same.”



Fraternity members Britton, Colter, Ralph, and Austin volunteer at a Red Cross Blood Drive at the Pace Center.

Pace Students Volunteer!

On a brisk morning, about 30 people stood under a carport unpacking boxes of food donations and gathering them together into bags to distribute to families. Tia was one of seven VCU students who was volunteering that day. “My friend introduced me to Belmont,” she said. “I didn’t have anything to do today, so I was like, might as well just help my community!”

To an outsider, it seemed chaotic, but the volunteers of Belmont Food Pantry worked in synchrony like a hive of bees. “It can seem overwhelming when you arrive, but it is a well-oiled machine and each volunteer plays a specific role,” said Helen Trevey, Executive Director of Belmont Community Resource Services. “Because we serve 500 families every Friday, we need about 70 volunteers each week. Students and retirees are key to meeting our needs.”

Belmont Community Resource Services is located in Richmond’s Southside and is a collaboration with Belmont United Methodist Church. Pace students have been volunteering at the food pantry since 2021. “Belmont gives students a chance to physically contribute without the pressure of having to be there every week,” Helen noted. “They know they are needed every time they show up and that their work is appreciated. There is grace when they can’t come, but then, we’re grateful to have them whenever they are able to come back!”

Helen is passionate about networking and finding the gifts of students. She tries to place them in roles where they can use their gifts and skills. “When students ask what they can do to help, I ask, ‘Do you want to interact with clients? Handle food? Pack boxes? Get a master’s degree in cardboard management?’” (Note: there are a lot of boxes at Belmont.) “Once students have the experience, they can bring it back to their lives at VCU. They think, ‘I can do this.’”

Students volunteer for a number of reasons, but most of them simply want to get out in the Richmond community. “A lot of our students who come from a faith-based background are used to giving back to the community and find the Pace Center through our volunteer opportunities,” said Rev. Katie Gooch, Director of the Pace Center.

Students who don’t have transportation may think it’s difficult to find volunteer opportunities near VCU’s campus, but staff at the Pace Center recommend starting by serving their own community at VCU. As the weekly event “Stories and Lunch” draws to a close on Wednesday afternoons, a group of students inevitably drifts toward the kitchen, where the noise of clanking glasses and cutlery will soon be replaced by the sounds of dance music. “I don’t know who started the dance parties!” VCU sophomore Tobi reflected. “Russ told me Pace had a speaker and then it just became the vibe.”

Non-student adult volunteers provide lunch each week for a rotating group of 60 or so students who participate in the storytelling event, but about 10 student volunteers help set tables beforehand and wash dishes

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“Ever since I was little, my parents have been like, ‘Give back to the community! Find something you’re passionate about!’”

-Sahiba, VCU junior, Psychology major,

after. The dishwashing is usually accompanied by music. “I think students think volunteering is stressful,” Tobi speculated, “but it doesn’t have to be. One of the most pivotal moments was last year when there were only three volunteers and 90 dishes. It flew by while we were just talking.”

Many students volunteer in order to overcome social anxiety. International Studies major, Mo, confided, “Before I started volunteering at Pace, I was still working on my social anxiety and how to talk and interact with people. But, since I started volunteering, I’ve gotten really better at it. I have learned to open up. If you keep practicing being social, the anxiety is a lot less.”

Pace offers many ways for students to get involved in the community on campus, but students are also eager to get “real-world” experience in the Richmond community. During the Covid-19 pandemic, when VCU’s campus was fairly dormant, Pace began hosting American Red Cross Blood Drives. Since then, Pace has hosted 1,035 donors whose blood has saved up to 2,397 lives.

Katie Miller, an Account Manager with the American Red Cross, is responsible for scheduling the drives and working with student volunteers. “Student volunteers are mission-critical when it comes to getting the word out on campus about the need for blood donors and students are able to gain wonderful leadership experience and collaboration skills.”

Pace student, Sahiba is an incredibly passionate Red Cross volunteer. “I just wanted to be involved in some way on campus,” said Sahiba, who started volunteering as a freshman. “I like to volunteer and give my time back however I can, whenever I can. After the pandemic, there was a decline in volunteering. I started a new initiative to find more volunteers on campus and get them involved. It takes just one student for it to get rolling.”

I love the students the best,” said Katie Miller of the American Red Cross, “because they are so willing to help!”

Food Insecurity on Campus

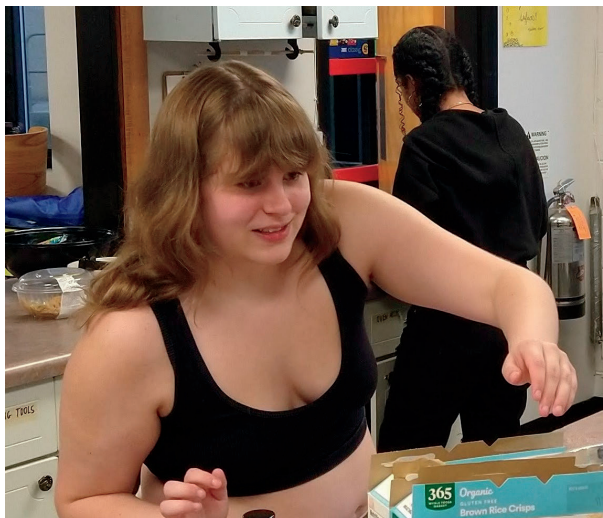
Pace Student, Teirney Judd, understands better than most the struggle University students face when seeking resources. Tierney is a student-employee of Ram Pantry, a food pantry sponsored by VCU. “I used to be one of the people that went to the Ram Pantry and experienced food insecurity on campus,” said Teirney. “I ran out of swipes [dining hall credits] during my first semester. I heard about the Ram Pantry and started going. Eventually, I started working there.”

Teirney is a passionate advocate for food and housing security, especially at VCU. “People here are young adults. They’re trying to navigate life. We don’t think that they should be punished and have to drop

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Students Aylla + Aaliyah volunteer at Belmont Food Pantry.



Pace student, Teirney, prepares vegan rice crispy treats for Strings & Things.

out of school because they don't know how to do something, or their parents aren't guiding them, or they don't know how to ask for help."

Teirney uses the gift of her personal experiences to give back to the VCU community. Because her family struggled with food insecurity during her childhood, she learned how to budget for groceries which is a skill many college students don't have.

"Lisa at Ram Pantry recognized my gifts and experience in this area. She was like, 'That's something that we really need at the pantry.' It's kind of like the Pace Center where they're looking for people's gifts - things that they know how to do. She saw the gift in me." Her story has become another gift that she shares at the pantry.

"One of the biggest things we've noticed at the Ram Pantry is the stigma of food insecurity and the stigma of poverty is a really hard thing to grapple with for students. We see a lot of students struggle to ask for help. Sharing my story is one of the ways in which I can get rid of that stigma

and make other students maybe relate a little bit more and maybe be less hesitant to reach out for the help."

During the summer of 2023, the pantry moved to a new location on West Grace Street. Pantry staff hope the location change will help to serve more students and decrease stigma around the pantry - a stigma that prevails even though findings from a recent study suggest that approximately one third of VCU students experience food insecurity at some point in their college careers. This equals roughly 10,000 students. The Pace Center works to combat this statistic by hosting communal meals through programs such as "Pots & Pals" and "Stories & Lunch".

Although VCU's population may be higher needs than some others in Virginia, the university is not alone in sponsoring an on-campus pantry. Within the last decade, the number of food pantries on college campuses around the country has increased from only 80 to around 800. That means about 1 in five colleges hosts a pantry.

Besides being active at Ram Pantry, Teirney also participates in events at Pace such as Walk-A-Dog and Strings & Things. "Walk-A-Dog is what brought me here." said Teirney, "Strings & Things is what got me to stay." Sometimes she and other students will prepare snacks for Strings & Things participants. Even for Pace events that aren't geared around food, snacks are a critical component. "We try to have food at most of our events," acknowledged Rev. Katie Gooch. "Even if the event doesn't have a food element, we keep the pantry stocked with readily available snacks. We don't want anyone to be hungry here." ■



Students help themselves to food during Stories & Lunch.

Meet Lisa Mathews-Ailsworth

Lisa has overseen VCU's student food pantry - Ram Pantry - since 2017, when the pantry transitioned from being a student organization into a service provided by the institution. Under Lisa's guidance, Ram Pantry serves an average of 120 students a week. In addition to managing Ram Pantry, Lisa oversees the Division of Student Affairs' Emergency Funds, assisting students with housing and other financial needs.

1) What was Ram Pantry like when you started and what is it like now?

When I first got involved with the Ram Pantry in 2016 it was a robust student organization led by caring undergraduate students. It relied entirely on the kindness of others, and other's desire to assist people. The pantry was open Wednesdays and Thursdays from 11-5 pm. Each hour, two volunteers were in the pantry to assist guests. The passion was inspiring, however, the logistics were a nightmare. Each hour the pantry was at the mercy of volunteers, thus the club advisor would have to stop their work to go to the pantry, confirm that the volunteer showed up, and if not, wait or close until the next volunteer arrived. From a guest's point of view, it must have been difficult because they never knew whom they'd see in the space. There was no consistency, each time a guest visited they didn't know if it would be a stranger, classmate, or friend sitting at the check-in desk. For many of our guests privacy is a concern. Until just this past September, the pantry was located in closets in the University Student Commons. The space was hidden, small, and dark, resulting in an uninviting atmosphere.

The pantry recently moved to a much larger, more welcoming space at 930 W Grace St. The new location has a positive energy due to the natural light and the layout being purposefully built for our needs. The new space is quadruple the square footage of the old space and includes industrial shelving, a sink, bathrooms, desks, and a waiting area. The pantry is also now a service of the university. We are still 100% reliant on donors, as no university funding is used to purchase food. However, we are now staffed by paid work-study students, ensuring we are able to remain open with consistency, and that we are confidential. If a guest comes at the same time each week, they should see the same workers. The changes have led to us serving twice as many students each week as we did in years past.

Keeping Pace



Lisa Mathews-Ailsworth - Associate Director, Office of Student Advocacy

2) What's one common assumption people make about food-insecure students?

It wasn't until I started meeting with students one-on-one to discuss their budgets, that I started to see the systemic obstacles. One of the largest barriers our students face is navigating adulthood without a co-signer. Co-signers are typically required to secure loans and housing. Without the ability to take out loans, it is extremely hard to acquire the \$30,000+ required to attend VCU, purchase a car, and rent an apartment, leaving these students with few options.

3) What have you enjoyed most about working with VCU students?

I enjoy witnessing their potential grow. An education will open endless doors for them, and it has been incredible to see where life takes them after VCU.



Scan to donate items



Youth picking up trash at the James River Park.

Servant Leadership Summer Youth Camp at Pace

The Youth Summer Leadership Institute returned to Pace last summer for the first time since 2018. The Pace Center hosted middle and high school youth from four congregations in Virginia and North Carolina. Students were able to serve local churches and nonprofit ministries in the Richmond area, including Shalom Farms, the Richmond SPCA, and Friends of the James River Park.

Are your youth interested in participating in 2024?

Pace plans to host high school-aged youth the week of June 17th-21st (July dates may also be available). Youth will stay overnight, participate in mission and service opportunities in the Richmond area, and learn about Servant Leadership principles.

Want to learn more? Contact Rev. Russ Kerr: community@thepacecenter.com

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