



# CHESTERTON HOUSE

A Center for Christian Studies at Cornell



2023-2024

# ANNUAL REPORT

# Lives are transformed when faith and intellect meet

## **We are reinventing the Christian experience in higher education.**

We are at a watershed moment in higher education. College campuses are seared by hyper-political ideologies, self-censorship, and an anxious and depressed student culture. Many Christian institutions have struggled to respond to these rapid changes and either ignore them or crumble under these cultural pressures. This has led to an ever-widening gap between Christianity and the core intellectual life of the university. It's little wonder that students are leaving the faith in historic numbers.

But that isn't the end of the story.

At Cornell, we are seeing new ways for Christians to be present in the university—ways that don't

compromise faith or intellect—and ways that bridge the gap between a distressed student culture and a deeper yearning for something beautiful. Our innovative programs allow students to explore this holistic integration of faith and intellect in a spirit of grace, wonder, and hospitality.

And it's working.

Chesterton House is experiencing exceptional growth and is bursting at the seams. This extraordinary surge marks an inflection point as record numbers of students explore how the full expression of faith and the Christian intellectual tradition can transform their lives.



# OUR CHALLENGE

## A NOTE FROM THE DIRECTOR

### The campus culture is changing.

- Campus culture has become thoroughly post-Christian, and those of orthodox faith are often in conflict with prevailing norms.
- Today's culture is more and more hyperpoliticized. The divide between opposing viewpoints widens every day.
- Students face unprecedented pressure in their professional trajectories.
- Students are more anxious than ever before.
- The dominant ethos is increasingly pessimistic and without hope.

### A Record-Setting Year

The national trends are clear: religious affiliation is plummeting among younger cohorts, campuses face increasing turmoil and social tensions, mental health crises are ubiquitous, and Cornell's own surveys of incoming students who indicate interest in seeking us out are running 20–30% lower than even five years ago, a trend that is actually understated since the total Cornell student body continues to grow.

So the last thing you would expect is a 170+% increase in aggregate engagement over the past five years. Far exceeding our pre-COVID engagement levels, the 2023-2024 year saw our largest-ever campus program with over 250 events and a total attendance of over 8,000.

But growth is complex. It can deceive, mask other issues, and unwittingly slip into an idolatry of metrics that misses what matters. So it's worth looking more closely at what is happening at Cornell, not merely through the lens of attendance and engagement, but considering the longer 25 year history of very slow, patient sowing and building that was always aiming at something greater.

It began with our founder, Karl Johnson, who set a bold precedent for innovative risk-taking and evolving ministry playbooks. Those playbooks continue to reinvent the space between academia and church, rethinking how a fully integrated faith informs the intellect and the daily rhythms of life.

- Our **academic program** embodies that legacy by offering an expansive range of conversations, collectives, courses, and events. From foreign policy to the arts, from engineering and business to culture and history, our program is a feast of discoveries, offering more than any one person could fully explore. We collaborate and coach our speakers to



go beyond the conventional expert-at-a-podium academic lecture and wade into the hardest questions where faith and practice meet. In this way, we curate a specialized stream of content to speak to pressing campus needs.

- Fifteen years ago, we took another historic step by beginning our **residential program** with a small group of students. This residential program has blossomed into a two-acre campus with multiple beautiful facilities, and it is one of the largest higher-ed intentional Christian communities in the nation. Our campus is a central hub not just for our 40+ residents but hundreds of visitors each week as well.

## Going Broader and Deeper

This year we've continued to **expand our range** to reach students at different stages of social and intellectual comfort levels and interests. From beginner-friendly programs that provide relational connections and warm welcomes, to advanced graduate research seminars that push to the edge of various disciplines, our all-of-the-above approach welcomes a wide breadth of students into a journey of discovering the richness of the Christian intellectual tradition.

Our **Public Reading of Scripture** program hit a milestone year with three fully launched independent weekly groups across campus and a record-breaking annual attendance of over 2,000. These groups gather weekly to listen to every word of the Bible, one hour at a time. Its success has inspired similar programs at several other campuses nationwide.

The impact of our programming goes far beyond Ithaca. Not only do our students spread out around the world, bringing this new energy with them, but our programs have also become leading models for rethinking campus ministry on other campuses. Researchers from Baylor University are soon publishing a three-year longitudinal study of character formation within our programs. Other centers, and even churches, have consulted and adopted some of our playbooks for their own contexts.

This helps us make inroads with the larger student body, the vast majority of whom will never engage with traditional campus ministries or churches, but find these new kinds of programming more appealing. More than ever, we need experimentation and innovation that is firmly anchored in the core commitments of historic orthodox Christianity. The growth didn't "just happen." It is the payoff of a patient generation-long investment. So our *next* generational growth opportunity is upon us now.

## Challenges of Growth

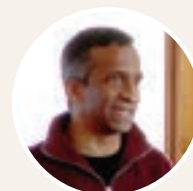
Our staff, systems, and facilities are under significant strain. We are regularly turning away students, whether from our residential waiting lists, our award-winning Logos Seminar, or other limited-capacity programs which are full beyond capacity. Our houses, which serve as dual-purpose residences and student centers, are wearing down under the weight of hundreds of weekly visitors.

We have taken a measured and deliberate approach in our expansion efforts—taking time to carefully consider each next move. Our focus is simply to do good work in and out of season, whether we're serving a few or many. However, we are now at a crossroads and are actively exploring strategic investments to expand our capacity and multiply our impact.

All of this is happening only because of our remarkable set of supporters who are committed to working for the long haul, building a durable institution, and are inspired by a larger vision to do good work, regardless of attendance numbers, which go up and down. These supporters are some of the most inspiring, thoughtful (and outright fun!) folks I know, and it's been a privilege to work with them and for them.

To those encountering us for the first time, we would love to get to know you. For those of you who have helped us get this far, thank you, truly, for being part of this historic movement.

— **VIVEK MATHEW** PhD '19 | *Executive Director*



# OUR RESPONSE

We address these challenges through a comprehensive approach—offering various levels of engagement and programming to connect with students in the ways they need. We also focus on outreach and partnership with other students and ministries. Chesterton House models a different way to: *Connect, Explore, Grow, and Activate.*

## Connect

Lasting change on campus begins when people *connect*. We intentionally engineer social spaces that nurture cohorts of students to form meaningful relationships. These small cohorts produce large impacts by spreading a positive culture.

- **Praxis Sunday Night Dinners**
- **Meal Plan**
- **Residential Retreats**
- **Social Gatherings**
- **Veritas Forum Campus Conversations**
- **Sunset & Scripture**
- **Faculty Socials**
- **Residential Meal Plan**

### Praxis Sunday Night Dinners

Sunday Night Dinners are one of our most significant hospitality events. Every other week, our residents invite guests, regardless of religious affiliation, to join us at the Knoll as we roll out the red carpet to offer them a meaningful experience. From real linens, a quality home-cooked meal, and thoughtful discussion, Praxis Sunday Night Dinners are meticulously planned to feel welcoming to all, creating an inviting space to discuss life's big questions and bring the riches of the historic Christian tradition to bear on our lives today.

## Explore

We swim against the tides of both current culture and traditional ministry models by encouraging students to *explore* how faith and academia inform each other. We bring in a wide variety of speakers—many of whom have conflicting perspectives—who aren't afraid to wrestle with big and challenging questions. Some of our avenues for this exploration include:

- **Logos Seminar**
- **Chesterton Perspectives Lecture Series**
- **Theological Society**
- **Visiting Scholars**

### Logos Seminar

Our award-winning Logos Seminar is a biweekly course that guides students on a journey through the classical Christian tradition and its toughest critics. Focusing on moral anthropology, hermeneutics, and Biblical studies, it regularly hosts visiting speakers from a wide variety of perspectives and disciplines and aims to help students work through some of the most sensitive and challenging moral issues of our time.





## Grow

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Faith takes root in every dimension of our lives—moral, spiritual, social, and physical. Centered on a saturation in Scripture, we have a rich offering of small groups, courses, book clubs, and events focused on developing one’s spiritual life.

- **Public Reading of Scripture**
- **Just Show Up Book Club**
- **Faith & Environment Collective**
- **Residential Life**
- **Spiritual Formation Mentor Program**
- **Faith & Work Events**

### Residential Life

Our beautiful two-acre campus provides a rich residential experience that welcomes 40+ residents each year. Students enjoy a Christian college-like experience on our mini-campus—including an evening meal plan that residents design, budget, and execute. Together, we foster a community that is characterized by spiritual formation, intellectual curiosity, and generous hospitality.

## Activate

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We don’t do this work alone. We have helped start and maintain many faith-based sub-communities on campus—providing resources, funding, advice, connections, and institutional stability from year-to-year. Our mini-campus serves as a central hub for many independent groups. These collaborations allow us to be a catalyst for reaching more broadly into Cornell and beyond.

- **Claritas Journal for Christian Thought**
- **Law/Business Graduate Professional Groups**
- **Faith, Science, and Tech Events**
- **Cornell Tech NYC Campus Group**
- **Inter-Ministry Collaboration & Support**
- **Inter-Faith Programming**
- **Regional Faculty Programming Beyond Cornell**

### Claritas Journal

Chesterton House serves in an advising role for the Cornell *Claritas*: the student journal for Christian thought. Through this partnership, we guide students in articulating a Christian perspective as they engage with a secular audience, helping them to communicate their faith thoughtfully and effectively.

# WE ARE FILLING THE GAP

*“I’ve seen atheists who have come to Christ, turned their lives around, and gotten involved in their community—and it all started with one Sunday Night Dinner. Chesterton House is upping the ante and changing the game. It’s a paradigm shift. And if you can slowly scale what Chesterton House is doing and build that DNA into other places—that would be revolutionary.”*

— MICAH HOFFMAN '23 | *Biology & Society* |  
*Chesterton House Fellow*





# *New Programs*

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Each year we continue to experiment and develop new ways to meet the ever-changing needs of the campus. Some recent developments include:



- **Sunset & Scripture**, where over 115 people gathered to listen to the entire Gospel of Mark while enjoying the Silo Food Truck and a gorgeous sunset over Ithaca
- **Beyond Utopia** screening of the Oscar short-listed documentary and talkback with **Pastor Seungeun Kim**, who created a modern-day underground railroad that has helped over 1,000 North Korean refugees find freedom
- **Faculty Faith & Work Accelerator** and inaugural regional conference
- **Veritas Forum** revived on campus with **Lydia Dugdale** and **Michael Fontaine**
- **Online Course** with preeminent philosopher **Eleonore Stump** exploring Dante's *Purgatorio*
- **CHOP (Cornell House of Prayer)** expands our footprint in a new multi-ministry hub and hospitality center that accommodates five residents. CHOP serves as a strategically located base for several ministry groups to use for prayer, Public Reading of Scripture, and small groups, in North Campus across from Balch Hall.
- Launched our third weekly **Public Reading of Scripture** group

# CHALLENGING THE CULTURAL NORM



*“I’ve been very grateful for the way Vivek and Ryan ran the Chesterton Perspectives events. The spirit of these events is to bring in a bunch of competing voices, encourage students to talk to them on their own terms, and then decide for themselves. They’re not trying to push you toward one certain conclusion. They want to instill in you a way of thinking. The goal is just to teach students how to think in a Christian manner about these topics, and I’ve really appreciated that.”*

— JOE DILL | *Applied Physics PhD Candidate*



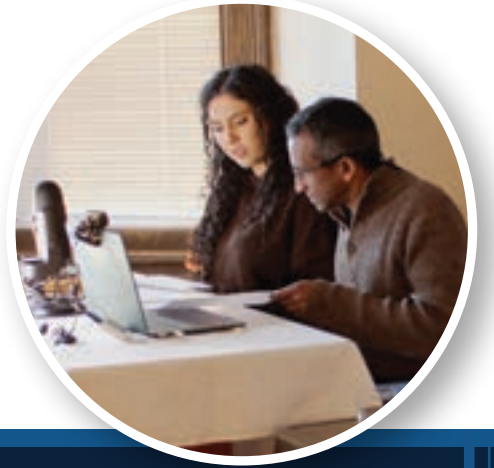
*“Chesterton House was one of the biggest pieces of my Cornell experience. I had a very narrow view of what a “good Christian faith” looked like, and Chesterton House has stretched my faith. I’ve had conversations with others where I know they love God, I know they’re a Christian, but I really disagreed with them. And I’m better for it. I know those conversations would have never happened if I wasn’t at Chesterton House. And now those are the types of conversations and relationships I seek out.”*

— EMILY MASON ‘24 | *Industrial and Labor Relations*



## 2023-2024 Visiting Scholars

We are committed to fostering engaging dialogue on faith, culture, and academia. This year, we hosted a diverse group of renowned scholars who offered profound insights into theology, ethics, the humanities, and the intersection of faith and society—deepening understanding and sparking meaningful conversations within our community.



VISITING SCHOLARS



**Old Testament Missiology**  
**COLLIN CORNELL**  
*Fuller Theological Seminary*



**The Lost Art of Dying**  
**LYDIA DUGDALE**  
*Columbia University*



**Feminism and the Family**  
**ABIGAIL FAVALE**  
*University of Notre Dame*



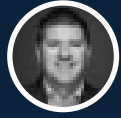
**Ancient Guide to Grief**  
**MICHAEL FONTAINE**  
*Cornell University*



**Beauty in a Wounded World**  
**BRUCE HERMAN**  
*Gordon College*



**Faith and Environmental Justice**  
**BEN LOWE**  
*Executive Director, A Rocha*



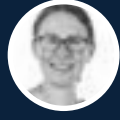
**Leading with Values**  
**JEFFREY METZNER**  
*Vice President, Proctor & Gamble*



**A Meaning of “Greater Israel”**  
**LAUREN MONROE**  
*Cornell University*



**Gender, Family, and Patriarchy  
 In Ancient Israel**  
**CYNTHIA SHAFER-ELLIOTT**  
*Baylor University*



**The Good Life**  
**MEGHAN SULLIVAN**  
*University of Notre Dame*



**Unraveling the Meaning  
 of Singleness**  
**DANIELLE TREWEEK**  
*Moore Theological College*



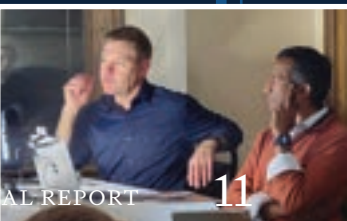
**The New Testament’s Use  
 of the Old Testament**  
**ROSS WAGNER**  
*Duke Divinity School*



**Family Drama: Does  
 Marriage Matter?**  
**W. BRADFORD WILCOX**  
*University of Virginia*



**The Rise of Christianity in  
 Modernizing China**  
**FENGGANG YANG**  
*Purdue University*



# OUR IMPACT

By God's grace, our work is thriving.

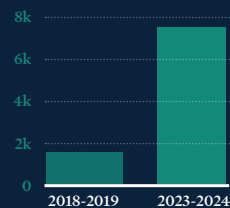
# 8,154

## ATTENDEES ACROSS ALL EVENTS

*Engagement has nearly doubled from 6 years ago.*

# 7,524

### MEALS SERVED



80% increase  
in the past 5 years

# 791

### LECTURE ATTENDEES

# 266

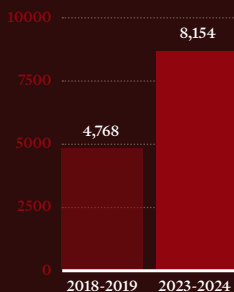
### EVENTS

Not including the  
60+ events held at  
Chesterton House  
by other groups

# 355

### COURSE ENROLLMENTS SINCE 2014

### TOTAL ATTENDANCE



70% increase  
in the past 5 years

# 2,237

### PERSON-HOURS OF PUBLIC READING OF SCRIPTURE

We started with  
just 15 students on  
The Knoll in 2020.  
This year aggregate  
attendance is  
over 2,200 —  
or 20% of our  
overall aggregate  
attendance.

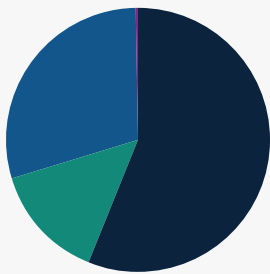
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### COLLABORATORS

Including churches,  
fellowship groups, and  
national organizations

# YOUR STEWARDSHIP

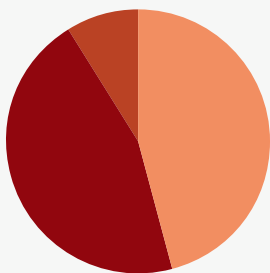
Your partnership transforms student lives and impacts the whole campus.



## Income

● Contributions	\$591,014
● Foundation Gifts	\$148,000
● Service Revenue	\$309,180
● Sales/Other	\$2,811

**\$1,051,005**



## Expenses

● Operating Expenses	\$475,940
● Residential	\$471,032
● Fundraising	\$90,227

**\$1,037,199**

## Net Revenue

**\$13,806**

NOTE: These figures include all annual operating income and expenses. They do not include income/expenses in our Long Term Projects category, used for projects (including capital projects) beyond annual operational needs.

# LOOKING AHEAD

## Serving More Students

We have been blessed with phenomenal growth and a surge in student response. But we are at a crossroads.

Our facilities and staff team are strained beyond their limits. We are routinely turning away students for courses, residences, limited-capacity events, and more. Each of these is a missed opportunity that could have begun a student's path toward a significant lifetime impact.

To that end, we are in active conversations with stakeholders on two different fronts:

- **Facility Expansion:** We are engaging architects to explore building out our mini-campus at The Knoll to accommodate more residents, guests, and event audiences.
- **Program Expansion:** We are also looking into what capital infusions might be needed to expand our program and staff capacity.

All of this is in service of meeting the needs of Cornell students in years to come. Stay posted as we explore this new terrain.

Together, with your help, we hope to change the larger landscape of Christian higher education.

Thank you for coming alongside us on this journey!





# JOIN US!

**Want to see us  
in action?**

**Be part of the  
conversation!**

We'd love to invite you to join our next event. Scan the QR code below to see our upcoming virtual offerings and tune in from wherever you are. We love to see our alumni and partners chime in from across the country!



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www.chestertonhouse.org

**CHESTERTON  
HOUSE**

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STONE MOUNTAIN, GA  
PERMIT NO. 1176

*“I am a Raving Fan of Chesterton House and the opportunities this ministry provides for Christian students to live together, pray together and deepen their faith together. It’s a compassionate island that fosters love, joy, peace, gratitude and grace. Thank God!”*

— **KEN BLANCHARD** | *Cornell Trustee Emeritus, Co-Author of “The New One Minute Manager” and “Lead Like Jesus Revisited”*



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