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FAITH & COMMUNITY

Integrating Faith and Relationships in the Community

The poet John Donne professed, “No man is an island entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main...” It was true then and is even more so now in the 21st century. Every one of us lives as part of a body; within family certainly but also within others in our community. That community manifests itself in a hundred different forms, from a small group Bible study, to a CrossFit session, to the stranger at the local hardware store. Our community circles range from close friends to circumstantial acquaintances, and from those we know well to those we only pass by as we move through this world. As Christians, we should take advantage of opportunities for interaction with those around us and be prepared for the nudge from God to develop those interactions into relationships.

Let’s take a brief look at the author of relationships, Jesus Christ.

Jesus has always lived in perfect community as part of the trinity. God resides within Himself in perfect fellowship and He created mankind to participate in that fellowship. When the relationship was broken through sin, God sent Jesus to live among us, die on the cross, remove our sins—all to restore us to relationship with Him.

In Jesus we see that from the age of twelve until His resurrection, He both grew from and invested in others in His community. For example,

- At the age of twelve, He learned at the feet of Hebrew teachers in the Temple (Luke 2:46).
- His first miracle was at a community wedding ceremony, where He met the host’s logistical and hospitality challenges, changing water into wine to allow community festivities to continue (John 2:1-11).
- He chose and invested deeply into three, twelve, seventy, and several hundred to learn from Him; co-labor with Him; and after His departure from the earth, continue His mission to the known world (Acts 1:8).
- He promised in His Great Commission that He would be with us always, even to the end of the age (Matthew 28:18-20).
- Even after his death, His focus on community continues through the church, a communal gathering of Christ-followers who are called to be His agents to the entire world.

Jesus showed and taught that the Christian life was never meant to be lived in isolation. It is meant to be in relationships, vertically with God and horizontally with others. As Jesus gathered those He



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would be in closest fellowship with, Mark wrote, “And he appointed twelve (whom he also named apostles) so they might be with him” (Mark 3:14). *That they might be with Him*—Jesus’ desire was a relationship of a journey together. That is our model for fellowship with Him and fellowship with others. Let’s look at two general areas Christians are to live out their faith among those God has placed in their community.

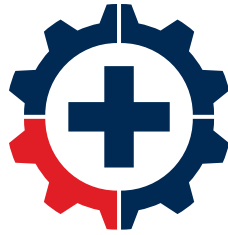
First, Christians are to live out their faith within a local body of believers.

As believers we are instructed to be a part of a body where we can worship God, grow spiritually while encouraging and serving one another. The apostle Paul gives clear guidance for the church that includes equipping the saints for ministry and building up the body—with the ultimate goals of unity of the faith, knowledge of the Son of God, and maturity of those in the fellowship of believers (Ephesians 4:11-16). After Christ’s ascension on the day of Pentecost, the community of believers gathered together for worship. We see God’s plan for the early church in Acts chapter 2: “And they devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers...and all who believed were together and had all things in common... praising God and having favor with all the people ... and the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved” (Acts 2:42-47). The apostles followed the example of Jesus, and we should do likewise. Scripture admonishes us, “[Do not] neglect to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encourage one another!” (Hebrews 10:25).

Military men and women’s frequent moves, deployments, and unique lifestyle can make it extremely challenging to fully participate in the body of Christ. It’s hard to find a place to worship and even once you find a place, there is a sense that plugging into a specific ministry isn’t worth it since you’ll likely move again. If you’ve felt this, you aren’t alone. In fact, most military believers would say they have experienced those same feelings of disconnectedness and ask the same questions you probably have asked. Questions like...

- Where will I and my family continue our growth in faith and service to the Lord?
- Equally important, where would God have us serve the Body of Christ through our gifts, talents, and resources?
- How can I serve in the body considering both the challenges—and the opportunities—associated with the military?
- How do I get involved in a ministry given my career and lifestyle?

We are called to Biblical and mutually edifying relationships, not just casual acquaintances. In his letter to the Thessalonian church, Paul reveals a heart refined by the work of Christ. He writes, “But we were gentle among you, like a nursing mother taking care of her own children. So, being affectionately desirous of you, we were ready to share with you not only the gospel of God but also our own selves, because you had become very dear to us” (1 Thessalonians 2:7-8).



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This is a sterling example of a Christ-like relationship—growing affection, focused on the other’s needs, and sacrificial sharing of self. It is much more than meeting at church and attending church events. This is a calling to do life together; to share each other’s burdens, to build strong, lasting relationships with each other and when needed to hold one another up. Doing life together happens through mentoring, discipling, accountability, small group relationships, picnics, sickness, and struggles.

These deep fellowships grow in richness over time. Starting with a simple coffee encounter or start-up OCF group or service project, deep relationships may evolve. Those are the encounters that we only discover months later that God had set up as divine appointments.

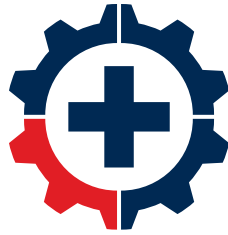
OCF’s mission is to engage “military leaders in Biblical fellowship and growth to equip them for Christ-like service.” Many forms of Christian fellowship found in the larger community, and its churches are growth and service producing. Nevertheless, the unique aspects of military life including frequent moves, family separations, challenging duties, and the military culture can often be best served in fellowship among fellow military. Small group studies, personal mentoring and accountability, prayer groups, chapel programs and services—all bring Christ into relationships where like-minded military can serve each other.

As fellow believers in uniform we we will be able to share some common hardships, trials, and experiences in Christ-like relationships with one another. In many ways military experiences that differ from those in other vocations. Like David and his mighty men and Jesus with His disciples, we are to build around us a coalition of believers so we can collectively worship, learn, grow, mourn, celebrate, and live as believers in Christ...*together*.

And it is together that we will be equipped to reach full maturity in faith so we can more fully serve others and serve the Lord. So again, first and foremost, Christian are to live out their faith within a local body of believers—where they have been planted both geographically and vocationally.

Secondly, Christians express their faith as they participate in their local community.

As Christians, we are to also live out our faith in the location God has placed us. For military leaders that includes the workplace, the military community, and the community surrounding the base. Look at Jesus, He attended the wedding feast of Cana as a member of the community—and there He conducted His first miracle in response to what seemed to be a purely social need. Both Christ and the apostles ministered to their communities through more than just healing and miracles. They brought food to the hungry, shelter for the homeless, and comforted the suffering and the sick. We, too, are called to involvement in our neighborhoods and cities. These actions are excellent examples of ways that a Christian can be active and serve their local community.



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Christians are called to engage the larger culture, to be salt and light within a lost world. Chance encounters at local stores and gatherings, personal involvement in community and school activities, individual and small group works of service are all opportunities to share the heart of Christ in a loving manner. Even the fact that you move often, opens the doorway for new relationships and opportunities to love people fully by sharing the Good News of Christ.

Additionally, a central part of exercising and applying our faith in our community is how we live as citizens within the local, state, and federal government. Government, like the church and family, is an institution established by God. Jesus, "... born of a woman, born under the law," was subject not only to the Jewish law but also to Roman law. He honored the laws and the appropriate agents of government just as we should. But yet, he didn't hide nor neglect his relationship with the Father during conversations with these leaders. Jesus responded to a question about the occupying Roman government by saying, "Therefore, render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's" (Mark 12:13-17).

Paul's exhortation about a believer's relation to government, found in Romans 13:1-7, is an excellent passage to study and discuss. While citizens in Biblical times had little personal influence on how they were governed, God has placed us in a democratic republic, a government that is ultimately subject to its citizens with the rights to vote, freedom of worship, freedom of speech and many other rights. Along with the rights come corresponding responsibilities. They include to be informed and directed by faith in voting, taking measures to protect the innocent, to wisely and boldly exercise the freedoms afforded us as citizens, and to season each encounter with the grace and wisdom of God. We can disagree without being disagreeable; we can boldly exercise our rights with humility and godly restraint.

It could be said that activating our faith in the community outside of the body of believers is where the true measure and grit of your faith is tested.

In conclusion, our God majors in relationships. From the perfect fellowship and love within the Trinity flowed God's gracious offer of a relationship with Him and with those He created. We find those relationships in His body and within the communities He places us. Within faith-driven relationships among believers and non-believers alike, we can be fruitful Christ-like servants in the military community.

In the follow-on discussion period, share and discover more on living an integrated life of faith within our community.