

*Mission Tools:*

# Building a Successful Orthodox Christian Fellowship On Campus

**Description:** Practical Tips for building a stronger group on Campus.

**Staff Needed:** Chaplain – A local Orthodox priest to act as advisor, speaker, and to serve regular Church services

President & Executive – Student representatives to do the legwork

**Background:** Many Orthodox Christian Fellowships on campus suffer from what might be called an “interest deficit”. This article discusses how such a deficit might be overcome, in ways which are the most spiritually beneficial to the students involved.

**Overview:** See below

**Feedback:** Remarks from student, via work of mouth, email, text messaging, etc. An end of semester questionnaire is helpful, along with quarterly informal discussions with feedback on the best/worst talks, a discussion on the needs, interests, and major questions of Orthodox students, as well as those of non-Orthodox. Vetting possible Orthodox applications of existing campus initiatives (Both local and out-of-area) is also helpful, and should be done at least twice each year, with an overall strategy meeting in August before the school year begins.

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*The recommendations below are taken from an actual letter, written in response to questions raised by a campus fellowship in our area. Their letter attempted to benefit from the ten year experience of our local Orthodox Christian Fellowship.*

Dear Nicholas & Suzi:

The Lord's blessing!

It is good to hear from you, and to know that your love for Christ and His Church

motivate you in strengthening the OCFs work in Toronto. May God bless your efforts. I started working on campus a decade ago, and with one short break in the middle of that time, I can say that campus work has changed:

- There are many more students;
- Students are busier;
- Students have a more selective "filter" to weed out unfamiliar activities;
  
- Students are lonelier and more desperate for answers to life's questions, but are also less likely to have enough courage and "chutzpah" to engage in a true spiritual search (i.e. many will "shop around", but few will "buy" – kind of the same explanation as the decline in the marriage rate among 20-something folks).

I say all this by way of introduction, since this is the backdrop against which we work. A few lessons we've learned here:

1. You cannot "sell" or "advertise" people into the Orthodox Church: it might work for some other sects, but not us. These folks don't stick around anyway.

2. About one or two people in every thousand is open to Orthodoxy. For example, on our campus there are about 20,000 students, which means there are between 20 and 40 who are even open to what you have to offer. You are there for them, to reach them, to invite them... not the other 19,970.

3. So-called "ethnic" Orthodox kids are often totally disconnected from the Church, and in many cases, want to be. Still, it is important to remember that for about one in ten, the Church will be the place where they will turn for answers to their most pressing life questions. The task of the OCF is to find ways of connecting with this subgroup of students.

4. If one doesn't have weekly meetings, one will not likely build the Fellowship. This suggestion comes from years of experimentation. Since most people work on a weekly schedule ("Monday I do this, Tuesday I do this..."), the OCF needs to fit into that schedule, otherwise it becomes something someone might attend if they have time – which, as we have stated, they rarely will. Weekly meetings allow the group to actually become a group of friends. Which brings me to my last suggestion.

5. Friendships determine the success of the club. Almost no one will have time to come to a Fellowship meeting each week out of duty. A few will come to hear a topic of interest, but they will be just as quick to stop attending when the interest wanes (I call these "tourists": their spiritual "search" is more of a taste test, so unless you are selling the flavour of the week, forget it.)

Finally, I will attempt to offer some responses to your questions:

**1. How do you select good discussion topics for our discussion nights (led by a priest or guest speaker)?**

Orthodoxy offers the answers to the problems of real life. Students are getting answers (many of them false) from lots of other sources. Consider the issues that impact the lives of students, those which cause them the most serious problems, or which figure most large in their life planning. Select speakers and topics which will clearly demonstrate an Orthodox outlook, using general life stories, and illustrations from lives of the saints.

The "topical" stuff (like icon lectures, Church history, etc.) are fine if they are periodic, and if their main purpose is to help educate an already-existing group of students: if the goal is to draw in other Orthodox people from off campus, or to draw more "tourists", it ceases to be a campus ministry. Such a crowd can actually drive away students, many of whom seem to be most comfortable with folks their own age (for better or for worse, this is the reality). We actually had to be quite firm with a few faithful "seniors" (i.e. people my age and above) who were interested in attending, asking them to limit their visits, since their presence changes the dynamic of the meetings from student meetings to... well, parish meetings, which students avoid. Speakers must also be able to relate to students, and speak their "language", not so much student "lingo" ("Wassup?"), which just makes adults look silly, but language which explains itself, in case the topic material is unfamiliar, and which makes reference to real experiences and fears from the lives of students.

## **2. What are the most effective means of advertising an OCF?**

The answer: *you*. Posters are fine, themes and buttons are great (we use a button machine to make custom 1" buttons – a cute promotional "hook" which students seem to like). Don't expect this kind of advertising to do much more than to connect with one or two of your "1 in 1000" per year (which is good, since the Holy Spirit will use it). What will really help is Facebook and Twitter reminders, forwarding a quote that relates to a talk, asking students for their name and sending them an e-icon for their patron saint, etc. The personal contacts and invites are the number one way to help your Fellowship grow. If I had to choose between one million posters, and 5 keen, active Facebook users for our OCF, you can guess which I would pick (hint: it's the one with no printing costs).

## **3. Is a traditional Bible Study a good idea, and if so, do you have any advice for conducting it?**

Honestly, Bible study is not "traditional", unless you are a Protestant. If you choose to go this way, it needs to be led by a dynamic priest who is dripping with explanations from the Church Fathers, else it collapses into an exchange of opinions, and will offer nothing that is authentically Orthodox.

The authentic Orthodox Bible Study is called hymnody: the hymns used for Vespers and Matins. Having these printed out for all attending is a help, and the priest can even comment on them and/or the life of the saint of the day whom they describe. These actually contain (in short, singable form) the teaching of the Church fathers on martyrdom, icons, chastity, humility, and a whole host of other things, and most of the verses are poetic adaptations from the Bible. We have found this approach more useful, although it took us nearly a decade to get to this point.

Father Geoffrey+