

features

Building a community within religion

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Reporter

The power of a community has the ability to make a real impact on the world around them. This can be within a cultural, racial or in this case, a religious community in rural Ashland, Ohio.

Ashland University is known for being a private, Brethren church affiliated school, but people’s knowledge of its on-campus religious involvement may not go beyond that. For individuals both on and off campus, the impact that the school’s religious organizations have on students may at times be one that is overlooked.

Currently, AU is home to eight different religious organizations, both old and new. Those organizations include the Coalition for Christian Outreach (CCO), Fellowship for Christian Athletes (FCA), The Melting Pot, Newman Catholic Campus Ministries, Nurses Christian Fellowship, Ratio Christi, The Well and Young Life.

Groups like FCA and The Well are well-established organizations that have been running for a decent period of time, whereas a group such as The Melting Pot is still developing after being formed just a few years ago.

With the number of Christianity-based organizations present on campus, it may be hard to determine what differentiates them from each other. While each group has their own motivations and goals, a common desire amongst them is to create and so-



Many of the religious groups on campus hold their meetings in the Jack and Deb Miller Chapel on campus.

ing two Well leaders. Each group is given the freedom to choose their topics of discussion which may range in any direction.

Sadie Zegarac, interim executive director of the Office of Christian Ministry, encourages students to find a religious organization that truly fits them.

“We want students to find what fits best for them based on the culture of the room. In the Office of

faith, and none, are invited to come experience what the different ministries have to offer. We tackle huge questions about life together in community,” Zegarac said. “So, even if someone is just curious about what is going on in the chapel on any given evening, I encourage them to check it out and learn more.”

Wells also encourages anyone who may have interest not to hesi-

campus minister for the Coalition for Christian Outreach, encourages for many international students that become involved in CCO.

Each week, CCO organizes a lunch in the lower chapel for international students that features traditional cultural foods. It is a mix of both faith and community.

“We have the Chinese lunch for the students to come and feel that they have access to their traditional food here,” Dong said. “A lot of [international students] come here and get homesick, so it’s helpful for them. I want them to come and feel that, even though they’re far away from their home, they can come and have their Chinese family here.”

Dong also explained how in her experience, some international students have never been given the chance to explore Christianity or what it had to offer. So, she believes this organization is a good opportunity for them to do that.

“The campus ministry is good for the students. I think everybody needs love and everybody needs to meet God. And for the international students, they say they never had the chance to do that,” Dong said.

Opening up opportunities for others is also something that Alec Dunlap, a volunteer leader for Young Life, aspires to do.

Dunlap, a junior religion major, first became involved with Young Life after hearing about the organization at the involvement fair during his freshman year.

“Our outline is that we build relationships with kids. It’s kind of like a mentorship. But you really go to where they are,” Dunlap said.

Individuals in Young Life at AU

mainly work with high school and middle school kids in the Ashland area to equip them for ministry.

“In Young Life it’s not about us. In a lot of [organizations], you go to bible study for your own growth. But with us it’s more of a service type thing,” Dunlap said. “Most of the time we’re going out to high schools and middle schools and being present in kids’ lives.”

He stresses how positively Young Life has impacted his own life.

Being involved with Young Life “has definitely provided a sense of community. It’s given me an opportunity to do ministry off campus and has helped me grow as a Christian,” Dunlap said.

Perhaps one of the most well-known religious organizations on campus, FCA, was an unexpected eye-opener for senior Anna Polasky.

Unlike many of FCA’s members, Polasky is not an athlete so attending her first meeting during her sophomore was a bit intimidating. But after being recruited to join the worship team by her friend Gabe Caldwell during her junior year, Polasky’s outlook on Christianity had been forever changed.

“For me personally, [FCA] is where I found my faith and I really saw an importance in it. I was able to find my home and my community within all of those people,” Polasky said. “And with that, I felt comfortable sharing my past and where I’d come from. It’s such a good place to go as an imperfect human being and walk out knowing that you’re loved by a God that doesn’t care how much you’ve messed up.”

FCA is one of the largest religious student groups on campus with around 80-100 students attending each Tuesday night in the lower chapel. In the hour-long meetings, students routinely recite the competitors creed, share scripture, and listen to Reverend Joe Maggelet’s sermons.

Polasky truly felt like she was apart of something after joining FCA.

“I grew up in a Christian family but never really saw the importance until I went to FCA and was like wow, all these people are really experiencing something and I want to feel that,” Polasky said.

With any of the religious organizations on campus, the focus on community and belonging seems to be the driving forces that keep students coming back year after year.

Polasky said that “the underlying goal is to hope that these students that join, no matter what background they come from, have their hearts softened and they really experience the love, joy and freedom” that is present in these organizations.



PHOTO SUBMITTED BY: ANNA POLASKY

Students at an FCA meeting following along in their bibles.

lidyf a cohesive community.

“Every religious organization here has something different to offer which is really cool and we’ve been doing a lot together to build that community,” said Emma Wells, the communications intern for The Well.

Wells, a senior entrepreneurship major, became involved with The Well during her freshman year and credits the organization for keeping her at AU.

“Being involved in The Well has kept me here. I came into college a pretty broken person after high school,” Wells said. “A lot of the experiences in the community that I’ve experienced in The Well has completely changed my mindset on the purpose of community and the goodness of Christianity.”

The Well meets Thursdays at 8 p.m. in upper chapel and welcomes any student who may be interested. Apart from the Thursday night services, there are small group meetings that focus on more pointed subjects of discussion.

There is currently an upperclassman men, upperclassman women, freshman men and freshman women group with each hav-

Christian Ministry, we work hard toward unity and overall want to see transformation on the campus of Ashland University,” Zegarac said.

The doors are also open for students that may be curious about the religious organizations on campus, but don’t identify as Christian.

“Students from all walks of

tate in getting involved.

“You also don’t have to have any knowledge of Christianity,” said Wells. “It’s really easy to come in and you could be totally unsure of what you think of Christianity and it’s still a really welcoming place for students to explore that.”

Exploration of something new is also something that Dolly Dong,



Students at an FCA meeting awaiting the beginning of their service.

PHOTO SUBMITTED BY: ANNA POLASKY