



Orthodox Volunteer Corps Service & Formation on the Front Lines

Young adults are leaving the Church but eager to serve. The Church wants to retain young adults but must give them more opportunities to lead in service. Orthodox Volunteer Corps exists to create a new reality: A national movement of Orthodox young adults in faithful service to the Church and the world.

Orthodox Volunteer Corps (OVC), one of the two newest Agencies of the Assembly of Bishops, develops and equips Orthodox young adults, 21-29 years old, to lead lives of faithful service. OVC does that by providing immersive, 10-month service placements with vulnerable communities; formation in Orthodoxy and neighborhood-based leadership; intentional communal living; and deep engagement in local Orthodox parishes.

OVC began programming in Pittsburgh this past August with six full-time Corps Members recruited from across the country. In the Fall of 2023 OVC will expand to 30 participants, including a new part-time program, also based in Pittsburgh and targeting 21-29 year olds. For two years in a row, OVC has received more than twice the number of applicants it can accept from young adults across the country. As a result, in the fall of 2024, OVC plans to expand to a second city.

Just over half way through its first year, this ministry is shaping lives. During the fall alone, the first six Corps Members offered 3,600 hours of service, connected directly with 230 community members, participated in 150 hours of training, and engaged 15

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local Orthodox parishes. Beyond the numbers, however, a deeper growth is occurring among the Corps Members. That formation is most visible through stories.

This winter a man entered Shepherd's Heart drop-in homeless center in Pittsburgh with both hands bandaged. Living on the street without shelter during a frigid night, he got frostbite so severe he needed to have every one of his fingers amputated to the first knuckle. He couldn't lift a glass to his lips. He was thirsty, hungry, and had soiled his clothes. So he came to Shepherd's Heart. There, he met OVC Corps Member, Evan, who fed, bathed, and dressed this man.

Evan met an immediate need; he also experienced a moment of personal transformation.

Evan is not alone in serving on the front lines. Ella works at an after-school program in a low-income neighborhood of Pittsburgh. She recently shared about a boy who wouldn't leave the homework room during playtime. She gently plied him with questions and learned that he was being bullied. Ella let him stay overtime in the room, a little respite for a little child with a caring adult.

Noah works at the Neighborhood Resilience Project, an Orthodox nonprofit in Pittsburgh. He recently met a visitor, a man who had witnessed the death of his priest at the altar during Liturgy, followed in quick succession by the death of five other close friends. At Noah's placement, the mission is to promote resilient, healing and healthy communities. Noah often helps community members in crisis—domestic violence, eviction, loss of jobs. For the visitor on that day, Noah just gave a tour of the facilities, sharing how the ministry is helping to heal the wounds of trauma and offering a small balm to the man's soul.

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At OVC, these stories of service matter at multiple levels. Service is essential itself. There are lives at stake. We need to help. Service also matters because it teaches. OVC has asked the first Corps Members what impact the experience is having. They have responded in unison: “Transformational.” As Corps Member Paige recently put it: “In the day-to-day, as we’re helping people in vulnerable situations find stability and rest, encountering Christ in those we serve, the hearts of my housemates and I have been softened and shaped.”

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