

Alice Gerth reflects on opportunities church life offers junior doctors

SERVING AND FLOURISHING IN CHURCH LIFE

key points

- Starting as a Junior Doctor presents unique challenges.
- An F1 can offer a lot to church life, but of necessity it will be different from what 'regulars' do.
- There are great opportunities for ministry among students.
- 'Menial' tasks can be hugely rewarding.

Changeover is a big day for all doctors. For many, starting as an F1 brings a unique set of challenges: new city, new job, new church, new friends. Looking back on this experience, I found settling into a new church was the hardest. Not because they were unfriendly, but because, to put it briefly, I have 'commitment issues'.

I work at least one weekend in four (on a good rota). The other weekends are spent trying to keep in touch with school and university friends now scattered across the country. Weekdays are often no easier. When I can make home group, it usually requires eating dinner in the car en route.

As I come to the end of my F1 year, I want to redirect the energy I've been spending – making friends and adapting to working life, into church. Having graduated the year before, student work was a natural option. I could still relate to the student experience, but at the same time I have some life experience to share. My question was whether the church would want me given my crazy rota (next year I will be working in A&E and neurosurgery – both notoriously busy jobs). This means I am unable to guarantee my presence at every student group.

I am blessed to belong to a church family that has a large medical population, used to shift workers, so

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able to embrace the challenges we bring. The process, though, has helped me to reflect on what it means to commit to a church family; what I bring as a doctor and as shift worker that those with more regular working hours don't. It's why I choose to serve in certain areas rather than others.

Why is being an active member of the church family so important? How can young medics serve when we can't make a weekly commitment? How can shift-working young medics be fruitful participants in various ministries, especially student ones?

Christ describes the church as his body. We are not designed to walk alone in our faith. Over this past year I have been exposed to so much more as a doctor than I was as a student. My consultants have supported me, whether in the difficult discussions with families, or dealing with angry patients, heart-sink patients, deaths of patients young and old. But my consultants don't point me to God. So I have found conversations with Christian doctors at church, at work and in CMF vital for my spiritual

health. They have helped me to keep a godly perspective.

I believe that to get the most from church, we need to be following Christ's example of service. I don't think anyone can dive straight into Sunday school or playing in the band every week. Initially it is important to find your feet and work out what you have time to do. During my first few months of work, I was trying hard not to fall asleep on the drive home. There was no way I was in a fit state to serve on a weeknight, let alone disciple anyone.

Not being involved in a teaching ministry felt foreign to me. Throughout university I had taught Sunday school and I was used to being a very active part of the body. This year I have discovered many more subtle ways to serve.

PRAYER: Prayer is the lifeblood of a church. I attend the monthly church prayer meetings whenever I am able. It is very encouraging to hear what is happening in the church. It's humbling to pray alongside older and wiser Christians who radiate the power of prayer. But as wonderful as corporate prayer is, you don't have to attend a meeting to pray for your church family. We are called to pray in private,¹ and what better way to serve your church family than to lift them up in prayer?

GIVING: Since graduating I now have a stable income. As such it is time to use the income God has provided to begin regular giving to my church family, following the example of Christ's generosity to us.² Yes, there is the student loan to pay off. But if we don't learn to give now, we won't give when we have a mortgage and children to support.

BEING ON TIME: When you can make it to church turn up early to talk to friends and greet those you have not met before. It is hard for those on welcome duty if they have no one to guide visitors to seats.

ONE-TO-ONES: If you don't have the time for more demanding ways of serving, you could volunteer to meet with a member of the church family to read the Bible and pray together.

TEA & COFFEE ROTAS/BAKING: This is not the glamorous side of church. But helpers are always needed and our duty teams are usually willing to accept people on an ad hoc basis.

ENCOURAGING YOUR CHURCH LEADERS: Paul instructed the church in Corinth to put Timothy at ease as 'he is doing the work of the Lord' and to 'help him on his way'.³ I know how much it encourages me when patients thank me and acknowledge work I have done. This is the same for those looking after our spiritual health.

So why, given all these other opportunities, am I looking to help with the Thursday evening student

group, especially as I begin F2 with an A&E job? At university, time and availability are often inverted compared to the rest of society, with more time available during the day than in the evenings. Clubs and societies meet after lectures in the evenings. A benefit of working shifts is that we have time to meet with students on weekdays. Another benefit is that we can show students that you can be involved with church once you start a busy job.

There are transition periods when we are more susceptible to spiritual attack and falling away. The obvious one is transitioning from school to university when as young adults we have to make a personal decision to identify as a Christian. I believe that the transition from university to young professional is equally dangerous and this is often overlooked. The professional world demands our time and pressures us to make career and money our idols.

The witness of young professionals when I was at university helped prepare me for this transition. Their attendance at church and student group despite being on day eight of ten, with an exam looming, was a visible reminder that Christ comes first. They were honest about the challenges and their need for prayer and fellowship. I left university with eyes open to the struggles ahead. I had mentors I knew I could talk to who I knew would be praying. Their support over the past few months has been invaluable.

We need to show students that commitment to God is more than just attending church every week. It is sacrificing time and resources to serve the people of God. I believe that leading a student Bible study pre-night shift, or after a long day at work, speaks volumes about our commitment to them and to their spiritual growth. We can add a different life experience into the leadership mix and mentor trainee medics and nurses.

A final note. Given the challenges I have outlined above, if at all possible, I would encourage medics to commit to one church (and therefore city) for your F1 & 2. This year I have lived in Oxford but commuted to Milton Keynes. In F2 I will be working at the John Radcliffe in Oxford. The one hour commute (each way) has been hard work, but the benefit of being established in one church for two years and not having a commute for F2 far outweighs the cost.

This year I have learnt the joy of quiet service behind the front line where often only God can see. However, as I start F2, I look forward to the challenge of a regular commitment and I pray that despite missing a few sessions I can make a positive contribution to the student team (God willing).

Alice Gerth is an F2 based in Oxford.



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references

1. Matthew 6:6
2. 2 Corinthians 8:9
3. 1 Corinthians 16:10-12