

Air Force Chaplain Candidate Program offers benefits to seminaries and students

BY DORN L. MUSCAR JR.

Last summer, Jo Ann Deasy, ATS director of institutional initiatives and student research, presented research from ATS concerning students entering seminary in the fall 2021. It provided insight into several challenges facing both students and seminaries: student debt, uncertainty in vocational plans, and pathways to seminary. As I listened to her presentation, it became clear that all theological schools should be aware of the tremendous value the Air Force Chaplain Candidate Program (CCP) brings to both seminaries and their students.

CCP is an internship-style experience for ministry-minded individuals who are willing to pursue a 72-hour ministry-related degree full-time. During the school year, the chaplain candidate focuses on their studies and ministry preparation. Meanwhile, during the summers, candidates are mentored in Air Force chaplaincy ministry. The first summer, they undergo eight weeks of Officer Training School. The following two summers, they serve 24-day tours to shadow Air Force chaplains at bases across the world. They continue to serve summer tours until they graduate. Graduates who do not receive tuition assistance may decide the chaplaincy is not for them without further Air Force obligation. Graduates



who do receive tuition assistance will incur a service obligation to the Air Force.

Tuition assistance and health benefits

Nearly 40% of seminary students bring debt with them to graduate theological education and 10% bring more than \$60,000. This is before they take on any additional debt to attend graduate school. Understandably, prospective students will thoroughly weigh which school to attend based upon the amount of further debt they are willing to undertake. Students participating in the CCP (who are commissioned officers at the rank of Second Lieutenant) have access to tuition assistance of up to \$4,500 per year. This could be a great compliment to the scholarships that seminaries might offer students. It is also revenue the seminary is guaranteed to receive from that student. Another area of huge benefit to the student is the access chaplain candidates have to Tri-Care Reserve Select. It offers quality, family health insurance for less than \$300 monthly.

Paid field education opportunities

The CCP also offers students several paid, summer tours of duty for the Second Lieutenants to engage in field education for course credit. Our candidates see first-hand what ministry looks like in the military context. They are led through a process of reflection and given the opportunity to lead a variety of ministry-related tasks. They are also given feedback through field supervision on areas of strengths and areas where growth is needed. During this field education, the officer learns a great deal about themselves, their calling, and what it takes to lead in ministry.

Graduate employment and ministry experience

A challenge facing both seminaries and students upon graduation is actual employment in a ministry context. Candidates who successfully complete the CCP can reappoint as a reserve chaplain—a commissioned officer who has the rank of First Lieutenant. While the reserve chaplaincy is a part-time position, it is a great

compliment to a full-time civilian ministry whether in the local church, nonprofit, or other chaplaincy (prison/hospital) role. Candidates reappoint as reserve chaplains and instantly have a paid part-time ministry in which to invest their time, talents, and energy for the glory of God and for the good of others. Reserve chaplains also earn GI Bill benefits to use with post-graduate education or to transfer to qualifying family members.

Means of leadership formation

Students enter seminary with varied levels of ministry experience, spiritual maturity, and sense of calling to ministry. The CCP is a great partner to the student and to the school in further bringing clarity and insight into the formation process. It provides a ministry context in which to implement the education received throughout the academic year. This is in addition to the direct leadership training received at Officer Training School.

More information can be found at www.airforce.com/chaplain.



Ch Dorn Muscar, Jr. is an IMA staff chaplain to AFRC/HC-Recruiting for the United States Air Force.