

## Alumni Spotlight: Matt McGarity (MDiv '11)



**Current Title & Military Branch:** Chaplain, US Navy

**Family:** My wife Elizabeth and I have 3 sons and 2 daughters. Our oldest son is a missionary in Iquitos, Peru serving as director of a home for abandoned boys. Our second son is a U.S. Marine reservist and junior in college studying business. Our oldest daughter is also a college student studying psychology with an emphasis on youth development. Not “empty nesters” yet—our youngest daughter (10th grade) and youngest son (8th grade) live with us on base in Washington, DC.

**Favorite professors:** Dr. Tim Laniak, Dr. Garth Rosell, and Dr. Rodney Cooper

**Favorite class:** I really enjoyed the homiletics classes. By taking them toward the end of my MDiv studies, I found that these classes helped me to take all that I had been learning throughout seminary and equipped me to effectively communicate the Gospel through preaching the Word of God.

**Favorite memory:** I have so many wonderful memories of my time at GCTS, but one that stands out was leading the worship team during chapel services. Being a small part of the chapel worship team for the faculty and students was a most humbling and weighty responsibility.

### **What have you been doing since you left Gordon-Conwell and what are you doing now?**

In July 2011, immediately after graduating from seminary, my wife and I planted a non-denominational church outside of Charlotte, NC, in a place called Lake Wylie. Over the past twelve years, we have had the joy and privilege of pastoring Relevant Church, while discipling the flock and developing leadership within the body. In 2016, Elizabeth and I discerned a strong calling in our hearts to enter into military chaplaincy in the US Navy Reserves. It had been fourteen years since I hung up my uniform as a US Marine (enlisted between 1996–2002), and I knew God was calling me back to serve—this time as a minister of the Gospel. Since joining the US Navy Reserve, I have served as the command chaplain to a Navy Operational Support Center, a Marine Wing Support Squadron, a Marine Combat Logistics Battalion, Marine Corps Recruit Depot–Parris Island, and a SEAL Team. Balancing the role of a military chaplain and Senior Pastor of our local church has been most rewarding.

Just a few months ago in answering yet another call by God to expand His kingdom, my family and I stepped into a full-time role as an active-duty chaplain. In July of this year, I passed the baton of leadership to my senior-most associate pastor. At that time my

family was sent out as missionaries from the very church we planted 12 years ago. I still serve on the board of our church, providing oversight, mentoring and accountability to the staff. But now Elizabeth and I focus the majority of our attention on the needs of the mission field to which we have been called. Our current assignment is in Washington, DC where I serve as a chaplain to the US Coast Guard Headquarters.



### **What do you love about your work as a military chaplain?**

Navy chaplaincy is unique because we cover all of our nation's sea services: the Navy, Marine Corps, and Coast Guard. The platforms of ministry are vast and diverse. Every unit—from Marine Infantry to Naval Aviation to Coast Guard Cutters to Navy Special Warfare and Marine Special Operations to Submarines and Ships, and so many more—are made up of people from many backgrounds and all walks of life. I love the fact that no matter where I am assigned, I am part of the team. I am not a pastor that my people see once or twice per week. I am on staff, I am part of the unit, I am in the workspaces with my people every day. This means that they have a pastor, a shepherd, and a chaplain at their place of work all the time. I love that!

### **What are the particular challenges of serving as a military chaplain in general and/or in your specific context?**

The US military is arguably one of the hardest reached people groups in our culture. Every unit is comprised of the most diverse group of people that you could imagine. Facilitating ministry in this context can be most challenging. Contextualizing the Gospel in the fast-paced tempo of the military, while ensuring the freedom of every service member to practice his or her religion, can be daunting. However, it has been my experience that some of the greatest joys of ministry often emerge from the greatest challenges we face. God continues to provide all that we need to carry out the calling He has placed on our hearts.

Among the many challenges of serving in the US military, one of the hardest has been deployments. Oftentimes this particular ministry requires us to leave our families and friends, the comforts of our homes, and the familiarity of the life we establish in order that we meet the needs of our country. But again, unique to the military, chaplains deploy with their troops, which means being immersed in the community of the deployed team.

**How has God woven together your Gordon-Conwell education with other life events to bring you to where you are now? How did you come to be doing your current work?**

During the last semester of my seminary education, I enrolled in a church planting class. At that time, I had been working with a core group of people to plant Relevant Church. To my surprise, the church I was planting became a case-study during that class. The timing of this proved to be a rich and rewarding experience that helped to frame and shape the humble beginnings of the church plant.

I was engaged in missions locally, globally, as well as to our military in a reserve capacity. At that time, my Marine unit was mobilized to form a Task Force, which I was activated to be a part of. That set of orders was followed by another set of active-duty orders to Marine Corps Recruit Depot, Parris Island (aka: Marine Corps boot camp). It was during this season of being a reservist mobilized on active-duty, that God really began to work in the hearts of both my wife and me. We spent a season praying and discerning God's calling on our family to leave the comforts of home and the life we grew to know and love for many, many years, in order to join the active-duty component, while picking up and moving our family to a completely new area.

**How has your Gordon-Conwell education served you in your past and current work?**

The education I received from Gordon-Conwell set me up for success in every capacity of ministry that I've been able to serve. The intensity toward a deepening growth in the study of God's Word matched with the tools for critical thinking and contextualizing Gospel ministry on every mission field has been the foundation of ministry to be built upon.

In addition to education, it has been the people who have been the most impactful to me. Incredible professors and many deep friendships established at Gordon-Conwell; these have both inspired and influenced my life and work of Gospel ministry as an evangelist, church planter, pastor, chaplain, husband, father, friend, and disciple of Jesus.

**What piece of advice would you give to young alumni who are considering serving as a military chaplain?**

As with any ministry position, calling to that position is vital. Unless God has called you to this particular ministry, you might as well find something else to do.

One of my favorite quotes during my seminary years was, "God does not call the equipped, rather He equips the called."

Don't be afraid if you feel called to the adventure of ministry as a military chaplain and feel ill-equipped. If God has called you to this context of ministry, then you can be sure that He will equip you for it.

# Alumni

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If you sense an interest in chaplain ministry, I would strongly encourage you to reach out to your local military recruiters and inquire about the chaplain candidacy program.

We have a shortage of chaplains today in all branches of service. The harvest is definitely ripe, and the workers are few. Would you consider being a harvester called to the mission field of our military? If so, I would encourage you to reach out to find out more. A link to the Navy Chaplaincy is below.

## **Do you have any publications or links to share?**

Learn more about [Relevant Church](#) or becoming a [Navy Chaplain](#).