

**Finding God Among Oles:  
An Exploratory Study of Student Run Religious Organizations  
on the St. Olaf Campus  
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**Abstract**

The purpose of this study is to examine in an exploratory fashion student run religious organizations (SRRO) on the St. Olaf Campus, specifically Fellowship of Christian Athletes and InterVarsity Christian Fellowship. Through this research we examine the purpose of these organizations for the St. Olaf community. By using qualitative research we have gained an understanding of friendship and social networks along with the religiosity of SRRO members. From ten interviews and six hours of participant observation we concluded that St. Olaf SRRO members have a deep sense of religiosity that runs outside of their membership within any SRRO. They also have diverse interests and friendship networks. Within their SRRO, meaning is found through shared understandings of significant Christian concepts.

**Setting/Community**

As part of the Evangelical Lutheran Church, St. Olaf prides itself not only on its strong liberal arts education but also its tradition rooted in the Christian Gospel. Faculty and staff at St. Olaf work to create an environment where a person's mind, body, and spirit can grow. Although St. Olaf accepts students of all faiths, 43.4 percent of the student body is Lutheran (CIRP 2000). Within the community of faith there are many different forms of worship and practice. While some people travel off campus on Sundays for church, others remain on campus, seeking a faith community through St. Olaf's Chapel service. For many, this is the only form of worship they participate in. For others, one day a week does not give enough attention to their faith. Such students often find another Christian community through the many student run religious organizations on campus. Although there are many forms of student run worship on campus, Fellowship of Christian Athletes (FCA) and InterVarsity Christian Fellowship (IV) offer two of the most organized and well known student run religious organizations. These organizations are not unique to only St. Olaf, rather they are branches of national organizations. We start with a look at FCA on the national level.

**“The FCA Mission**

To present to athletes and coaches and all whom they influence the challenge and adventure of receiving Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord, serving Him in their relationships and in the fellowship of the church.”

-FCA National Website

Although St. Olaf's FCA is a branch of the national organization, FCA at St. Olaf is very different in content and purpose.

"Here at St. Olaf, FCA can stand for Fellowship of Christian Anybodies. There are a lot of us at every meeting, and the majority are not athletes. FCA is St. Olaf's largest student organization with over 400 members on its e-mail alias. We are also the largest huddle in the state of Minnesota!! We try to be a place that is easy to come to on any given night. We hope everyone feels both welcomed and challenged in our faith. Church background is not important. Lutherans, Catholics, Baptists, Non-Denominational, no church background-all are invited."

- St. Olaf FCA Website

Within the national organization, the main focus still remains on athletics. The goal of FCA is to "first, convert the athletes, who are among the most visible individuals in our society, then, use these stars for what is generally known in the business as 'outreach' (Aitken1989:394). FCA believes that sports are one of the best ways of selling any idea, thus they use it to convert people (395). Still, within the St. Olaf Community, there is not a strong emphasis placed on sports. Therefore, to understand what FCA truly is, we had to look past the statements of the national and St. Olaf websites to examine further exactly what FCA as a group of Christians does. Thus, in order to gain a better understanding of SRROs on the St. Olaf Campus we thought it necessary to actually participate in the activities of such organizations.

We the researchers therefore found ourselves heading to FCA on April 10th. The first meeting we went to was in the lounge of Ytterboe. Room draw was taking place in their regular meeting place, the Black and Gold Ballroom, and so the group found another place to hold their meeting. Ytterboe lounge is a well-lit, open space where many students can come together. When we arrived, there were people scattered about socializing. The back wall of the room was lined with coaches and chairs but mainly the center of the room stood empty. In the front of the room was a band warming up. This band included two singers, a guitarist, bassist, violinist, cellist, and conga player. Above them, on the wall was a Power Point presentation that read "Welcome to FCA!!"

As nine o'clock grew nearer, more people arrived. The general feeling of the night was one of comfort and openness. People greeted each other with hugs and smiles. They dressed casually and were open and friendly. The group was largely women yet there were a significant number of men in the group. St.

Olaf does not have much ethnic diversity and that was extremely apparent in this almost completely white gathering. When nine o'clock came around, the lights dimmed and the band began to play. The group of roughly one hundred and twenty-five people stood and began singing the words projected by the Power Point. The group largely sang praise songs, which are Christian songs with a pop culture twist to them, tending to be repetitive and simple. This makes such music easier to learn and remember. During these four or five praise songs, the doors were left open for late arrivals. These people entered the room in a unabashed fashion and quickly scouted out friends and joined the crowd. After the praise songs had finished the lead female singer led the group in a stream of consciousness prayer, which is a prayer that is not prepared before hand but rather done impromptu. Such prayers are often repetitive in nature and usually contain a simple, straightforward message.

The prayer quickly led into a skit about room draw. During both meetings attended, this seemed to be the general trend. There are praise songs, skits, announcements, a speaker, and once again praise songs. The skits revolved around well-known events taking place on campus or around the world. In the two times observed, it was interesting to note that no women had roles in such skits. One man dressed up to look like a mother but still no women took part in these activities. After the skit on the first night, a professor from St. Olaf, Professor Bruss, gave a talk on the importance of the Resurrection in the lives of Christians. Although he began his talk by saying he didn't know what he would say, Bruss very articulately explained how Christians should act within the light of the Resurrection. He left the group with a solid message of challenging themselves to carry on their faith and to live a life void of the fear of death. Rather they should focus their attention upon the newness of life given us through the resurrection and rejoice in a life without the pain and sadness of death.

The next week's meeting had a similar style yet one of the FCA members got up before the speaking part of the meeting to ask everyone to get in small groups to discuss how God had worked through them over the year. After this was completed a FCA member got up and spoke about the importance of the Bible in his life. He discussed the never-ending knowledge one can find in the Bible and how the Bible is one of a few means of changing the human spirit. He spoke further about the need to pray and be open to change.

On each night after the speaker had finished there was another stream of consciousness prayer and then a praise song filled completely with alleluias. This concluded the meeting on both nights. Afterwards, some people stood around and talked while others left. Each of these meetings lasted roughly one hour.

Overall, there was a casual and inviting atmosphere the entire night. Neither

my research partner nor myself had ever been to an FCA meeting before but we both felt welcome and not out of place. People were friendly, giving us smiles and talking to us. The general style of the meeting did not leave out newcomers by creating a lot of in-group talk. Rather, the whole meeting was explained through directions given by the leaders or through the Power Point. The other large SRRO on this campus with an emphasis on community is InterVarsity Christian Fellowship (IV). It is founded on a set of core commitments.

**”Scripture:**

We encounter the living God through scripture and are transformed by the Holy Spirit as we read, study, teach and obey His Word.

**Prayer:**

We express our faith, love and dependence on God through lives of prayer and worship.

**Spiritual Formation:**

We cultivate intimacy with God and growth in Christ-like character through personal and corporate spiritual disciplines, empowered by the Spirit.

**Community:**

We promote authentic relationships and redemptive communities marked by God's grace and truth.

**Discipleship of the Mind:**

We engage in learning and thoughtful Biblical reflection in every area of life.

**Leadership Development:**

We develop women and men to serve as leaders at every level of InterVarsity and ultimately for the Kingdom of God, honoring God's gifts and calling in them.”

-National IVCF Website

IV at St. Olaf, unlike FCA, does not differ much from their National organization’s mission statement:

“In response to God's love, grace and truth:

The Purpose of InterVarsity Christian Fellowship/USA is to establish and advance at colleges and universities witnessing communities of students and faculty

who follow Jesus as Savior and Lord:

growing in love for God,

God's Word,

God's people of every ethnicity and culture and God's purposes in the world.”

-St. Olaf IVCF Website

The purpose of IV, as affirmed in the mission statement, is to bring together Christian communities on campuses all over the nation, focusing within these groups on God's love, word, and apostolic mission. The branch of IV at St. Olaf calls its members to do just this through its large group meetings. Every Wednesday from 9:00-10:00 p.m. in an out-of-the-way room on the third floor of Buntrock Commons a group of students gather. They come to sing, listen, talk, worship, praise, and examine God's word. This is the large group meeting of Intervarsity Christian Fellowship. The room is the Sunroom, a section of the Black and Gold Ballroom. It is a long rectangular room in which three rows of chairs have been set up facing the front wall with a center. A projector sits in the middle aisle and a person sitting next to it changes the transparencies as it projects the words of songs onto the main wall. Musicians stand in the front and play the songs as the attendees sing along. Each meeting begins with roughly a half-hour of praise songs, much like FCA. The lights are dimmed and the musicians started playing the first song. The people, roughly twenty to twenty-five, stay seated while they sing; during the first meeting we attended the participants sat quietly as they sang. However, in the second meeting most people had their eyes closed and their arms either held out in praise or their hands folded in prayer.

A free-flowing stream of consciousness prayer follows the singing, followed by about five minutes of socialization and then announcements. During both meetings the announcements were about a t-shirt design contest and other opportunities for worship with IV members during the week to come. People are dressed casually, in shorts and jeans, t-shirts, sandals and tennis shoes -- standard school day clothes. There are twenty-six people in attendance, eleven of whom are male in the first meeting. The second meeting had twenty-three people, eleven of whom were male. Both times almost all of the attendees were Caucasian except for an Asian male and female. People continually filter in, even after half of the meeting has passed.

During the first meeting the speaker was introduced and then a short stream of consciousness prayer was said by one of the girls running the meeting. The speaker stood in front of the room, a music stand with notes and an open bible on it in front of her. Throughout her talk she glanced at the notes and shifted through the pages. When she spoke about a verse from the Bible she read it from the one that lay open on her stand. She did not stay next to the stand though, but instead shifted back and forth from foot to foot as she talked, walking several paces back and forth to each side. Her talk was about living on this side of the Resurrection, and lasted about thirty-five minutes. She spoke about living with eternity in mind, that we should all live our lives in God's service, whatever our vocation might be. She continued by using various apostles to illustrate that with God denial, failure, and hostility are not the last

word, and that God's love conquers all. She finished with a free flowing stream of consciousness prayer.

During the second meeting three seniors spoke about what IV had meant to their spiritual lives. The first two, both male, read passages from the Bible. They spoke of how they had gained an understanding of God through participation in IV, and how IV gave them a community of Christians with whom they could share and expand their faith.

The first meeting ended with the prayer said by the speaker, the second meeting finished with everyone singing one of the songs that opened the meeting. In both cases, some people left immediately while others stayed to talk in small groups.

In general, IV and FCA meetings have a different feel. With the large numbers that attend FCA, it is easy to blend into the crowd and there is more of a likelihood that you will have acquaintances already in the group and feel welcomed by them. In contrast, in IV, due to its small numbers and a familiarity that already exists within the group, newcomers stand out more and have a greater chance of feeling out of place and awkward. Whereas in FCA most people stood together in a large group during praise songs, IV members sat in separate chairs, scattered throughout the room, many praising in a personal fashion with their arms raised in praise or their eyes closed and hands clasped in prayer. This contributed to FCA feeling more inclusive and community oriented.

To better understand the research as a whole, it is necessary to conduct a brief comparison of FCA and IV large group meetings. Both groups meet from nine to ten p.m. in the Black and Gold Ballroom on different weeknights and follow a similar format. Because they meet on different nights, they allow for a cross over of members from each SRRO. Meetings begin with roughly thirty minutes of praise songs led by a band, though FCA's band is larger and includes a sound system. Following the music are announcements usually given in a lighthearted or silly manner. FCA uses skits to facilitate their announcements. Throughout the night, stream of consciousness prayer is a common occurrence and precedes each new activity within the meeting. After announcements speakers are usually introduced and talk for roughly twenty-five to thirty minutes. Both meetings end with another praise song and prayer. Throughout our interviews, the idea was expressed that IV offers a more in-depth, academic look at faith and the Bible while FCA is more about praise and fellowship with an emphasis upon making people comfortable in a Christian setting. However, neither of us found such a distinction in the meetings we attended. Both FCA speakers focused upon Biblical passages and the importance and meaning that can be drawn from the Bible. They gave specific passages to support their points and used the lessons found in the Bible

to explain how one should live their life today. In IV, Biblical passages were used to give credence to the message that the speaker was presenting. She did not give an in depth focus to the Biblical stories but rather backed up her message with Biblical verses. Still, the academic nature of IV may come from the emphasis they place on small group Bible studies, something we did not examine.

### The Problem

If they didn't know before they arrived, students quickly learn once they enter St. Olaf that a strong emphasis is placed on Christian community. Because this is a college of the church, there are many opportunities for worship in various forms on campus. However not everyone participates in these opportunities. When we began this study, we set out to better understand what types of students are active in SRROs. However, as our research progressed, we reframed our focus to examine the importance of SRROs in the lives of students. We found this to be a more interesting and plausible topic to study given the limited scope and time we had to conduct our research. At first we hoped to look at a number of SRROs and the extent to which there is a difference between them. Once we understood the number of SRROs at St. Olaf, we realized it would be implausible to attempt an in depth examination of more than two SRROs. We therefore chose two of the most prevalent SRROs on the St. Olaf campus.

Several important theories apply to specific aspects of our research. The theoretical framework that encompasses religiosity is more of a conceptual framework composed of research done by others. Examples include research that examines the affect of religiosity on psychological well-being, such as the affect of religion to reduce stress, increase social interaction, and increase overall health and happiness. Rational Choice Theory is important in discussing social networks and the role they play for SRRO members. Rational Choice Theory works to explain the purposive choices of actors (Ritzer:272). Within our study, we hoped to use such a theory to better understand the importance SRRO members place on religious and non-religious extracurricular activities. We wished to see if SRRO members spent more time in religious activities and thus gave into the opportunity cost of such a decision, spending less time in non-religious activities.

Another theoretical framework that influences our research is symbolic interactionism. This theory hypothesizes that people derive meaning out of situations through their social interactions. The ability to think and express oneself arises from socialization (Ritzer:222). Within our study, symbolic

interactionism is important because it attempts to explain how SRRO members can have shared meanings. One other theory that we used examined how friendship networks grow out of religious groups. Prior research has found a link between time spent in a religious organization and the networks from which one draws their friends.

As one of the leaders in the field of Sociology of Religion, we have examined Clifford Geertz and how his theories on religion might impact our study. First, Geertz discusses how sacred symbols function to synthesize a group's tone, character, quality of life, and world-view. Geertz's theory works within the context of our paper by helping to show how SRRO members rationalize what they learn within their group in terms of their larger world-view. The beliefs that SRRO members have must be reasonable within the world in which they live or religion would not serve a purpose within their everyday lives. Geertz also examines how motivation is a disposition induced by religious activities. In this context, motivation is "a persistent tendency, a chronic inclination to perform certain sorts of acts and experience certain sorts of feelings in certain sorts of situations" (Geertz 1973:96). In our research we believe that Geertz's examination may help us to understand why SRRO members are motivated to give up other activities to spend time and energy at SRRO meetings.

Although our research is congruous with other research in the field, very little outside information helped to shape our own study. We have found within our study that four main themes have arisen. The first theme looks at the impact of the SRRO on the friendship networks of SRRO members. Secondly, we examine what types of extracurricular activities SRRO members are involved in and if their membership in the specific SRRO we studied has an impact upon their membership in other religious and non-religious extracurricular organizations. Next, we wish to take a closer look at the purpose SRRO members feel their organization plays within the St. Olaf community. As an addition to this, we have examined how SRRO members feel they are perceived by the larger St. Olaf community. Finally, we wish to look at the shared meanings that are created within each SRRO in terms of religious ideology.

### Methodology

St. Olaf has many student run religious organizations (SRRO). Within these organizations there are hundreds of student participants. It would not have been feasible in our time frame to look at every SRRO and its impact upon the St. Olaf Community. We therefore chose to examine two of the largest and most prominent SRROs: Fellowship of Christian Athletes (FCA) and Intervarsity Christian Fellowship (IV). In order to conduct a thorough examination of these two organizations, we felt it would be best to interview

members of both organizations and to attend large group meetings for each organization.

When conducting interviews we wished to ensure that we were talking to members who regularly participated in one of the two SRROs, therefore we interviewed only officers. We obtained names through personal contacts within the organizations and from names given us by the advisors. Interviewees also offered names of other officers. We contacted officers through email, asking them if they would be willing to be interviewed. We then set up times according to their schedules. All interviews were conducted at tables either in the Cage or right outside of the Cage. At the beginning of each interview the interviewee signed a consent form and filled out a general demographic survey. Each interview lasted between thirty and forty-five minutes. All interviews were conducted between April 10th and April 28th. In total , we interviewed four FCA officers, four IV officers, and the advisor for each group. Most participants showed interest in our research topic and were curious about exactly what we were studying and why. Several interviewees requested copies of our final research paper.

An integral part of each SRRO is the adult advisor. We obtained the names of these advisors from the Student Activities Committee Office. We contacted each by email and requested interviews. Both advisors were too busy to be interviewed but were willing to fill out our questionnaire on there own time (Appendix C). The questionnaires and consent forms were then placed in our P.O.s.

Participant observations were conducted at the large group meetings for both organizations. We both attended the large group FCA meeting on Tuesday, April 15th. Betsy attended another large group meeting for FCA on Tuesday, April 22nd. Kat attended IV's large group meeting on Wednesday, April 23rd. We both attended IV's large group meeting on Wednesday, April 30th. Both large group meetings start at nine p.m. and run roughly one hour. They are usually held in the Black and Gold Ballroom in Buntrock Commons. At each group meeting we sat in the back of the room and jotted notes concerning the activities and participants. Each researcher attended a total of three meetings. In order to obtain less biased research, we both attended at least one meeting of each SRRO.

Within any research there will be strengths and weaknesses. One of our weaknesses is a limited number of interviews, ten in all. There was neither the time nor many other SRRO officers we could interview. Only interviewing officers also gave us a limited perspective on general attitudes in these organizations. Attending meetings during the end of the year was also a weakness because meetings were more focused on seniors graduating and reflection upon the year as a whole and what was learned rather than what we

would suspect to be regular activities during the rest of the year. Finally, there were too many SRROs at St. Olaf to do an in-depth look at each; therefore we chose the two most prominent.

With regard to strengths, we thought that it was important to interview officers because we desired the perspective of those who are regularly active in the organization. Their position suggests that they attend on a regular basis. By each attending both groups meetings, we counteracted our biases and each gained a greater perspective on both SRROs. Lastly, we chose to do both interviews and participant observations. By conducting both forms of research, we were able to gain a greater understanding of the organizations and members as a whole.

By examining only two SRROs and only conducting a small number of interviews the generalizability of our research is limited. However, the intent of this research is exploratory and therefore these weaknesses do not greatly affect the value of our research. The value of our research can be found in the increased understanding of SRROs that it can provide to member and non-members alike. It helps to illuminate a cross-section of the St. Olaf community which is often highly stereotyped.

We both came into this research with biases towards these organizations. We had little or no knowledge of their purposes and had heard negative things about them through other students, such as their Bible thumping nature, their cliquish tendencies, and their self-righteous attitudes. Also, we both tend to take a very critical, skeptical view of any religious organization because of our own strongly held religious beliefs. With that said, no researcher approaches her work without some biases, and religion is a very personal subject. Everyone comes to it with his or her own opinions and personal feelings. Keeping that in mind, we were careful to be as neutral and unbiased as possible when conducting interviews and writing field notes.

### Findings

For each of our eight student interviews we asked for basic demographic information. We interviewed five female and three male students. We hoped that through their demographic information we could gain a better understanding of the students we were interviewing. We also hoped that we would find a correlation between the general demographics of each student and their participation in the group. There does not appear to be a pattern in religious affiliation for those we interviewed. Concerning majors, there is a general trend towards humanities, still this does not allow us to arrive at anything conclusive.

To gain a solid understanding of the SRROs, we interviewed only organizational leaders. Within FCA there are roughly ten leadership positions,

ranging from co-presidents to public relations liaison. IV has six leadership positions, ranging from president to small group Bible study coordinator.

Names*	Year In School	SRRO
Membership	# of Years in Organization	Major Religious Affiliation
Rachel	Junior	IV
	3	CIS / Women's Studies
		Former LCMS, currently Nondenominational
Sarah	Senior	IV
	4	BM Violin Performance
		Nondenominational
Ruth	Junior	FCA
	3	Religion / Asian Studies
		Evangelical Free
Abigail		
		Senior FCA 4 Family Studies Presbyterian
Mary	Senior	IV
	3	Psychology / Family Studies
		Former Catholic, currently Baptist
Joseph	Junior	FCA
	3	Greek / Religion Lutheran
Jonah		
		Senior FCA 2 History Nondenominational
Elijah	Junior	IV
	2	Physics / Math Ed. Nondenominational

\*For the sake of confidentiality, names have been changed.

After conducting our interviews and finishing our participatory observations there was a massive amount of data analyze. However, upon analysis we found that we could in a systematic way break up our findings into four categories: the religiosity of FCA and IV members, types of social networks, perception of the importance of SRROs for the St. Olaf community, and shared meanings as found through important definitions.

### Off To Church We Go

There is a broad stereotype within our society that youth, when they break away from parental influences, lose connection with their faith. Not until they begin parenting do they again pick up their faith, hoping to instill religiosity in their children. As researchers, we wish to understand the purpose of SRROs for students on the St. Olaf campus and therefore hypothesized from the beginning that SRROs take the place of church for many students. Students, not wishing to lose complete contact with their faith substitute visiting a church weekly with SRRO participation. SRRO participation would therefore be the main way in which students continue to express their religiosity. For our study we defined the religiosity of students outside of their SRRO participation by examining the amount of time they spend reading the Bible, how often they go

to church, and whether they feel they have become more or less involved in church organizations since they have come to college.

Within the interviews we did for FCA, every student reported attending church every Sunday. The advisor responded that he attends church “almost every Sunday.” With regard to involvement in church organizations, half the students said they were as involved now as before entering college and half said they were more involved. As far as reading the Bible is concerned, responses varied from definitively reading it daily (2), reading a few times a week (2), and responses like Abigail’s, “Yes...I try to make it a part of my life every day, but I’m not super strict about it – it is just because I want to read it.”

In the interviews we did with IV members, we asked the same questions. For church attendance, all interviewees including the advisor stated that they attend weekly. In terms of involvement, all felt they were more involved now than before college. The strongest sentiment came from Mary who said, “Absolutely, at least ten to twenty times more.” Concerning the Bible, everyone reported reading it at least weekly. Some responses offered specific amounts of time like “yes, fifteen minutes per day” and “yes, once – twice per day for one half to one hour.”

After we examined such results, we as researchers feel that SRROs on the St. Olaf Campus do not function, at least for the most highly involved, as their only form of religion. As one interviewee stated, IV is an “addition to life” and is not the central focus of it. Therefore, Oles are different than other Christians on campuses across the nation in that they have a broad spectrum within which they find their religiosity. What are the implications for such a wide array of religious activity on the members of SRROs at St. Olaf? Former research has found that students who have a devotional and participatory lifestyle within religious activities tend to be healthier psychologically. Ellison, Gay, and Glass (1989) found that students who take part in public and private worship tend to have a greater life satisfaction. Participatory and devotional religious activities allow for an increase in social integration by meeting others with the same religious interests as them and by creating “subjective spiritual resources in their day-to-day lives.”

Other researchers, like Frankel and Hewitt (1994), concur. They found that “students who belong to Christian faith groups...[in this case a branch of IV] are healthier and happier and handle stress better than a comparison group of students with no such affiliation.” Thus, St. Olaf Students, by placing an emphasis on church activities outside of SRROs tend to be more well rounded and diversified in their faith. According to research done by Ellison et al (1989) and Frankel and Hewitt (1994) these students are more satisfied with their lives due to their personal growth through the Bible and participation in regular group religious activities within and beyond the St. Olaf community.

## Are Your Friends Religious, Too?

An important aspect in understanding the purpose of SRROs at St. Olaf is to determine if such organizations are the mainstay of SRRO members social interactions. Therefore, in our research we looked at the role friendship networks and extracurricular activities play in the lives of these students. We have broken this theme into two subsections: Friendship Networks and Extracurricular Organizations.

### Friendship Networks

We first asked our interviewees about how active or inactive their friends are within their specific SRRO. Within FCA we found that all interviewees have at least some friends within the group and some who are not active at all. This point was accentuated by some of the interviewees when they stated that some of their friends would not classify themselves as Christians. This refutes one of our original theories that most SRRO members form a close-knit, exclusive friendship network. However, when interviewees classified their friendships, often their closest friends tended to be active within the group.

The next question we asked looked at whether interviewees had met their friends within the group. We found that often an interviewee's friends within FCA were met through FCA. Half of our interviewees referred to FCA as a "good avenue to meet freshman outside the dorm" (Abigail), or a good place to meet people outside of the main group of friends one gains from their freshman corridor.

To better understand the exact significance of SRROs on the friendships of SRRO members, we also asked how many friends each interviewee has within the group and outside of the group, how much time they spend together, and how they use that time. We did not ask for specific numbers because most students do not keep track of the number of friends they have or the exact amount of time they spend with those friends. Rather, we asked for general impressions of time and activities. From our findings, it does not appear that there is a core pattern. Instead, the time spent with friends for each interviewee varies with each individual. For example, one interviewee said that he spends time with his FCA friends at religiously associated activities while he sees his non-FCA friends on the weekends to watch movies and play video games. On the contrary, Ruth commented that "it's not like I hang out with friends from FCA on weekdays and other [friends] on weekends." Therefore, we found that among the interviewees time and activities spent with SRRO friends varies greatly.

In contrast to FCA, IV interviewees tended to answer negatively to the question of having friends who are active in their SRRO. Half of the interviewees expressed that friends used to go but do no longer. Mary commented that concerning her friends, "none are active," while Sarah

commented that her friends are “basically completely inactive” within IV. This refutes more thoroughly the idea that SRRO members would form tight knit, exclusionary friendships with others in the group.

Our second question concerning whether IV members met their friends through the group, again contrasts with our findings concerning FCA. Most express a sentiment that their close friends are not involved. While this was the norm, one interviewee felt that this was an exception. She felt that most IV members had close friends within the group yet our research found just the opposite.

The findings for our last question, which examines how many friends one has in the group, was answered by IV members in a similar manner to the FCA interviewees. As with FCA interviewees some IV interviewees, such as Mary and Elijah, felt there was no “distinction between friendship groups” while Sarah saw a clear distinction between her IV friendships and her non-religious friendships. Although many friends are not involved in IV, in general, friends often attend other Christian functions.

#### Extracurricular Organizations

The other area we examined in relation to social networks was interviewees’ participation in extracurricular activities. We were interested in finding out if the religious organization we asked them about was the only SRRO they participate in or if their interests are more diversified. Within FCA, all of our interviewees are involved in Thursday Night Bible Study and Selah. The Thursday Night Bible Study is a campus wide in-depth Bible study led by a pastor from town. Selah is praise and worship style music played for forty-five minutes to an hour every Sunday night in the Pause.

We were also interested to find out if our interviewees participated in nonreligious activities on campus. Therefore we asked what nonreligious organizations they are apart of. FCA interviewees listed such interests as: intramural sports, Ole Choir, Project Friendship, theater, Manitou Mess, KSTO Radio, and Volunteer Network. Our findings show that although FCA members are involved in nonreligious activities, they are more involved in SRROs.

In comparison with FCA, IV members also all attend both Thursday Night Bible Study and Selah. Between FCA and IV, the involvement in SRROs is comparable. Within our interviewee population, rarely did we find any overlap in attendance between FCA and IV. Our findings suggest that within the SRRO population there is not a need to go to both FCA and IV. Yet, our research cannot offer an explanation for this finding.

With IV interviews, though we specifically asked a question about nonreligious organizations, many of the responses we got to that question referred to participation in religious organizations both on and off

campus. Concerning nonreligious organizations, IV members participate in SOC (Student Organizing Committee), Nordic Ski Club, and St. Olaf Orchestra. Once again, our findings show that although IV members are active outside the religious realm, the majority of their extracurricular activities revolve around religion.

As discussed earlier with regards to religiosity, social networks have also been shown to have a positive affect on health. During our background research for our topic we found that Pollner (1989) states that social support networks, in this case SRROs, have a positive affect on psychological and physical well being. Besides “real” social networks, Pollner finds “a network of imagined others which partly overlaps the network of actual acquaintances but includes unmet, unmeetable, and mythical others as well. In American society, one of the most prominent of imagined significant others is a deity” (1989:92). A relationship with a divine other is a correlate of well being. This, as with our previous findings, suggests that being active in SRROs, where the central focus is on a relationship with God, leads to a better sense of well being for participants.

Other research we found focuses on friendship networks within campus religious organizations. Madsen and Vernon (1983) found that within their study, “fifty-seven percent of the participants reported that while attending college a majority of their friends were also participants [in religious organizations]” (1983:131). Our findings refute this study because most members of SRROs in our study did not define their main friendship group as falling within the organization.

According to rational choice theory, people make purposive choices based on a hierarchy of values within their own lives. Such choices that they make all revolve around an end goal or result. Because each person has limited resources there is an opportunity cost for each decision that is made. To do one thing is to give up being able to do another. Within our research, SRRO participants must decide how to use their resource of time. According to Pargament, Echemendia, Johnson, and McGath students “are actively involved in many developmental tasks – differentiating themselves from their families, establishing lasting personal relationships, developing and pursuing career goals” (1984:278). Pargament et al. further found that students are consequently devoting less time for religious activities. In contrast, our study found that St. Olaf students in SRROs spend time participating in more religious activities than extracurricular activities. This suggests that for our participants, religion is at the top of their rational choice hierarchy.

In conjunction with rational choice theory, Geertz presents a case for motivation as the reason why SRRO members do not participate in non-religious activities as much. He believes that religious symbols and symbol

systems induce a worshipper to a certain set of dispositions (Geertz 1973:94-95). One such disposition is motivation. Within the SRROs the motivation is a tendency to attend regularly because of the community and style of worship which emphasizes group praise songs and an inclusive atmosphere. Thus, SRRO members may be more likely to give time and energy to SRROs as opposed to other activities because SRROs offer a community of believers, who become moved with great emotion to individual acts of praise due to praise songs and prayer. SRRO members are able to find people like themselves who actively engage in worship with emotion and deep belief. They are not looked down upon for their behavior but welcomed into a community where their behavior is a norm. Thus, they have motivation to attend SRRO meetings rather than other extracurricular activities.

### How Do You Define Yourself?

As an integral part of our interview we asked our interviewees to define three significant terms. These terms appeared repeatedly on the websites for both the national and campus branches of FCA and IV. We therefore were interested to see how members of these organizations defined these terms. Those three terms were spirituality, faith, and Christian Community. Within sociological theory, symbolic interactionism has played a large role in understanding socialization and communities as a whole. Within our study, we believe that symbolic interactionism plays an important role in understanding the shared meanings we have found within these definitions. Within this theory, words can come to represent symbols or social objects; “social objects [are] used to represent whatever people agree they shall represent” (Ritzer, 2000:223). Socialization causes people to attribute specific meanings to symbols. Within the context of FCA, our interviewees mainly had similar ideas as to what each term meant. When they were asked to define spirituality, Joseph stated that for him, spirituality “stems from thinking about our existence. We are not a body alone. We have a spirit and the truest part of us is spirit. Spirituality is the pursuit of life with that in mind.” Likewise, Ruth said that spirituality “is how you relate to the world beyond what we see. How you relate to things that are nonphysical.” Similarly, IV members like Mary said that spirituality is “the way your spirit and your soul relate to Christ and his spirit.” This idea is also reflected by Rachel when she said that spirituality is “what feeds my spirit and [whether] that relationship to God is in a healthy place, where God wants it to be.” In each of these definitions the interviewees responded with ideas that were larger than their physical nature and revolve around more metaphysical questions.

With regard to the definition of faith, FCA members were consistent in their understanding of the word. Abigail gave a direct quote from the Book of

Hebrews, saying that faith is being, “sure of what you hope for and certain of what you do not see.” Jonah commented that for him faith “is how you relate to the world beyond what we see. How you relate to things that are nonphysical.” IV members had similar impressions concerning faith. Mary commented that faith to her is “hope in something that is unseen and intangible...being confident in something you can’t be completely confident in.” Similarly, Rachel felt that faith is “believing in something that is beyond the limits of my human reason and trusting it is true even if I can’t intellectually rationalize it is true.” These similar definitions both emphasize the ability to believe in something that is not tangible. Thus, they suggest a shared understanding of what faith means for FCA and IV members in the Christian context. This shared meaning also appears to reflect an examination of religion within an academic context due to the in depth content given through the definitions.

Ritzer states that one of the functions of symbols is to help people to perceive their environment (2000:223). Within SRROs the concept of Christian Community refers to an integral environment for what it means to be a Christian. Within the context of Christian Community, FCA members like Abigail gave definitions such as, “Having other people desiring to explore spirituality and faith alongside you and finding support and friendship through that.” Also, Ruth described Christian Community as “the support network for believers in a world that is different from the beliefs a Christian has. It’s ideally a community of love and acceptance based on ultimate truths.” Concerning IV, there were similar definitions given. As an example, Rachel gave a lengthy definition of Christian Community, stating, “I think community means a group of people sharing a common humanity. So a Christian community is a group of people acknowledging their common humanity but acknowledging we have something beyond that too. We have a common God and a common Lord and Savior in Jesus Christ. So we seek to interact with each other and what we have in common but also what makes us diverse...a common purpose to serve each other and help each other while we are also acknowledging and worshiping Jesus Christ. A community is not a closed thing. The circle opens up to embrace others. Community is a circle of people facing outside.”

Similar to this, Elijah stated that to him, Christian Community is a “group of believers who come together to have fun and or worship and be fed spiritually.” Thus, although there may not be an actual, physical environment for Christians to gather in, there is the intangible community built around the idea of Christian fellowship.

One way that the idea of shared meanings developed within SRROs was

through guest speakers. These speakers presented ideas and definitions to the group as a whole. By virtue of the fact that they have been invited to speak, it would appear that they are well respected and liked by the group. This would lend credibility to the statements they make concerning faith, spirituality, and Christian Community.

Still, the shared meaning found through all the definitions plays into a larger shared meaning that revolves around belief. These individual shared definitions help to create a whole belief system that is shared by the SRRO members we interviewed. This shared belief system might arise within the SRROs due to the study of faith and Christianity that occurs often within the SRRO meetings; whether it is through large group meetings with a speaker or small group Bible studies that offer a more intimate setting. Whereas within academic studies, the focus is upon rational, intellectual conversation, SRROs offer a place for personal and spiritual insight that allows the growth of many peoples' beliefs. This openness to discuss personal feelings and difficulties also allows SRRO members a way of dealing with the challenges that confront them due to their belief. In the end, this shared meaning can reach beyond just the St. Olaf community. As SRRO members go out into the world and find new communities of worship, they will bring along with them the shared meanings they formed in their SRROs. They will help to carry on their shared beliefs by expressing these ideas to future communities.

### What's the Purpose of the Christian Community?

Within our study, one of the most interesting conundrums that we as researchers have found is the difference between how SRRO members view their organization as part of the larger St. Olaf Community and how they see the larger student population's view of their religious organization. Such findings came about through questions such as "What is the importance of this organization for the community of St. Olaf?" and "How do you feel the larger St. Olaf Community perceives this organization?" From our first question we found among FCA members that there is a general consensus about the organization's purpose. Most members stated that FCA provides the school with a place for Christians and non-Christians alike to come and learn "what it means to be a Christian" (Ruth). Other FCA members stated that FCA is a place to come to learn "to live life in the spirit rather than just learn about it through academics" (Joseph). On the other hand, IV members have a different view of their organization's purpose. Rachel said that IV is "a place to question and explore. It's described as a more intellectual group. It tends to draw the people who are more introspective and analytical, an academic study of God." In a common sentiment, Mary said, "IV is meant to stimulate the intellectual aspects of being a Christian. It allows you to dig into and discuss

the Bible.” These answers show that IV works to connect intellectually and spirituality, developing faith along with one’s academic development.

SRRO members definitely think they fulfill a unique purpose on campus. They see this purpose as spreading Christian faith to other members of the St. Olaf community. For them, because they have found a religion that is “shown to represent a way of life ideally adapted to the actual state of affairs the world view describes...”

(Geertz 1973:90) it is important to spread the message. In other words, SRRO members, have found a religion that works to reasonably explain the current world in which they live. They thus feel compelled to share the message.

Although both groups believe they have a distinct purpose within the St. Olaf Community, they both feel that the larger St. Olaf Community perceives them in a different light than they see themselves. Both FCA and IV members responded to this question in a similar manner. There were a few positive comments about their general purpose like: “FCA hopes to be a place for wherever you are in your faith,” “inviting, open, and inviting of diversity” and, “a good resource to have.” Still most responded with opinions like: “cliquey,” “exclusive,” “extremely conservative,” “hard to break into,” “not necessarily being sincerely Christian” and, “a bunch of crazy Christians that are cultish.” Thus, our findings show that SRRO members feel that the larger St. Olaf Community perceives them in a radically different way then they see themselves.

Although the SRROs do not specifically call themselves Evangelical, they actively attempt to recruit students. From our observations on campus, this is not something they do only at the beginning of the school year, but rather they continue publicizing with fliers and posters until the very end of the year. More evidence that SRROs practice Evangelism is that they recruit Christians from all denominations and well as non-Christians. As a SRRO advisor commented, “It is a place where Christians or people interested in Christianity can get together and be with one another.” Similarly the St. Olaf FCA website states that “Church background is not important. Lutherans, Catholics, Baptists, Non-Denominational, no church background- all are invited.” This evidence would indicate that the feelings SRRO members perceive the larger St. Olaf population to have towards SRROs are not reciprocated by SRRO members.

### Summary and Conclusion

When we first began our research, we were both naive about the workings of SRROs on the St. Olaf campus. Therefore, as we conducted our interviews we were greatly surprised and interested in the answers we were given. As we look back on our own analysis, there are findings that are more interesting and

relevant to our topic than others. One of the things that surprised us greatly was the amount of religiosity that SRRO members have. Within all of our interviews, only one person referred to their SRRO as acting as a church. We were also surprised that all of our interviewees are regular church attendees and Bible readers. Within the busy life that students lead at St. Olaf, our interviewees find time to give to their own spiritual development along with being part of a Christian community within the college setting and outside of it.

Although there is definitely an opportunity cost that comes with such commitment, all of our interviewees seemed well adjusted and no more stressed than other students, although they seem to take on a great deal of responsibility outside of classroom work. Although members do express interests outside of religion it seems clear that SRROs and other religious activities rank at the top of their opportunity hierarchy. In a broader understanding, such results show that youth of today are diverse in their consumption of religion. Although we do not have explicit findings on this, this does seem to be the case on the St. Olaf Campus. Also, it is interesting to note that perhaps some of the most religious students on the St. Olaf Campus do not allow their lives to be swallowed up by their faith. Rather, their faith acts as something that accompanies them every day, no matter where they go or with whom they associate. Contrary to our own preconceptions, SRRO members seem to be well-rounded in their friendship networks, allowing for time with friends within the group and outside of the group. They do not seem to be threatened by inactive and non-Christians.

This research has greatly opened the eyes of both of us. We comprehend so much we never understood before about SRROs and the student population that makes them up. These people are not the Jesus freaks that they are often made out to be. Rather, they tend to be open, extremely friendly, and approachable people who have a personal devotion to Christianity and a relationship with God. This is not something that they, to our knowledge, try to force on others, rather they more appropriately exemplify the Word of God to others, outside of their SRRO, through their actions and the way they live their lives. They are working hard to live within a Christian context within a very non-Christian world. From this greater understanding that we have gained, we can see where SRROs would be helped in their mission through further research. As our findings show, they believe that the larger St. Olaf community perceives them in a negative light. Our experience also indicates this. One possible use for our research findings would be to show the larger St. Olaf Community that SRROs are not the cliquish Bible thumpers that they are commonly thought to be. Such information could help to break barriers between groups of people and in the long run build a stronger community and allow more people access

to SRROs. Within the evangelical tradition upon which these groups are founded, the goal is to spread their message to as many people as possible and therefore this information would be a positive asset in helping them reach that goal.

Much of our research ended up refuting the research done by others concerning topics similar to ours. This may be specific to St. Olaf, yet we will never know unless more research is done concerning religiosity and friendship networks on other college and university campuses. Also, it would be interesting to examine the views of non-SRRO members to see if they perceive SRROs in the same way that SRRO members feel they are perceived by the larger college community. We would also like to look more closely at the role that SRROs play in the psychological and physical health of SRRO members on the St. Olaf Campus.

## Appendix A

We are looking for some basic demographic information. Please take a minute to fill this out before the interview.

1. What year are you in school?
2. What is your major?
3. How long have you been a member of this organization?
4. How frequently do you participate in your organizations activities?
5. What, if any, religious denomination do you belong to?
6. Do you attend church services? If so, how often?

7. Do you feel like you are more, less, or as involved in church organizations (both on campus and off campus) now than compared to before you came to college?

8. Do you read the Bible on your own? If so, how often?

## Appendix B

### Questionnaire for Research on Student Run Religious Organizations

2. How did you first get involved in this group?

3. How active or inactive are your friends in this group?

4. Did you meet these friends through this group?

5. How many friends do you have in the group and how many friends do you have outside of the group? Can you tell me a little bit about these different friendship groups? (How much time do you spend together? What do you do? How often do you see each other?)

6. Do you participate in any other student run religious organizations at St. Olaf?

a. If so, what are they?

7. Tell me about other on campus organizations that you participate in?

Now I would like to ask you about a few significant terms:

8. What does Spirituality mean to you?

9. What does Faith mean to you?

10. What does Christian Community mean to you?

11. What would you say is the importance of this organization in your overall life?

12. What would you say is the importance of this organization in your life at St. Olaf?

13. In your opinion, what is the importance of this organization for the community of St. Olaf? (Prompt: What does the organization do for St. Olaf?)

14. How important to you was it that St. Olaf has a strong Christian Community, when choosing a college?

15. How do you feel the larger St. Olaf Community perceives this organization?

## Appendix C

### Leader Questionnaire

1. How long have you been the advisor of this organization?
2. Were you involved in this organization when you were a student?
3. What, if any, religious denomination do you belong to?
4. Do you attend church services? If so, how often?
5. What is your role as advisor?
6. How do you define:
  - a. Spirituality
  - b. Faith
  - c. Christian Community
7. In your opinion, what purpose does this organization fulfill for the community of St. Olaf? (Prompt: What does the organization do for St. Olaf?)
8. In your opinion, why do students participate in this organization?
9. What benefits or drawbacks do you see St. Olaf's Chapter of FCA providing to its students due to its large number of participants who are not athletes?
10. Could you provide us with some of the history of this organization at St. Olaf?

## Appendix D

### Introduction

You are invited to participate in a research study investigating student run religious organizations on the St. Olaf Campus. This study is being conducted by \_\_\_\_\_ and Katharine Nee, two students at St. Olaf College under the supervision of Professor Anderson , a faculty member from the Department of Sociology/Anthropology. You were selected as a possible participant in this research because you are a member of InterVarsity or Fellowship of Christian Athletes. Please read this form and ask questions before you agree to be in the study.

### Background Information

The purpose of this study is to examine the role of student run religious organizations for their members and the campus as a whole. Approximately 12 people are expected to participate in this research.

### Procedures

If you decide to participate in this study, you will be interviewed. This study will take approximately one hour over one session.

### Potential Risks and Benefits

There are no known risks to participating in this study. There are no direct benefits to you for participating in this research.

## **Confidentiality**

Any information obtained in connection with this research study that can be identified with you will be disclosed only with your permission; your results will be kept confidential. In any written reports and publications, no one will be identified or identifiable and only group data will be presented.

## **Contacts and Questions**

If you have any questions please feel free to contact, \_\_\_\_\_ or Katharine Nee, at \_\_\_\_\_ or nee@stolaf.edu. You may ask questions now, or if you have any additional questions later, our faculty, Carolyn Anderson, x3133, will be happy to answer them. If you have other questions or concerns regarding the study and would like to talk to someone other than the researchers you may contact:

Jo Beld, Administrator  
St. Olaf College Institutional Review Board  
St. Olaf College  
beld@stolaf.edu  
507-646-3343 or 507-646-3910

You may keep a copy of this form for your records.

## **Statement of Consent**

You are making a decision whether or not to participate. Your signature indicates that you have read this information and your questions have been answered. Even after signing this form, please know that you may withdraw from this study at any time.

I consent to participate in this study.

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Signature of Participant / Date

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