

# RELIGIOUS EDUCATION

USAG Fort Polk, LA

GARRISON CHAPEL  
FY 21 Religious Education

Report and Analysis

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***“Instead of thinking outside of the box, get rid of the box.”<sup>1</sup>***

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This report accounts for the Religious Education efforts of the US Army Garrison Religious Support Office (RSO) at Fort Polk, Louisiana from 01 October 2020-01 October 2021. Religious Education (RE) is the formative process integral to building and stabilizing character and a key component of the free exercise of religion.

Within the military context RE is essential to prepare the heart and soul for the rigors of training, deployment, combat and reintegration for the military soldier and family members.

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<sup>1</sup> Johnston, Bob. *New Perspectives a Senior Moment Outside of the Box*, Grey Wellington Times, 2020

## **Fort Polk Religious Education Report FY 21**

Religious Education (RE) serves as a means of readiness, and contributes to the quality of life within the military community. RE is an experience that reaches beyond the day and moment of engagement cultivating habits and behaviors reflective of faith based beliefs and value systems.

### **Fort Polk RE Attendee Demographic**

The Fort Polk RE programs primarily serve dependents of service members due to the unique mission of Fort Polk, and JRTC. The 2020 US Military demographic report reflects that there are more active duty related family members than there are active duty services members. The US Army reporting, 481,254 active duty members, and 642,816 family members<sup>2</sup>. The average attendee at a Fort Polk RE program is a spouse in her late twenties to mid-thirties, and her two children this is also reflective of the demographic report suggesting that 62% of spouses are 36 years of age or younger.<sup>3</sup> The second most prevalent attendee is a school age child between PRE-K and 6<sup>th</sup> grade, and while there seems to be no predominant grade, there is often a large group of 1<sup>st</sup>-2<sup>nd</sup> graders, which is reflective of the demographics report suggesting the average age of a dependent child is 7 years old.<sup>4</sup> If we are to understand the family as a unit it is reasonable to assert that the distinct challenges of military life have the potential to affect each member adversely, and the family as a whole. It is with this understanding that new initiatives and efforts are consistently made to develop family formation RE based concepts.

### **Fort Polk RE Program Funding and Cost Analysis**

During the FY 21 the Fort Polk RE team served 11,742 participants across 502 events. Data records indicate that approximately \$14,947 dollars of appropriated funds (AF) were utilized, and \$ 10,551 dollars of non-appropriated funds (NAF) were utilized toward RE programing. This yields an AF average of \$1.27cents, per participant, and

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<sup>2</sup> Department of Defense, *2018 Demographics Profile of the Military Community*. Office of the Deputy Assistant Defense for Military Communities.2018

<sup>3</sup> Ibid

<sup>4</sup> Ibid

\$9.70 per hour. Use of AF funds is approved to support RE per AR 165-1, (14-3 section a, page 27). Mission essential funding for RE is largely related to the purchase of curriculum. Non-appropriated funds averaged \$0.89 cents per participant; this does not include the NAF funds utilized for watch care expenses in support of childcare during RE programs. The total annual expense for RE programs at Fort Polk for FY 21 combining the AF/NAF funding source was \$25,498, averaging \$ 50.79 per event.

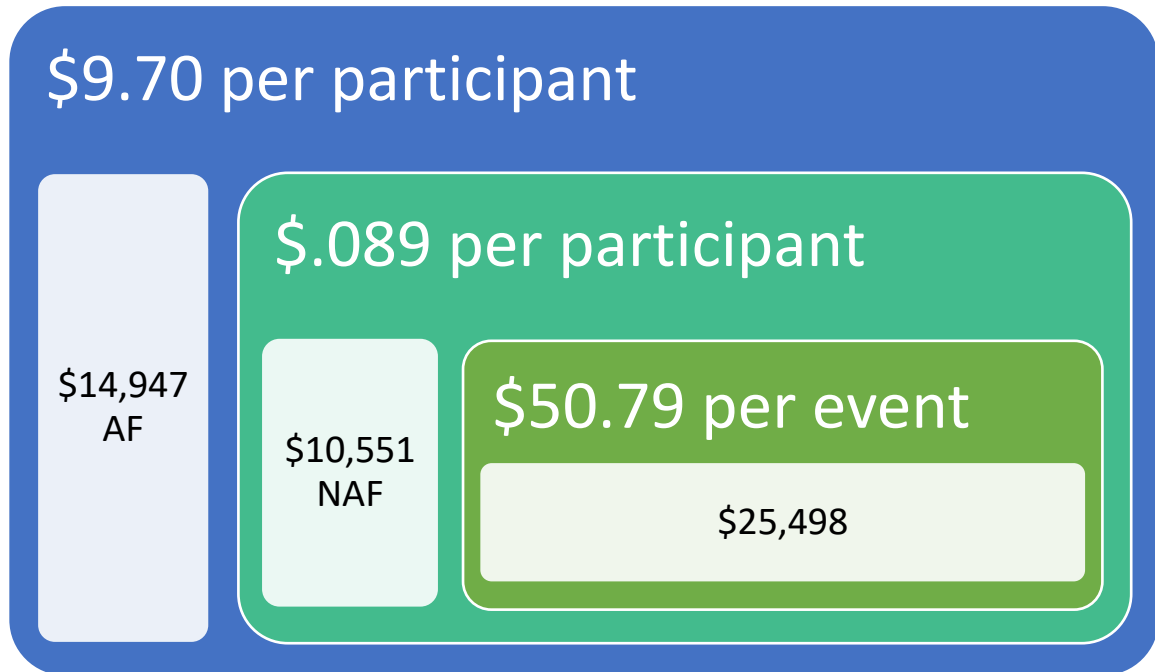


Figure 1 Cost of Religious Education FY 21 according to fund, and per event averages.

Financial data and historical data is encouraging, indicating that more AF was spent toward securing appropriate mission essential needs than the prior two years of reporting. Understanding the quality of life aspects of RE further begs the discussion of RE programing cost compared to other Army agencies like Morale Welfare Recreation (MWR) and Army Community Services (ACS).

### Participation Trends

Of the 11,742 participants recorded attending RE events Quarter 1, FY 21 yielded the highest attendance of the year, accounting for 4,633 participants. The month of December yielded the highest attendance online, and March yielded the highest attendance of in-person RE. The trends during the year mimic the state of the community with regards to COVID-19 restrictions and natural disasters that affected the area. The highest accounted attendance was in QTR 1, as people were eager to return to in-person programs, trends in attendance taper off as the Delta variant spiked, and

state/DOD restrictions increase again. During the year, the average for in person attendance quarterly was 1,356 in-person participants, and 1,579 online participants.

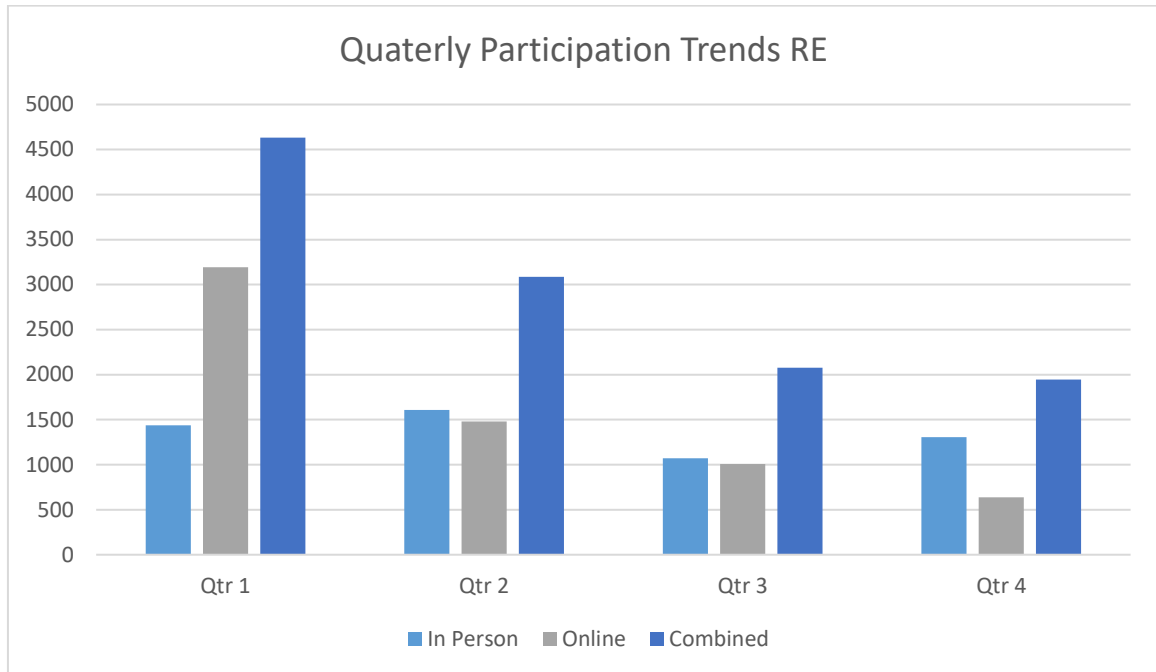


Figure 2 Participation Trends per QTR.

*The chart above indicates that when In-Person attendance was low, online attendance increased, and when online attendance lowered, In-Person attendance increased.*

## Events

During FY 21 a total of 502 RE sessions were coordinated through the RSO. These events produced a total of 1,549 operational program/education hours across twelve months. Divided by faith group, the protestant community conducted the most events, followed by the catholic community. Data indicates that 43% of the events were protestant which is reflective of the predominately protestant assigned personnel. The catholic community showed significant growth, producing 41% of the events. The number of events within the joint faith community were up for FY 21 suggesting more ecumenical opportunities. The catholic community attendance and program size was up considerably compared to prior years and at present indicates a growth trend for FY 22.

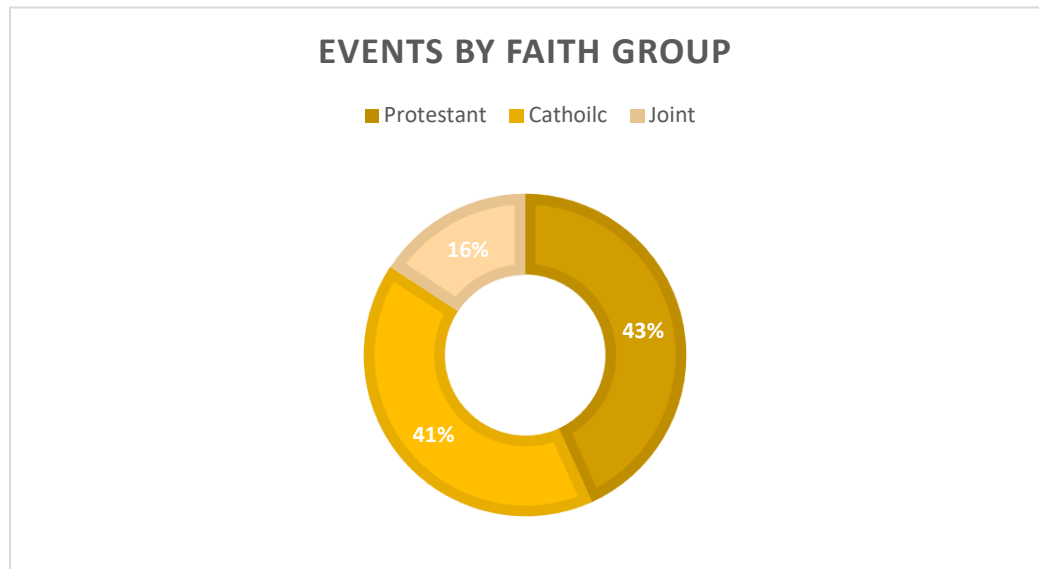
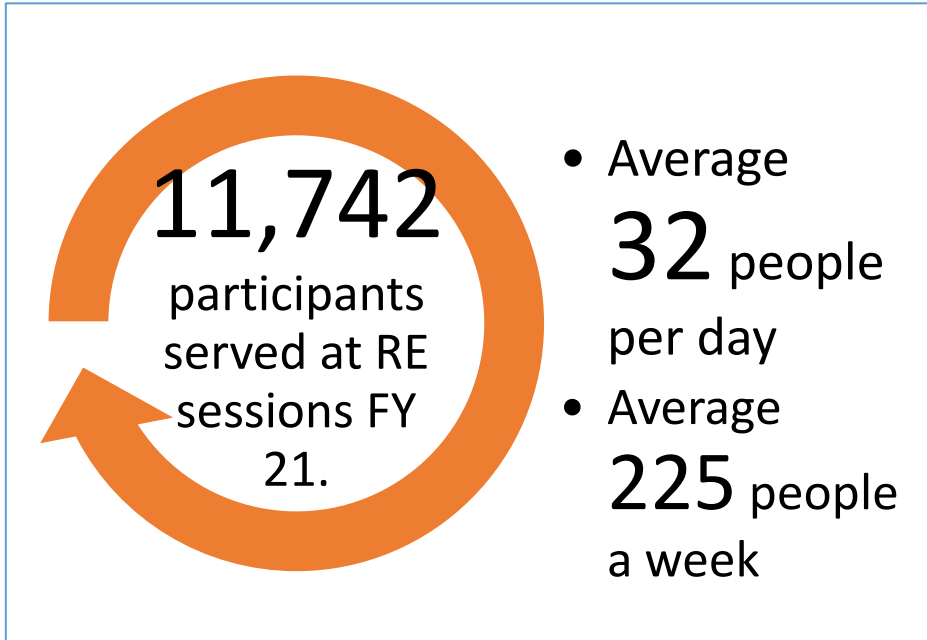


Figure 3 Events represented by faith group.

### Initiatives

The FY 21 year of programming and initiatives brought ample opportunity to continue development, and investigate digital gatherings, large group activities supported through streaming access and chapel sponsored asynchronous initiatives. Lesson's learned from nearly 24 months of programming in new ways, has taught the Fort Polk RE team to think outside of the Chapel walls and to strive reach farther daily. According to the US Statista report on internet usage, 313 million people are on the

internet in the United States and of those 276.8 million access it through mobile devices.<sup>5</sup> The most frequently used social media source is Facebook, yielding 71% of all social media activity and an average of 62% of people checking in daily.<sup>6</sup> Armed with that information and a installation PAO study yielding similar results, many of the decisions made to reach across the digital divide were done via Facebook. Although not ideal for developing quality RE, it evolved into a means of delivery for content, but not a space for content use in most instances. The DRE prepared and delivered several effective small group forums that were asynchronous in nature across Facebook platforms with great success. The two most popular ones that attracted the most activity were the Five Love Languages Group(FLLG) and the Advent group. For six weeks the FLLG was held in an asynchronous forum. The DRE prepared a playlist; week 1 introduced the love languages as a concept, and the subsequent weeks one love language was introduced weekly. Weekly playlists were curated content that focused daily on a task as laid out in the image below.

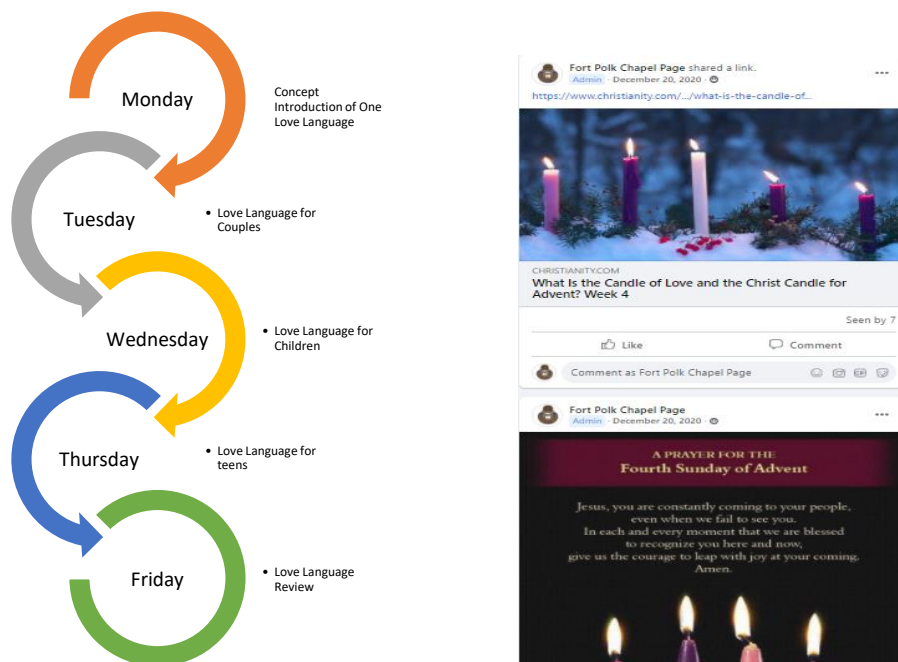


Figure 4 Photograph of the Advent Closed RE group.

Each week a new love language was introduced, and throughout the week one sub category each day (as laid out above). Daily the following items were posted from the playlist: video, blog, image with the concept displayed, and practical application. In totality, there were 35 links in the playlist for the project. All links were associated with curated material, and posted directly into the closed page. A nearly identical model was followed for advent season (as pictured above). Those participating did so primarily as

<sup>5</sup> Internet Usage in the Unites States ,2020, Statista Dossier, statista.com

<sup>6</sup> Ibid

consumers with the occasional comments and interaction. Because the group was located on Facebook the DRE was able to track usage, and interaction via the built in metrics data. These types of groups were highly successful as they promoted self-study, and practice. This concept was successful, but also required man hours to prepare and deliver despite the limited interaction. Other digital based initiatives were explored on the google suite front.

During the year the DRE composed 55 google based websites supporting various missions, that provided digital access to several audiences. Some websites were connected to digital based scavenger hunts for varying age groups, to include unit based physical activities, families, and children. Websites were also used to bridge Sundays during preaching schedules family devotions offering kids content, family content, and adult content for consideration, as displayed in the *Jonah* website below. The goal was to close the gap between Sundays offering families, and adults an opportunity to further explore and consider the worship service. Content was accessed at user's convenience.



Figure 5 Photograph of the Jonah website during the minor prophets series and scan code to site.



Google sites were also used to support the virtual vacation bible school project, a daily website with all user content for the day was posted into the closed group (see below). This significantly decreased the man hours spent toward virtual programming for VBS as compared to the year prior, when the RE team posted a link or item into the Facebook page every two hours off of a playlist. Consolidating daily curriculum into daily sites also promoted the flexibility to serve families off of social media. Website links can be texted or emailed to mobile devices, and then streamed to large screens.



The RE team prepared and delivered 20 YouTube videos during FY21. The videos totaled 152 minutes and just under 3 hours of content. Content ranged from informational, to actual religious education content. The audience associated with the majority of the material was school age children. Research and statistics imply this delivery method could greatly benefit the RE efforts to the active force. In the US users are predominantly male and 71 % are between the ages of 18-25.<sup>7</sup> YouTube ranks as the second most used platform in the United States with 122 million users, 62% of which access it daily.<sup>8</sup>

Continued development with use of google suites and websites specifically for RE will be an ongoing project for FY22. Digital agility promotes the ability to reach those we serve without geographical limits, or within the constraints of the duty day and offers them the ability to engage RE in a personal and introspective manner.

In addition to learning new things with google suites the access to Wi-Fi within the RSO opened doors to opportunities that before would have cost both time and funds to facilitate participate. In March 2020, the single largest RE event of the year was held. The RSO and volunteers coordinated an IF gathering conference to be live streamed at Main Post Chapel. While this had been done in previous years on a small scale, the need for community was almost palpable. The event, was set up with all the care and precision we would have used if the speakers were live. Local military spouses and active duty soldiers from across the entire community attended the gathering, for the weekend. Every space in the building was open so that those who wished to attend could do so with the assurance of respecting social distancing. This was our first, but will not be our last live-stream conference on this scale. This event greatly expanded

<sup>7</sup> Global Media Insight, YouTube User Statistics 2021.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

our capability and helped to conquer our remote location using the bridge of internet access.

### Volunteer Work Force

RE events and programing at Fort Polk are sustained through the efforts of two contractors, and a Director of Religious Education (DRE) who manage a large volunteer force. During the FY 21 year approximately 67 volunteers per month, coordinated, taught, lead, and assisted the RE team in producing high quality RE. RE volunteers are a manpower asset, and for most volunteers this is also an expression of their personal faith and belief system. The efforts of the volunteer team produced 1,540 educational hours, and 2,219 volunteer hours outside of program preparing for sessions.

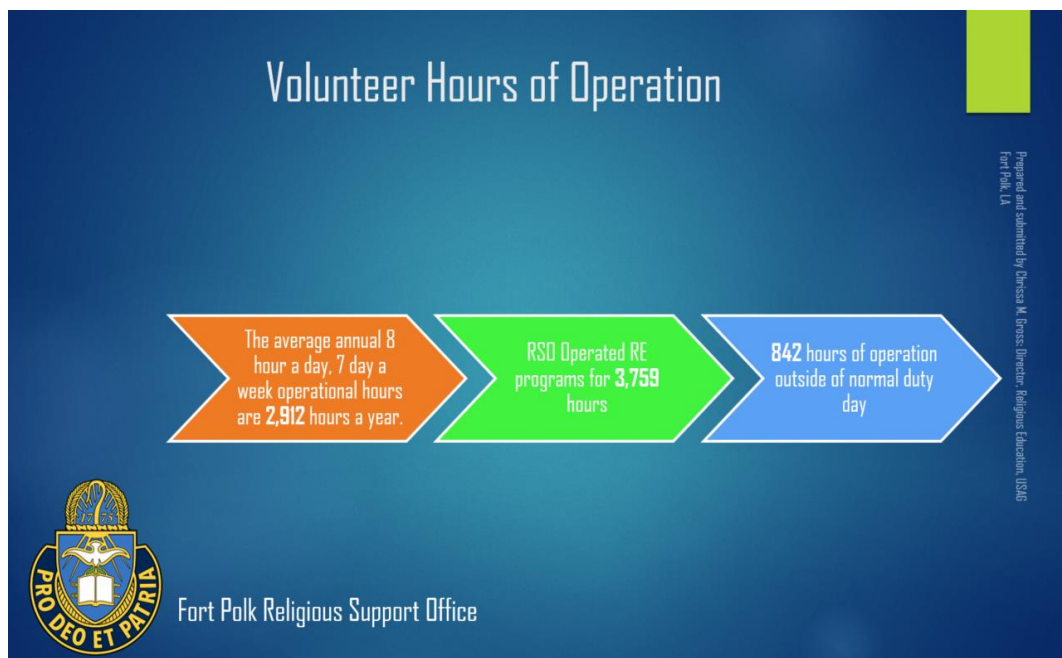
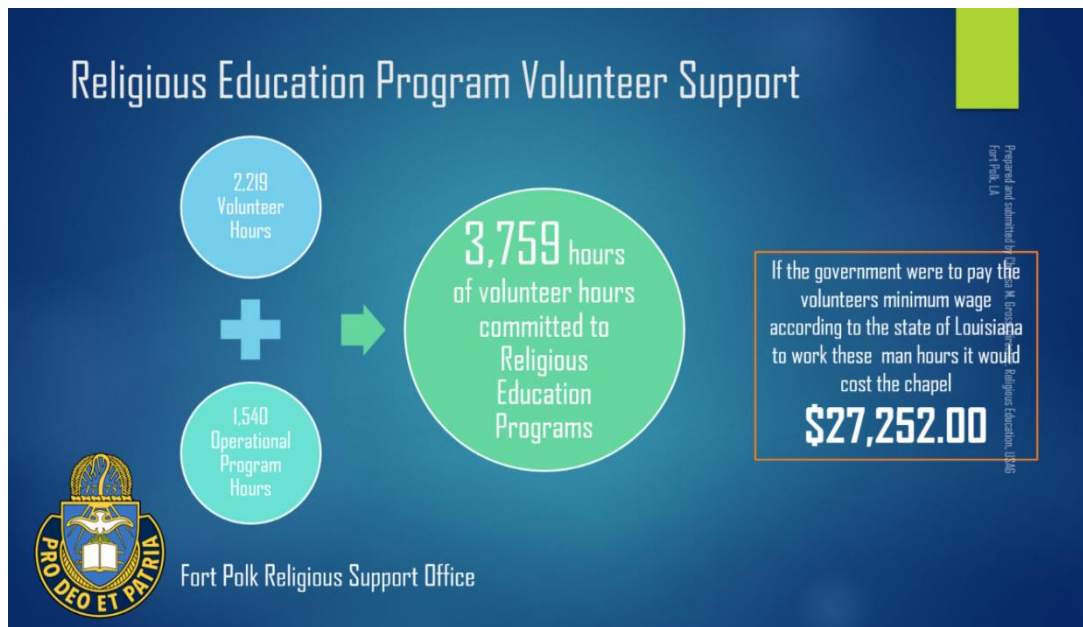


Figure 6 Volunteer hours outside of a normal 40 hour duty week.

Volunteer recognition effort from within the Army systems at ACS during FY21 recognized 52 volunteers exhibiting excellence and leadership. They were each recognized for their work at the chapel during the quarterly Commanding General volunteer ceremony. Three volunteers were also recognized as volunteer of the year nominees, two of which (adult large group volunteer, and youth volunteer) won the title of **Volunteer of the Year** for Fort Polk. During FY 21, RSO recorded the highest number of volunteers across the installation recognized in this forum.

In addition to the ACS recognitions, eight of the Fort Polk Unit Ministry Team members were awarded an **Army Achievement Medal** for their outstanding support during Vacation Bible School, where they filled in when volunteers were not available. The RE team made a deliberate effort to recognize volunteers on social media providing opportunities for others to show gratitude toward the hard work, commitment and dedication they pursue in support of RE.



## Conclusion

Fort Polk RE FY 21 brought about the comforting sounds of footsteps in the halls paired with the new territory of digital terrain for RE. As a digital culture begins to emerge from within the US Army Chaplain Corps, arguably the efforts of RE across the US Army are at the front line. Fort Polk continues to be an ideal place to pilot new ideas and strategies, a desolate post in an island of pine trees and high operational tempo. Evaluation and analysis of RE efforts is an integral part to building the systems unique to the Fort Polk community that deliver quality RE. Recognition of volunteers as individuals is imperative to cultivating a culture of gratitude and teamwork. A year of rebuilding has led to discovery, adventure, and a constant need for adaption. As FY 22 comes into view over the horizon, efforts with digital strategies, and the genuine connections that in-person gatherings offer will be paired together. The RSO and RE team is deeply committed to building a bridge for the families and service members of Fort Polk to connect, empower and develop the moral fortitude to stand the test of the military with the security of their faith intact.

