

Why Fraternities Thrive & Men's Ministries Don't

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What drew me to my fraternity was that I found something there that I couldn't find in my student ministry group: brotherhood. Here are 10 lessons my fraternity taught me that should change the way we think about men's discipleship.



By Brett Clemmer
President & CEO
Casselberry, FL

Sometimes I joke that in college I majored in fraternity and got a degree in psychology. I joined my sophomore year and enjoyed the Greek life. I was

involved in the campus Greek Council and was an officer in my own fraternity.

But the main thing that drew me was that I found something there that was frankly lacking in the Christian student group I was in: brotherhood.

While there were obviously many things about fraternity life that are not biblical, the community I participated in was compelling. We spent tons of time together. We studied together, ate together, did community service together, and of course, had a good time together.

When I think about what men's discipleship relationships—or intentional spiritual friendships, as *Man in the Mirror* often refers to them—could look like, I often think of my fraternity.

Here are 10 lessons I learned from my time with my fraternity brothers that apply to growing in relationship with Christian brothers.

Lesson #1: This is a group you want to be a part of.

The idea of joining a fraternity had a lot of appeal to me,. But when I looked around at many of the houses, I saw many groups I did not want to join.

The fraternity I ultimately chose to join was full of guys just a little bit older than me who I wanted to be around. In fact, they were guys that I wanted to be *like*.

As I got to know them, and they got to know me, we went through a process of deciding that we wanted to be brothers.

Application questions: Are you—and your Christian brothers—winsome? Would younger guys in particular want not just to be *around* you, but to *become like* you?

Lesson #2: We were a group with shared values.

The national organization stipulated a set of values that gave us a frame of reference for what it meant to be a brother in this particular fraternity. The values of truth, honesty, and brotherhood were appealing to me and something that I wanted to be a part of.

Did all the guys represent these values perfectly? Of course not. But at least it was an agreed-upon frame of reference that undergirded the idea of being in this group and gave us a vision for who we wanted to be.

Application questions: Is there a way for men to understand the values you stand for? Are those values compelling?

Lesson #3: Being a brother was more than lip service.

In order to join my fraternity, there were some hoops I had to jump through. Our house was not one that believed in hazing, but there was still a hierarchy.

However, in my house, the older brothers looked at the pledges not as vassals or personal assistants, but rather as neophytes who didn't quite know how things were supposed to work and needed to be taught and shown.

Application question: Do the (spiritually) older guys in your circle actually take responsibility for the growth of the (spiritually) younger guys?

Lesson #4: We were not all alike.

While our fraternity was not particularly diverse racially or ethnically (at least in part due to the fact that there was a strong black fraternity community on campus), we were by no means a homogenous group of guys.

We came from different places, had different majors, different backgrounds, different interests, and different goals in life. In fact, there were even guys that I didn't like—and who didn't particularly like me. Yet we were able to always look past the personal preferences when it came to what was best for the group and for each other.

For example, although I was not the most popular guy in the fraternity, I was elected president. In fact, most of the guys who didn't like me voted for me anyway. Why? Because they thought I had the skills needed to lead the house fairly and competently. Similarly, they elected the right guy to be the treasurer, the right guy to be Rush chairman, and the right guy to be social chairman. They looked at each guy's strengths and skills and tried to put the best person in each position to help the organization run well.

Application question: Are you trying to help guys learn their giftedness and put that to work in the church and beyond?

Lesson #5: The best way to help a pledge become a brother was a combination of learning, service, and relationship.

We had a thick manual full of history, facts, structure, governance, values, and goals. We were expected to study and know it all by heart.

But just as important was the time spent doing things to serve others and generally just hanging out. All of these things were necessary to bond as brothers and help the new guys become a part of the group.

Application question: Do you have a balanced approach to helping a man integrate into the life of your church? Is there an unhealthy focus on head knowledge or serving in the church? Do guys go out of their way to make sure new men are involved socially?

Lesson #6: There was a clear path—and a guide.

From rush, to pledging, to pinnacle week (also known as “hell week”), to initiation, to brotherhood, you knew exactly what the next step was and how to keep moving forward.

Along the way, there was someone to guide you through it, your “big brother” and pledge director.

Application question: Are guys consistently being led to the right next step in their journeys as disciples of Christ? Are there other men to guide them?

Lesson #7: I learned how to love another guy as a close brother by working together.

When I was the president, the vice president was a guy named Brian. Brian lived to antagonize me. While I was a hard-charging idea guy, Brian was a deliberate process guy. In fact, I was quick to speak and slow to consider the consequences of my words, while Brian was the opposite. He often slowed me down, much to my frustration.

Then a funny thing happened. After Brian and I had worked through a particularly difficult project together, I realized we had become best friends. To this day, I realize he was one of the best friends I ever had.

He knew me so well and loved me so deeply that he was never willing to let me stay in my immaturity. Subtly, he was constantly challenging me to be better; he was good for me. We were different, but our differences turned out to be our greatest connection.

Application question: Do you have opportunities for guys to work together on projects and engage in activities together? What other ways beyond

organized classes/groups can guys develop close, authentic relationships over time?

Lesson #8: You need brothers during difficult times.

When I was a junior, I was sitting at a Thursday night poker game with my brothers. I was depressed. My dad, whom I was very close to, had had a heart attack on a business trip earlier that week. He was okay, but frankly, it scared me. Sitting at the table, one of my brothers, Dave, looked at me and said, “Your dad just had a heart attack, and you need to go see him.”

Ignoring my protests about upcoming tests and papers, Dave went into action. He grabbed a couple of pledges and informed them they would be going to my classes and taking notes for me for the next few days. He made me a thermos of coffee.

Then he called my mom. Seriously. “Mrs. Clemmer? This is Dave. I am one of Brett’s fraternity brothers and he’s feeling really sad about his dad. We are sending him home right now. He’s got a thermos of coffee and we’ll take care of things here until he gets back.”

And so at midnight I jumped in my ‘76 Chevy Impala and drove three hours to my home in Connecticut. The next day I visited my dad in the hospital. Dave was right. It was just what I needed.

When I got back to school the following Wednesday, several professors asked about my dad. They all told the same story. One of my fraternity brothers (Dave, of course) had come to tell them what was going on with my dad and asked them to allow me to make up work that I might miss. They had all agreed. Dave was very convincing! (The pledges’ notes, however, were useless.)

Guess what? Dave was also one of those guys who didn’t particularly like me. But he *loved* me like a brother.*

Application question: Do the men of your church look out for each other, even when a guy doesn’t think he needs it?

***Lesson #8A: There is no greater difficulty than losing a brother. And there is no better solace than brothers suffering through it together.**

Tragically, Brian died two years after we graduated in a freak accident. When Brian died, although I had been out of school for a couple of years, we all gathered to mourn, remember, and support each other. There were tears, hugs, memories, and laughter. We spent 48 hours together nonstop—crammed into hotel rooms and spare bedrooms—leaning on each other for comfort.

Application question: Are you there for your brothers when tragedy strikes? Are you also there for them when suffering lasts—in the days, weeks, and months that follow?

Lesson #9: Brotherhood is for life.

Decades later, I am still in touch with many of my fraternity brothers. Today, we are all even more different than we were then. For example, I am one of the few with a strong faith life.

Yet to this day, we still take the time to connect—especially during significant events, such as when we heard that a brother's son was diagnosed with a chronic illness, or that another brother earned his next certification as a fire fighter, or that another became a grandpa. We still care.

Application question: Are you leaving time and space in your life for forming intentional, spiritual friendships with some Christian brothers that can stand the test of time? How can you build friendships that last for life?

Lesson #10: As great as the brotherhood was in my fraternity, it is but a pale

reflection of what brotherhood with fellow believers can and should be.

Ultimately, it comes down to this: Men are designed for relationship and hungry for brotherhood. And yet, so many of us remain isolated with only acquaintances in our lives, *even if we are part of a church.*

Learning and studying are important growth steps for a disciple. But if you want men's discipleship to truly thrive—whether it's in a small group of guys, churchwide ministry, or one-on-one mentoring—then authentic brotherhood has to develop.

How do we do this? While women may form close relationships face to face, men often form them shoulder to shoulder. The way we develop intentional, spiritual friendships then is through shared experiences. Learning, serving, socializing, road trips, and even a fraternity ritual are all formative because they give us experiences to share.

THE BIG IDEA: *Men are designed for relationship. Head knowledge is not enough to grow as a disciple. We need brotherhood.*

I may have learned the lessons above from my fraternity days, but the principles are true no matter the setting. In some ways, Jesus ran a little “fraternity” of His own. He had an executive council—the twelve—that included a vice president (Peter), social chairmen (the guys who set up the last supper), a treasurer (Judas Iscariot), and maybe even two sergeants-at-arms (James and John, the “sons of thunder”).

And he had the larger brotherhood that hung out, fished, did community service (feeding and healing people), and went on road trips. They were deeply connected in purpose, and together, they changed the world.

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