



NEWS RELEASE

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A HOME AWAY FROM HOME: NEW JERSEY ARMY CHAPLAIN CANDIDATE FINDS COMMUNITY AT ST. JOHN BAPTIST CHURCH OF HOPKINS

COLUMBIA, S.C. — When Chaplain Candidate (2LT) Elorm Ocansey arrived at Fort Jackson in January to begin the U.S. Army Chaplain Basic Officer Leader Course (CHBOLC), he expected to spend the next several weeks learning the doctrine, leadership, and ministry skills required of an Army chaplain.

He did not expect one of the most important parts of that journey to begin just a few miles outside the installation.

A longtime resident of Franklin Township, New Jersey, Ocansey had never been away from home for such an extended period. Although born and raised in Ghana, West Africa, he has called New Jersey home since immigrating with his family at the tender age of 12. Like many Soldiers arriving at Fort Jackson, he soon began searching for a church where he could worship while away from home.

The search ended at St. John Baptist Church of Hopkins.

"It all started because my classmate, Chaplain Kee, wanted to find a Black church," Ocansey said. "After attending one service on post, we both knew we were looking for a church that felt rooted in the community."



The recommendation came from an unexpected source; a staff member at the Fort Jackson Drill Sergeant Academy dining facility, who encouraged the two Soldiers to visit St. John Baptist Church. That single recommendation became one of the defining moments of Ocansey's time in South Carolina.

Under the leadership of Rev. Dr. Sammy L. Wade, a retired U.S. Army chaplain whose distinguished military career spanned twenty-six years, St. John welcomed the young officer into its congregation from his very first visit. "What Pastor Wade and the members of St. John gave me wasn't simply a place to attend church," Ocansey said. "They gave me a sense of belonging. They reminded me that the Church has a way of becoming family, even when you're hundreds of miles from home."

Midway through CHBOLC Class 2026-001, Ocansey returned to New Jersey to fulfill civilian ministry responsibilities and complete the final requirements of his Master of Divinity at New Brunswick Theological Seminary; before returning to Fort Jackson mid-June to complete his second half of chaplain training with CHBOLC Class 2026-002.

Returning proved more difficult than he anticipated. His original classmates and friends had already graduated and moved back home to their duty stations across the country. Even more difficult, a day after returning to South Carolina, one of his closest friends from seminary lost her battle with Stage IV cancer. "I remember driving down Old Hopkins Road that first Sunday back," Ocansey recalled. "I wasn't looking for anything extraordinary. I was just grateful there was one friendly place I could go."

During worship that morning, the choir ministered Frank Williams' gospel classic, Your Grace and Mercy. "I don't know if the choir knew what I had been carrying that week," he said. "But God knew."

As worship concluded, another unexpected connection emerged. Leaving the sanctuary, Ocansey noticed campaign signs throughout the church property supporting Dr. Jermaine Johnson, the Democratic nominee for Governor of South Carolina. Months earlier, Pastor Wade had introduced him to Johnson's campaign and explained the historic significance of his candidacy.



For Ocansey, who has long been active in community development and civic engagement in New Jersey, the moment represented another reminder that faith communities have often served as gathering places for both spiritual life and public leadership.

A few weeks later, during the Fourth of July Lexington County Peach Festival, Ocansey unexpectedly encountered Kevin Reese, a lead organizer with the Johnson campaign. Before long, Dr. Jermaine Johnson and his lovely wife, Dr. Evan Johnson arrived, and the group spent the afternoon walking the festival grounds together, greeting residents, distributing campaign literature, and reflecting on the remarkable influence Pastor Wade and St. John Baptist Church have had throughout the Midlands.

"It was remarkable how every conversation seemed to come back to Pastor Wade," Ocansey said. "Whether we were talking about ministry, military service, or public service, his name kept coming up. That speaks volumes about the impact one faithful leader can have on an entire community."

On August 13th, Ocansey graduated from the U.S. Army Chaplain Basic Officer Leader Course as one of the top students in his class, completing the Army's initial training program with a near-perfect GPA. Following graduation, he is expected to accession as an Army Chaplain and eventually begin serving as the Battalion Chaplain for the 1st Squadron, 102nd Cavalry Regiment, 44th Infantry Brigade Combat Team, New Jersey Army National Guard.

Known as the historic "Essex Troop," the regiment traces its foundation to Newark, New Jersey, in 1890. During World War II, the 102nd Cavalry Reconnaissance Squadron landed on Omaha Beach shortly after D-Day and ultimately served more combat days in Europe than any other U.S. cavalry group.

As he prepares to begin that next chapter, Ocansey says one of his greatest memories of South Carolina will not come from a classroom or training exercise. Instead, it will be the congregation that welcomed a young Army officer as though he had always been part of the family. "Fort Jackson prepared me for Army service," he said. "But St. John Baptist Church reminded me what ministry looks like at its best. It opens its doors, welcomes strangers, and walks beside people through difficult seasons." That is a lesson I will carry with me forever.



Chaplain Ocansey, all smiles after his CHBOLC 2026-002 graduation ceremony.



Rev. Ocansey with Dr. Jermaine & Dr. Evan Johnson at the Lexington County Peach Festival.

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