

Commitment to Ministry

CHAPLAIN BRIGADIER GENERAL KENNETH “ED” BRANDT

I’m supposed to follow that, really?

[LAUGHTER]

Thanks.

[LAUGHTER]

Well, grace and peace to you from Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior. It’s thrilling to be here with you, and it’s always great to be back in Utah. I’ve been back here, what, three times, Gerry, in the last two-and-a-half years? And the wonderful hospitality has been amazing.

And I want to thank Frank Clawson so much for inviting me back. I appreciate the time we get to spend and the work that you’re doing for chaplains. I appreciate that so much.

I also want to say, Frank and Gerry, especially Gerry, has been a good, great friend to me—counselor, confidant, and a great leader for the Utah National Guard chaplaincy. And Gerry, I really appreciate what you do out here.

I just want to say thank you to General Burton. I know he’s not here. He’s the adjutant general for Utah, and he does a phenomenal job as a leader—and a great person, a great man of faith. And in the military, we need people of faith to live lives of integrity, and to set an example for other people who follow.

And finally, I want to bring greetings from General Lengyel, the chief of the National Guard Bureau; General Dan Hokanson, the director of the National Guard; and of course, my boss, Chaplain Major General Tom Solhjem, the chief of chaplains, U.S. Army.

I’m sure you know it already, but you do have a newly minted colonel here: Tom Helms. Tom got promoted last week, and the Pentagon had the privilege of being there with him and his family. So Tom, congratulations to you. Appreciate that so much.

It was drill weekend in Delaware, where I’m a member of the National Guard, and I was the lead pastor of a fairly large church in suburban Wilmington. And on that particular day, there was an event taking place in downtown Wilmington where I had to be in uniform. It was a drill weekend.

And so the associate pastor took the pulpit that morning, and I decided to spend my time visiting some of the Sunday school classrooms in the church. And I went to the third-graders, the fourth-graders. I got to the sixth-grade classroom; I’m in my uniform. I walk in, have a little talk, and then finally say, “Any questions?”

And of course, somebody had to ask, “Have you ever killed anybody?”

[LAUGHTER]

And before I could answer, Phillip [INAUDIBLE]—I’ll never forget. He said, “Yeah, he bored 400 people to death last Sunday morning.”

[LAUGHTER]

So I hope that’s not the case today.

[LAUGHTER]

I want you to know, I'm an ordained Presbyterian minister, and we have three sacraments: we have baptism, the Lord's Supper, and coffee hour. That's our third sacrament that we have.

[LAUGHTER]

But The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints has a special place in my heart because of the relationship that I have with Gerry, and Gene Whitmore, who's the full-time support chaplain for Utah, and the work that the Utah National Guard chaplains do.

They are our best resource for strong bonds. You may not know this, but the Utah chaplains are our number one resource to lead strong bonds and events for same-gender couples. We have a tough time finding people to do that, and Utah provides that resource. And it's been great.

And you talk about ministering, sir? You talk about ministry, reaching out to people. That's ministry: caring for people that you may not agree with, but you care for, which is important.

Utah has sent National Guard chaplains to Guam, various parts in the mainland, and they provided—you provided—loving care and support for all the people who have attended. And so there is one enduring friendship that's remained intact for 10 years. And I don't know if he's here or not, but James Montoya—I met him over in Vicenza, Italy, when—well, Utah has a state partnership with Morocco.

And so I got to meet James over there, and he's been just a great friend, a good spirit, and—I think—a wonderful leader. And I know he makes a great bishop. I know that.

And finally, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, I think, captures an efficient and lay-led way to proclaim the gospel and minister to people. And I said it for a couple of reasons—as I said, I'm Presbyterian.

And in 1983, the Presbyterian church—the northern branch and the southern branch—came together, following their disagreement after the Civil War. And in 1983, the Presbyterian church had about 3.5 million members—again, professionally trained clergy, paid clergy. And what has that brought us, all these years later? A membership of 1.7 million.

I tell you, we're out there. We're going great, aren't we?

[LAUGHTER]

It's super. The numbers tell a story. And I think, for me, it's a matter of how we passionately engage the calling to which God has called us.

If clergy, all brands, all denominations of clergy, look at it just as a job with a paycheck and benefits, they are off the mark and should not be on the pulpit. They should not be in a congregation, because it takes more than just a paycheck. It takes the passion to care for people, to go beyond the eight hours a day, to be out there in those evenings.

The church I served in Wilmington, Delaware—I followed a pastor who was asked to leave over tragic circumstances. He broke the trust of the congregation; people did not trust him. And so I followed this guy, and for the first year of my life, I was out four and five nights a week meeting people face-to-face to build trust.

I tell you, when a chaplain or a pastor breaks trust with a congregation, it's not just that pastor; it's all of us. We are looked at as used-car salespeople. You want that? You want that reputation? I know I don't.

And so when we're out there doing the work, whether it be a cross, tablet, or crescent over our name in the chaplain corps, we represent a total group of people who are responsible to care for the spirits and provide religious support of folks who serve in the military.

In the Presbyterian church, there's a call. It's confirmed by the congregation; it's confirmed by the presbytere; it's confirmed by God; it's confirmed by the person who has this call. And it's reminiscent of that final exchange between Jesus and Peter in John 21.

And that's where I want to go a little bit, where you talk about how to minister in the Lord's way. That passage captures it for me. And I know you know the story.

Peter sees Jesus far off; he's out there fishing with his friends. He hears Jesus's voice. Peter jumps into the water; he makes his way to land to greet his risen Lord. And they get there; they have breakfast on the beach. And then Jesus asks Peter three questions:

"Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?" "Yes, Lord; you know that I love you." "Feed my lambs."

"Simon son of John, do you love me?" "Yes, Lord; you know . . . I love you." "Tend my sheep."

A third time Jesus asks, "Simon son of John, do you love me?"

"Lord, you know everything [about me]; you know that I love you." "Feed my sheep" (John 21:15–17, New Revised Standard Version). Feed, tend, feed.

These are the instructions from our Heavenly Father. These are words from Jesus to Peter. These are words to you and to me—feed, tend, and feed.

During my second pastorate, the congregation consisted of a fairly large agricultural community. It was a church located in the same county in which my parents lived and raised the family. It's in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania.

Have you ever—anyone been to Lancaster County, Pennsylvania? Great. Thanks for spending your money there; we really appreciate it.

[LAUGHTER]

You may have seen the bumper sticker, "Welcome to Lancaster County; now go home." That's kind of our motto there.

[LAUGHTER]

Anyway, there was a guy in my congregation named Tom Smith, and Tom had this fairly large dairy farm. And the first couple of years there, he said, "Ed, why don't you come out and help me milk cows?" And so I said, "Oh, sure. I'll do that." So we scheduled a time and a date, and I said, "What time do I need to be there?" He said, "4:30 a.m."

[SIGH]

OK. So I showed up at 4:30. He has a fairly large family—about six, I think; five or six kids. And we go out there, and we first feed the calves. They're out there, and these little plastic containers are in there. And then we go in, and we feed the cows, and then we put the milk machines on the udders, and we do that for about 85 head.

And around 7:30, 8:00, we're done. We go back to the house and we have breakfast. And I'm thinking to myself, he does this twice a day, every day. And if he wants to go on vacation, he has to pay someone that he trusts to do the

work for him.

And you think about—whether it be tending, feeding—tending cows, sheep, or people in our congregation—it’s every day, every minute of every day, caring for the needs of the people in our congregation. You just—you need to take a break at times. Yeah, I’ve got that. But at times, there’s a demand on you to respond.

I worked with a person one time who came to me and said, “Hey, listen, Ed. Can I just come into the office at, like, 5:30 a.m., and then I’ll leave at 2:00 in the afternoon? That way, I’ll have the number of hours I need to have in for my work, and I can go home.”

I said, “Well, if that’s how it works, I’ll come in at 3:00 a.m., and I’ll leave at 11:00 a.m. and have the rest of the day to myself.” That’s not the way ministry works. It’s feed, tend, and feed—not on my battle rhythm, not on my schedule, but on the schedule of the people for whom I care.

In your eyes, it may be an emergency. In my eyes, it may not be. But I’ve got to respond to your reality and maybe reframe your reality to help you deal with it in a constructive kind of way.

And what we’re getting back to is this idea of, what kind of life are we caring for, for the people entrusted to us? In the Greek New Testament, there’s two words for life. One is *zoe*, which is this kind of life right now, every single day. You get up, you go to work, you do your thing, spend time with your family. It’s a *zoe* kind of life.

There’s another word called *psuche*, which is your soul, your spirit kind of life. And when Jesus says these words, when Jesus says, “I’ve come to give you life, and give it so you may have it more abundantly,” he’s talking about this kind of life right here and now—a *zoe* kind of life. But that *zoe* leads to that spirit life beyond, the eternal life that we will have.

We have to have a quality of life now that helps us see how God is working in our lives and the lives around us. And part of our jobs as chaplains, regardless if we’re military or civilian chaplains, part of our responsibility is to open the eyes of people who are in need so they can see a life that Jesus wants them to have: a life that is real, full of happiness—like we heard yesterday in the conference—but a life that is full of hope; a life that is full of compassion, forgiveness, and understanding—the fruits of the spirit, if you will. And if we’re not doing that, if we’re just sitting in our office and waiting for people to come by, we’re dropping the ball.

I went to one of my endorser training conferences several years ago, and I spoke to a chaplain who had just retired from the military. And I said, “How’s it going?” “Oh, it’s terrible.” I said, “Why?” He goes, “I cannot train these people to come and see me in my office.”

[LAUGHTER]

He was air force.

[LAUGHTER]

We’ve got to get out and see people, connect with people, and engage people.

The first church I served was up in Newport, Pennsylvania, Perry County, on the way to Penn State. First two weeks I was there, I went to see the funeral director to introduce myself.

His name was David Myers. He had a funeral home out back and a furniture store out front. His motto was, “Your grandmother bought furniture from my dad.” That was his motto.

[LAUGHTER]

I like that. And so in the conversation, he said, “Where did you get your education?” And I go, “I went to Princeton Seminary.” He said, “Wrong. You’re going to get it here.” And he was so true.

We get our education by how we engage in people. If we approach it that we know everything about everything, we know nothing. And we need to be open to learning, be lifelong learners. We’ve got the book knowledge, sure, but it’s that practical street knowledge that we have to gain over time.

And during my three years of ministry there, my wife and I were visited by LDS missionaries who came knocking on the door. And of course—I hate to say this—we did all we could to get out of engaging them.

[LAUGHTER]

I thought by saying I’m a Presbyterian minister, that would shut it down. But it didn’t.

[LAUGHTER]

They were very nice, caring, and warm people. They were curious. And several weeks later, they stopped by again. They were persistent. I think they were in sales before they became missionaries. I’m not sure.

[LAUGHTER]

But when they came by the second time, I was recovering from a medical procedure, and my wife explained it was not a good time to visit. And so they left. And about an hour later, they came back with a cake, a prayer, and best wishes for a healthy recovery.

That’s caring. That’s ministering, reaching out to people who you may not agree with. Feed, tend, and feed, says Jesus, if you love me.

Another passage more familiar to you than to me is from the prophet Alma. I did some research.

[LAUGHTER]

Alma 42:4 says, “And thus we see, that there was a time granted unto man to repent, yea, a probationary time, a time to repent and serve God.” Serving God is making a person’s life here now better—here and now better. It’s focusing on the life, the zoe understanding of life. Let’s connect to the soul and spirit of individuals.

Over three years ago, my dad died. And most of us, I’m guessing, know that father and son relationships are kind of complicated at times. And that was true with my father.

And following his passing, I went to church on All Saints’ Day, ironically. And the choir had this beautiful anthem, and the refrain went, “when my earthly work is done.” That refrain remains etched on my soul, for the ministry we do as God’s people should be helping us to accomplish an earthly kind of work.

It’s not just retiring and sitting back and saying, well, I’m done; let’s watch reruns of Columbo now and get caught up in the ’70s films. No. It’s doing something that makes a difference in the lives of people.

As long as we have gifts, we have a responsibility to use them. And if we do not use the gifts God gave to us, we are sinning. I believe that.

We don’t counsel because we have a lot of leftover time; we don’t preach because we want to spin our theological wheels; we don’t care for people for the heck of it. No. We counsel, we preach, and we care because it’s part of our earthly work for our Heavenly Father. It’s Jesus’s mandate to feed, tend, and feed other members of God’s creation, and hopefully, God’s kingdom.

Matthew 25 gives us another glimpse of how ministry takes place in the Lord's way. You remember the Judgment of the Nations. The people are separated from one another, like sheep from goats. And the king says to those at his right hand: "Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world;

"For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me,

"I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.

"Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when is it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink?

"And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing?

"And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?"

"And the King will answer them, 'Truly I tell you, just as you did it to . . . the least of these [my brethren], you did it to me'" (verses 34–40, NRSV).

We minister to those around us because they are God's children. And some may not know it yet, but they are God's children. Feed, tend, feed. When you did it to the least of these my brethren, you did it to me. That's ministering in the Lord's way.

You all know and are painfully aware how the demographics are changing in the world. If you take a look at the end strength of the Army National Guard, we have about 335,000 soldiers, service members. And the understanding of religion is dramatically changing.

We have 49 percent Protestant, 15 percent Catholic, 35 percent no religious preference, and 1 percent other. We have a generation who is not fully connected to the biblical narrative that we grew up with and that we know. Let me give you an example.

Several years ago, I officiated at a wedding. And of course, what do you read at a wedding? 1 Corinthians 13:4–7.

"Love is patient and kind; love does not envy or boast; it is not arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures" (English Standard Version). We've said it a thousand times.

And following the services, this young person came up to me and said, "Chaplain Brandt, that passage was beautiful. Did you write it?"

[LAUGHTER]

I said, "Sure."

[LAUGHTER]

No, I didn't say that. People are not connected to the Bible as we once were. They don't know the story. They are creating their own narrative—a little piece here, a little piece there, and there's a hodgepodge of pieces that sometimes doesn't make sense.

If I asked you the question, am I my brother's keeper, you know where that comes from. Genesis 4, right? February 12, 1968, in the Congressional Record, the Honorable Robert Sikes, Congressman from Florida, submitted for

reprinting a speech by General Harold K. Johnson, chief of staff of the army. These words from General Johnson were delivered at the annual Presidential Prayer Breakfast held on February 1, 1968.

Now I would encourage you, if you have time to look up—there's some great passages in that Congressional Record. If you need to go to sleep some night, read some of them. But this is particularly interesting.

The speech or sermon is from a military leader, and it illustrates how the biblical narrative was woven in the fabric of military leadership. General Johnson began by saying, "For my text, I turn to the letter of James, chapter 3."

And it reads, "Are there some wise and understanding men among you? Then your lives will be an example of the humility that is born of true wisdom.

"But if your heart is full of rivalry and bitter jealousy, then do not boast of your wisdom—don't deny the truth that you must recognise in your inmost heart.

"You may acquire a certain superficial wisdom, but it does not come from God—it comes from [this] world, from your own lower nature, even from the devil.

"For wherever you find jealousy and rivalry you [will] also find disharmony and all other kinds of evil.

"The wisdom that comes from God is first utterly pure, then peace-loving, [and] gentle, [and] approachable, full of tolerant thoughts and kindly actions, with no breath of favouritism or hint of hypocrisy.

"And the wise are peace-makers who go on quietly sowing for a harvest of righteousness—in other people and in themselves" (verses 13–18, Phillips translation).

Chief of staff of the army, 1968—Presidential Prayer Breakfast. And then he goes on to ask the question: "I wonder," he says, "if it isn't time for each of us to reflect upon the eighth and ninth verses of the fourth chapter of Genesis: am I my brother's keeper?"

And the general, chief of staff of the army, responds, "The answer is yes." General Johnson's assuming that people know the Bible. He specifically is assuming that people know the story of Cain and Abel. General Johnson is holding people accountable for their lives in society.

And somewhere along the line, we've abrogated that responsibility. We've—well, if that's what makes you happy—without having a plumb line to what God's definition of happiness is. We've given up, in some ways, to that.

When we minister in the Lord's way, we continue the biblical story of being our brother and sister's keeper. We continue the biblical narrative of redeeming the lost, giving hope to the forlorn, and loving the outcast. And we minister in the Lord's way when we hold people accountable for the life God has given to them.

Here's another example of society being detached from the story of faith. And forgive me—this shows a little bit of age here. But how many of you even know the 1960s song written by Pete Seeger, "Turn! Turn! Turn!"? OK. You know the song, right?

OK. Most people don't know today that it's based on Ecclesiastes 3:1–9. Biblical narrative being woven into society—and people don't know. Maybe there's a stealth operation we've got going on here—I don't know. But we're making inroads in some ways.

The fact of the matter is that faith born to humanity through Abraham and Isaac and delivered through Jesus the Christ is woven tightly into the fabric of community, and many people don't know it. Take the limited controversy

over wishing people a merry Christmas or happy holiday.

Again, faith gives an edge here. Holiday is an adaptation, another way of saying, Happy holy day, which morphs into holiday. We've got them.

[LAUGHTER]

As chaplains, we understand what it means to be plural and inclusive. And the story of the gospel is a proclamation of good news for all. In fact, the Greek word for proclamation really is the same word that was used by the Romans for a political edict of proclamation.

When Jesus says, "Proclaim the good news" (Mark 16:15, NRSV), euangelion, that word proclaim is the same word used by the Romans in a political way. The gospel is freeing, and it's also threatening at times. When you free people to be redeemed and loved by God, it unleashes something in their heart that they never knew was there.

As chaplains, we offer hope to people who are trapped in darkness. To quote Isaiah, "The people who [have] walked in darkness have seen a great light" (Isaiah 9:2, NRSV). We are lighting candles along the way every single day of our lives. Ministering the Lord's way is giving hope and shedding light on people who feel trapped in the shadows of life.

Imagine what impact a chaplain would have if, in the moment of despair, the commander turned to the chaplain in the midst of the command group and asked the chaplain for a word of hope, and the chaplain responded, "You're right, sir. It doesn't look good. We're doomed."

[LAUGHTER]

Is that what we do? No. In Luke, Jesus proclaimed, "The spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind" (Luke 4:18, NRSV).

Questions to ask ourselves each day in the chaplaincy are, Did I make a difference in one person's life today? Did I take time to mentor another chaplain today? Did I nourish my spiritual well? Thank you for pointing that out. We don't do that enough. We don't do that enough. We think we are superhuman, and we're not.

Did I take care of my family today? Did I pray? Did I feed, tend, and feed Jesus's flock today? The questions are an important barometer of our intensity for ministry. Too often in the parish and in the chaplaincy, there is the unintended consequence of reaching a plateau and coasting until retirement.

Have you seen people coast in life, besides teenagers on the family dime? I see it in all three compos. I see it in the active; I see it in the guard; I see it in the reserve; I see it in civilian chaplaincy.

Too many people have allowed ministry to be boiled down to answering email. Their counseling consists of this. Here's the phrases for counseling when you're coasting.

"Tell me more," "I see," "That must be tough," "How are you dealing with that?" And my favorite is, "How does that make you feel?" Then just repeat them four times during the hour, and you're done.

People coast. Some chaplains label lazy lunches as pastoral care; others hide out in their office. And yes, some seek to pass the buck to someone else.

And I know this. I know personally that as you grow older, you do slow down. But that is no excuse for not giving quality ministry to the people around you. If you can't do it well, find someone else. If you really can't do it well,

then maybe it's time for something new in your life.

One of my heroes is Abraham. Here's a guy in his old age, ready to start collecting social security, which was probably solvent back then, as opposed to today.

[LAUGHTER]

And God visits Sarah on the way and makes her laugh when He promises her a child, and He even tells Abe in his old age to get up and go to a new land. Ministering the Lord's way is giving birth to new things even when close to retirement, or even when retired. It's getting up and going to a new place when we feel it's time to settle down.

You need to understand that, in my personal life, my career has mostly consisted of installed pastorates. Only for the last 10 years have I been wearing the uniform full time. And my personal and vocational frustration is in speaking with chaplains who confess, when they wear the uniform, that they're hooked like a drug addict on BAH.

They can't give it up. Like, I've got to have this full-time job. I've got to get the BAH; I've got to get the full-time military benefits. I've got to get this predictable military pay. And the thirst for promotion goes on.

Even in this rank that I have, at this point in my career, I receive one or two emails a month that go something like this: "Hey, Chaplain Brandt, hope you're well. I wanted to see what your timeline is for retirement so I can put my packet in for your position."

[LAUGHTER]

No. You start getting enough of those emails, you start checking your brakes when you get in the car at night.

[LAUGHTER]

Make sure there's no wires hanging out from the engine; you make sure things are OK.

[LAUGHTER]

And I'm just the National Guard. I'm not even active duty. What does Chaplain Solhjem go through? Something like that.

Ministering in the Lord's way is not asking, "Lord, may one of us sit at your right and the other at your left in the kingdom of heaven?" Let me share with you a conversation that should have never taken place, but it did. And it infuriates me.

I was on a bus at Andrews Air Force Base going to meet wounded warriors coming back from Afghanistan, and there was with me an LTC chaplain. And there were other people on the bus, OK? It was a pretty public place.

And this chaplain begins a conversation with me like, "Hey, Chaplain Brandt, do you know of any '06 billets opening up in the National Guard so I can get promoted? And I thought to myself, I understand the question, but is that the place to have it—in front of NCOs, and medical workers, and people that we're serving? Is that how we show our true colors, in conversations like that? Is ministry all about the promotion and the pay?"

Tend, feed, tend, and feed. That's the priority; that's the commitment; that's the passion. That's why I get out of bed in the morning; that's why I go to work; that's why I love being with people. That's why I wear the uniform; that's why I've got a cross above my name, because I feed, tend, and feed. And it gives me tremendous joy to do that.

That conversation would have been more appropriate in my office, not on a bus with people preparing to meet wounded warriors. My simple advice to everyone is to do the work that you're called to do.