

**“Abiding in Difference and Diversity”**

**How The Military Chaplain Corps Can Truly Embrace Plurality, Diversity, and Inclusion**

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**Abstract:** Despite the expanding diversity amongst demographics and faith backgrounds of service members, the Chaplain Corps is still largely conservative, Christian, white, middle-aged, heterosexual, cisgender, and male. As the military's make-up continues to evolve, including an ever-growing number of LGBTQIA service members, is the Chaplain Corps actively engaging concepts of diversity and inclusion in ways that truly promote and sustain spiritual health for all? Utilizing my specific experience as a chaplain in the Army National Guard, this project will consider how lack of diversity in the Chaplain Corps detracts from its primary mission to serve all and potentially harms the mental and spiritual resiliency of its service members. This project will then explore theological reflexivity, navigating towards the embrace of diversity amongst service members and the Chaplain Corps overall. The solution lies in the foundations of chaplaincy: truly honoring the first amendment and, by doing so, abiding with one another in difference and diversity.

**Note:** this project utilizes both "service member" and "Soldier" to refer to military members. The use of "Soldier" references my specific experience within the Army National Guard. I use the reference "service member" when I am speaking more broadly to the military as a whole.

## **Introduction:**

The United States prides itself on being the “great melting pot” because of its vast cultural, racial, and religious diversity. Despite its claim, however, its citizens still struggle to amplify and embrace the diversity that makes this country so unique. The military is often described as a “microcosm” of the American society.<sup>1</sup> While this is largely true, there are distinct differences that can add frustration and barriers to the lives of American military service members. Citizens, in the face of injustice and discrimination, can protest, speak out, and engage in political discourse on the topics about which they are so passionate. Military service members, however, must maintain their neutrality and be mindful of their actions and words, even among their private social media pages, regardless of their emotional spurring. In the wake of national crises such as the murders of Ahmaud Arbery, Elijah McClain, George Floyd, and Breonna Taylor, many service members struggle internally with the emotions and anger they desperately wish they could express outwardly.<sup>2</sup> It is not the nature of the military to talk, to feel, or to consider life’s most difficult questions. It is, however, the nature of the chaplain. As society, and thus the make-up of our military continues to evolve, the military Chaplain Corps must be ready to rise to the occasion to meet the equally evolving and diverse spiritual needs of its service members. Despite the expanding diversity amongst demographics and faith backgrounds of service members, the Chaplain Corps is still largely conservative, Christian, white, heterosexual, cisgender, and male. Utilizing my specific experience as a chaplain in the Army National Guard, this project will consider how lack of diversity, particularly related to LGBTQIA persons, in

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<sup>1</sup> Brenda Moore, "(Race/Ethnicity + Gender) Perceptions of Social Equality: A Preliminary Analysis of the US Active Duty Force," Defense Equal Opportunity Management Institute (August 2020): 2.

<sup>2</sup> "Military Members: A Silent Protest?," Brownstein Hyatt Farber Schreck, LLP, last modified June 24, 2020, <https://www.bhfs.com/insights/alerts-articles/2020/military-members-a-silent-protest->.

the Chaplain Corps detracts from its primary mission to serve all and threatens to harm the mental and spiritual resiliency of its service members.

### **Part I: Definition and Scope**

I cannot hide my anger to spare you guilt, nor hurt feelings, nor answering anger; for to do so insults and trivializes all our efforts. Guilt is not a response to anger; it is a response to one's own actions or lack of action. If it leads to change then it can be useful, since it becomes no longer guilt but the beginning of knowledge. Yet all too often, guilt is just another name for impotence, for defensiveness destructive of communication; it becomes a device to protect ignorance and the continuation of things the way they are, the ultimate protection for changelessness.<sup>3</sup>—Audre Lorde

Researchers have established more clearly than ever before that spirituality is intrinsically linked to overall mental health and wellbeing. One such study addressed the importance of spirituality within the recovery plans for combat veterans.<sup>4</sup> Responding to this evidence, the military has given special attention to and begun to emphasize a holistic care approach that encourages spiritual health as equally as mental, physical, and emotional health. Many branches of the military are developing specific programs, such as the Army's Holistic Health and Fitness (H2F) program.<sup>5</sup> As this renewed attention to spirituality enters the strategic discussions of our key military leaders, the Chaplain Corps moves front and center. The Chaplain Corps, on paper, is uniquely equipped to provide impactful and insightful guidance in a pluralistic, spiritually diverse military. However, an equally important question lurks beneath the surface: has the Chaplain Corps engaged and nourished the diversity within itself enough to truly be positioned to uplift its diverse service members?

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<sup>3</sup> Audre Lorde, "The Uses of Anger. KEYNOTE ADDRESS: THE NWSA CONVENTION 1981," *Women's Studies Quarterly* 9.3 (Fall 1981): 9. <https://academicworks.cuny.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1654&context=wsq>

<sup>4</sup> Smith-MacDonald, L., Norris, J. M., Raffin-Bouchal, S., & Sinclair, S, "Spirituality and Mental Well-Being in Combat Veterans: A systematic Review." *Military Medicine*, Vol 182 Issue 11-12 (November 2017): e1920-e1940. <https://doi.org/10.7205/MILMED-D-17-00099>

<sup>5</sup> United States Department of the Army, *Field Manual 7-22 Holistic Health and Fitness*, Washington, DC: Department of the Army (October 2020). [https://armypubs.army.mil/epubs/DR\\_pubs/DR\\_a/ARN30964-FM\\_7-22-001-WEB-4.pdf](https://armypubs.army.mil/epubs/DR_pubs/DR_a/ARN30964-FM_7-22-001-WEB-4.pdf).

Historically speaking, the Chaplain Corps has never been more diverse. However, this diversity does not reflect the makeup of the military overall. The Chaplain Corps is still starkly Christian, male, and white. The presence of diversity within an organization does not automatically equate to cultivating and encouraging a diverse and inclusive environment. Diversity is notably absent in many social media posts by the Army Chaplain Corps, and the references to worship or spiritual care are nearly always Christian. Despite recent diversity initiatives, the Chaplain Corps continues to struggle with diversity across the board. Military chaplains were required to be endorsed by a Christian denomination until 1862 when the prior year's commissioning of a Jewish Rabbi by a Pennsylvania Civil War unit prompted the law to change. The first non-Judeo-Christian Chaplain wasn't commissioned until 1993 when Muslim Chaplain Abdul-Rasheed Muhammad was sworn into the Army.<sup>6</sup> Since then a few more Muslim Chaplains, a handful of Buddhist Chaplains, and a single Hindu Chaplain have commissioned into the military Chaplain Corps. For reference, as of January 2024, the Army National Guard has 674 Chaplains. Only 15 of them are Jewish, one is Muslim, and the Hindu and Buddhist faiths are not represented at all.<sup>7</sup> The truth remains that the majority of our service members have never encountered a non-Christian Chaplain in their unit or career.

While a few more service members may be able to say they have encountered female Chaplains, this number also remains notably low. The same January 2024 report tracks only 42 female Chaplains; a meager 6% of the National Guard Chaplain Corps.<sup>8</sup> This is significantly lower than the 19.3% of female National Guard members captured in the 2022 military

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<sup>6</sup> The Chaplain Kit, "History of Non-Christian Chaplains," last modified April 2018. <https://thechaplainkit.com/history/history-of-non-christian-chaplains/>.

<sup>7</sup> David Evans, "1-19-24 Command and Unit Chaplain Officer Assigned Strength.xlsx," National Guard Bureau (January 2024).

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

demographics report.<sup>9</sup> In North Carolina, I was only the second female Chaplain commissioned into their National Guard Chaplain Corps. When the first female Chaplain was medically retired in 2015, I became the only female Chaplain in the state's Guard. This remained true until I transferred to the District of Columbia National Guard in 2022, leaving no female Chaplains in North Carolina at that time. Race is another barrier in the Chaplain Corps, and women of color are even rarer still. Eighty-two percent of the Army National Guard Chaplain Corps identifies as white, 11% as black, 5% as Asian, and 1% as American Indian (the remaining 1% identified as "other" or "unknown").<sup>10</sup> The percentages are even more drastic when you consider the intersectionality of race and gender. Only 4% of the Army National Guard Chaplain Corps are white females, 2% are black females, and 0.4% are Asian females. There are no female American Indian Chaplains in the National Guard.<sup>11</sup> Although the Chaplain Corps' various public presentations and advertisements depict otherwise, these percentages share an uncomfortable truth: the Chaplain Corps remains largely represented by white, Christian men. A photograph or curated presentation is unreliable evidence of true change. Moreover, it's almost impossible to raise the issue of sexuality within the Chaplain Corps as its history is overwhelmingly cisgender and homophobic. There are no National Guard Chaplain statistics to discuss the representation of LGBTQIA Chaplains, despite the knowledge that these Chaplains exist. An internet search for "gay Army Chaplain" prompts a few articles and no official Army pages. "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" was repealed from the military at large, but its sentiments remain tightly gripped in its Chaplain Corps. As painful as the truth surrounding our lack of diversity

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<sup>9</sup> Department of Defense, "2022 Demographics Profile of the Military Community," Office of the Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Military Community and Family: 70.

<https://download.militaryonesource.mil/12038/MOS/Reports/2022-demographics-report.pdf>

<sup>10</sup> Evans.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

may be, without acknowledgement it remains a sore that will fester and rot the Chaplain Corps from within.

While my project largely focuses on the direct impacts the lack of diversity has on LGBTQIA Chaplains and Soldiers, it is imperative to illustrate the damaging reverberations stemming from a lack of conversation and acknowledgement of the collective diversity in its midst. This lack of conversation permits microaggressions, ostracism, and bias (both unconscious and intentional) to remain a constant companion of the Chaplain Corps. Many of those who belong to a minority group within the Chaplain Corps, be they LGBTQIA, female, black, Asian, Muslim, Jewish, Latter-Day Saint, etc., will experience “minority stress” as a direct result of their treatment by their peers and Chaplain supervisors. “Minority stress” is defined as the “stigma, prejudice, and discrimination [that] create a hostile and stressful social climate that lead to mental health problems.”<sup>12</sup> Often, these stressors are overt enough to be distressing and damaging to the recipient but subtle enough to be denied and justified by the offending party. These microaggressions are defined as, “brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, or environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative slights and insults toward members of oppressed groups.”<sup>13</sup> I will highlight three specific moments of bias and prejudice that directly illustrate the problem facing the military Chaplain Corps.

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<sup>12</sup> Eros R. DeSouza, Eric D. Wesselmann, and Dan Ispas, “Workplace Discrimination against Sexual Minorities: Subtle and not-so-subtle,” *Canadian Journal of Administrative Sciences*, Vol 34, no. 2 (June 2017), 123.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

### **“It Was Just a Joke”**

In the weeks after George Floyd was murdered in May 2020,<sup>14</sup> a Religious Affairs NCO was promoted to Master Sergeant. In the midst of the standard congratulatory responses, a supervisory chaplain wrote the following: “Congrats Master Sergeant Drake<sup>15</sup> for a much deserving promotion. Please enjoy as the title of ‘master’ will be redacted due to current environment and we will resort to calling you ‘sergeant’ again.”<sup>16</sup> This was sent as a “reply all” on an email with roughly 15 Chaplains, ranging in rank from First Lieutenant to Colonel, one female, nearly all white, with one male BIPOC on the thread. The white supervisory chaplain was speaking to a white Master Sergeant. When called out for his “offensive and inappropriate” joke, especially considering the immense pain and anger present in the summer of 2020, he immediately became defensive, deflective, and dismissive: “it was more of an inside joke as I have observed his rise as an exceptionally intelligent NCO over the years.”<sup>17</sup>

### **“Don’t Want to be Reported”**

Another occasion involving a supervisory chaplain, in this instance a State Chaplain for the National Guard, emphasizes the misogynistic and sexist ideologies that still lurk within the Chaplain Corps. A colleague of mine in the National Guard Bureau’s Sexual Assault and Prevention Response Office was conducting an on-site visit with a state experiencing significant leadership failings when handling sexual assault and harassment reports. She sought out one-on-one time with the State Chaplain to understand how this state utilized the Chaplain Corps, especially its confidentiality, for victims of sexual assault. During the conversation surrounding

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<sup>14</sup> Chris Graves. “The Killing of George Floyd: What We Know,” MPR News, June 1, 2020, <https://www.mprnews.org/story/2020/06/01/the-killing-of-george-floyd-what-we-know>.

<sup>15</sup> Note: Name altered for this project.

<sup>16</sup> Megan Joyner, “Attention to Orders - email,” July 2, 2020.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

victims and reporting, the State Chaplain paused at his words and stated, “Oh! I probably shouldn’t have said that to you. I don’t need you thinking I’m sexist.”<sup>18</sup> In the midst of a significant site visit stemming from failures in leadership, the highest-ranking Chaplain in that state found it appropriate to joke about biting his tongue so my colleague didn’t add him to the list of reports. Would he have actually said it if my colleague was male? Does he view sexual assault and its impacts as a joke, too? How can he promote diversity and equality as a supervisory chaplain when his own words connote sexist and derogatory tones?

### **“Not Jewish Enough”**

As my Brigade built for deployment and prerequisite trainings in early 2019, many Soldiers sought assistance from their chaplains in fulfilling religious accommodations. These ranged from simple (finding adequate meditation space for Buddhist Soldiers) to the complex (religious waivers for the wearing of beards). A sister battalion had a Jewish Soldier seeking kosher Meals-Ready-to-Eat (MREs) for a month-long training in the field. While this Soldier was not actively practicing her faith during drill weekends or these longer training exercises, she strictly adhered to the dietary restrictions of her faith. She approached her chaplain to help her secure the kosher MREs that were available by request only. The chaplain, a Christian, took in her request and replied, “you’re not Jewish enough” to qualify for kosher MREs. The Soldier did not realize that she did not need to route this request through the chaplain’s office at all. Since her religion was documented as Jewish in her administrative paperwork, her supply sergeant could have placed the specific order for her. As the religious subject matter experts within their units, however, Chaplains are often engaged for resources and advocacy in receiving prompt accommodation. Instead, she encountered discrimination at the hands of her unit’s

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<sup>18</sup> Mary Hale, reported to me on January 12, 2024.

spiritual and religious leader and spent her training combing the standard MREs for the few items that qualified as kosher.

### **Fragility in the Chaplain Corps**

While I will share additional stories throughout this project, these three instances speak directly to the fragility of the Chaplain Corps. Diversity is currently a word that hardens and often infuriates those within the dominant demographics (for the Chaplain Corps this is white, male, conservative, and Christian). We have made diversity and equality buzz words that appear in numerous trainings but, in reality, pack very little punch. In many ways, these attempts amplify the microaggressions as much as it may eliminate the macro ones. The dominant group resorts to convincing those around them of exactly what they aren't—racist, sexist, or homophobic—rather than cultivating a community of what we could be—diverse, affirming, and inclusive. In her book, *White Fragility*, Robin Diangelo states,

While making racism bad seems like positive change, we have to look at how this functions in practice. Within this paradigm, to suggest that I am racist is to deliver a deep moral blow—a kind of character assassination. Having received this blow, I must defend my character, and that is where all my energy will go—to deflecting the charge, rather than reflecting on my behavior.<sup>19</sup>

We see this very problem within two of the three stories above. The chaplains, both indirectly and directly, are defensive about how they are perceived. The chaplain who made the racist joke resorted to blame and deflection when confronted, accusing me of not representing the Christian faith, and “suggesting in an open forum that a senior officer is racist and usurping the rank structure the military has in place.”<sup>20</sup> The tone of his reply demonstrates a lack of understanding in how his words might impact others in a negative way. The State Chaplain exhibited disregard

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<sup>19</sup> Robin DiAngelo and Michael Eric Dyson, *White Fragility: Why It's So Hard for White People to Talk About Racism*, Reprint edition (Boston: Beacon Press, 2018), 72.

<sup>20</sup> Joyner.

towards the serious nature of my colleague's visit and his role in promoting true equality within an organization. The Battalion Chaplain was never subsequently counseled or trained on how to provide inclusive, pluralistic care to all Soldiers. The silence of the Chaplain Corps in condemning sexist, racist, xenophobic, and homophobic actions is deafening. We are too concerned with keeping the appearance of a clean house at the expense of growth and genuine dialogue. Within this larger conversation of diversity, inclusion, and conversation, I shift the focus of this project to impacts of the lack of diversity on LGBTQIA service members and chaplains.

## **Part II: Exploration and Analysis**

As Commander in Chief, I've seen that our national security has been strengthened because we are no longer denied the skills and talents of those patriotic Americans who happen to be gay or lesbian. The ability of service members to be open and honest about their families and the people they love honors the integrity of the individuals who serve, strengthens the institutions they serve, and is one of the many reasons why our military remains the finest in the world.<sup>21</sup>—President Barak Obama

### **A Crack in the Door:**

On September 20, 2011, my journey to the Army National Guard Chaplain Corps began. The “Don't Ask, Don't Tell” policy, repealed by President Barack Obama in December 2010<sup>22</sup>, had finally gone into effect and I immediately emailed the Chaplain recruiter in North Carolina. We met two days later and my encounter was a microcosm of how a lack of diversity impacts relationships, social cues, and assumptions about the “other” in our midst. As I shared my story, particularly my recent struggles as a gay woman to find a ministerial home and my motivations

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<sup>21</sup> The White House. “Statement by the President on the One Year Anniversary of the Repeal of Don't Ask, Don't Tell,” September 20, 2012, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2012/09/20/statement-president-one-year-anniversary-repeal-dont-ask-dont-tell>.

<sup>22</sup> National Archives Foundation, “Don't Ask, Don't Tell Repeal Act of 2010,” accessed April 9, 2023, <https://www.archivesfoundation.org/documents/dont-ask-dont-tell-repeal-act-2010/>.

to join with the full repeal of Don't Ask, Don't Tell, his only response to me was "wow, if only you were black, you'd have the trifecta [of diversity]." At only twenty-four years old and extremely nervous, his words did not shock me as much as they should have. Despite my concrete qualifications, this Chaplain recruiter (and National Guard Chaplain) did not see me as an asset in that moment, he saw me as his diversity ticket. My accession into the Chaplain Corps provided North Carolina a notch on the diversity bar and a conundrum its conservative Corps was not necessarily equipped to welcome.

### **The Effects of Lack of Diversity: Chaplains, Service Members, and Mission**

Earlier I utilized the word "assumptions" in regards to the Chaplain recruiter and his interaction with the "other" in his midst. For these Chaplain "others," the assumptions made by their cis/het-white-Christian peers have lasting impacts and ramifications on trust, acceptance, and sense of safety within the larger Chaplain Corps community. In North Carolina, every Chaplain wore the cross on their uniform, the designation for a Christian Chaplain. Despite the presence of over 100 recognized Christian denominations within the military,<sup>23</sup> an assumption was regularly made that all the Chaplains ascribed to the same beliefs, theology, and worship style. When the Chaplains and their Religious Affairs Specialists would gather for training, a morning Christian devotional was always provided. Although attendance was listed as "optional," all personnel were expected to attend. Consideration for variations in the faith of the Chaplains, or the potential for non-religious or non-Christian Religious Affairs Specialists, was never shown. The Christian assumption permeated each and every event. On my last Chaplain training with the North Carolina National Guard Chaplain Corps, the State Support Chaplain

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<sup>23</sup> Department of Defense, "Faith and Belief Codes for Reporting Personnel Data of Service Members," March 27, 2017. <https://americanhumanist.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/Faith-and-Belief-Codes-for-Reporting-Personnel-Data-of-Service-Members.pdf>.

invited his local pastor to lead a training session on leadership. The pastor quickly went into a story about a woman who had struggled “with the sin of homosexuality.” I stood and walked out immediately. I did not, and would not, condone this rhetoric for an official training platform. Unbeknownst to the group at large, I was not the only gay person present that morning. A Religious Affairs Specialist had recently come out to me and was terrified to tell anyone else within the Corps. A Chaplain Candidate was gay and likewise nervous that his gender and sexuality would deter the other Chaplains from embracing him. An assumption was made that morning. Not only by the pastor but by the State Support Chaplain that invited him: everyone in this room thinks alike. This is a divisive, dangerous, and unholy assumption. All three of us were told that morning, inadvertently or not, that we did not belong. It also reinforced our own assumptions: “most GLBT persons expect religious persons to see them as less than, as sinners, as persons who are in need of correction.”<sup>24</sup>

My walk out took me straight to the State Support Chaplain and the State Religious Affairs Non-Commissioned Officer to clearly state that this was unacceptable. I had been told ten years prior that I was not seen as an equal, that I was merely a diversity token. My heart broke for the two men in that room that now received the same lesson. I call this the “ministerial wall.” Experience by experience, brick by brick, this wall grows as discrimination, alienation, and false assumptions are shown. As the wall reaches a modest height, initial trust of any new Chaplains encountered becomes all but impossible. I find myself speaking in code, attempting to see if my new colleague will allow space for me to exist in their world after they realize I am gay. And even after space feels permitted and I am allowed to join in partnership, I must wonder

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<sup>24</sup> Nancy Anderson and Jo Clare Wilson, “Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, and Transgendered (GLBT) People,” *Professional Spiritual & Pastoral Care: A Practical Clergy and Chaplain’s Handbook*, Ed Stephen B. Roberts, (Nashville: Skylight Paths Publishing, 2012): 283.

if am I ever truly embraced. This internalized battle and isolation is torturous and psychologically devastating. In her article, “Being the Only One,” Crystal Yarborough, a licensed clinical social worker with the Department of Veterans Affairs, writes poignantly on the impacts of “other” in her work as a therapist. She often found herself the only person of color in her peer groups and among her clients. Regarding her hesitancy to raise these issues in her peer groups she states,

I feared they would not be able to relate or may even trivialize my concerns. I worried about being deemed ‘too sensitive’ or ‘bringing up the race card’ when asking for consultation, given that discussions of race remain taboo even among many well-intentioned psychotherapists.<sup>25</sup>

When safety and shared experience are assumed by the majority, it is detrimental and dismissive to those who qualify as “other.” Throughout my career, I have been told by other Chaplains, “we both believe in Christ,” “we worship the same God,” or “only God can judge, it is not my place.” These comments, meant to instill comradery and trust, do just the opposite. It is of the same passive aggressive veil as “love the sin, hate the sinner.” What many Chaplains, especially those in the majority, do not realize is that when they say they support you (gay, female, non-traditional Christian) and yet remain committed to actions and language (and community) that confirm the opposite, trust becomes a one-way street. Those Chaplains may always blindly trust that I will remain present for them, but I will never truly be able to trust the same of them. It is not safe for me to do so; the ministerial wall grows higher.

The ministerial wall will take decades to truly demolish. Hundreds of years of oppressive history do not dissolve overnight. Further, the endorsing requirement for all military Chaplains adds a significant barrier to acceptance of diversity. Military Chaplains are bound by the rules

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<sup>25</sup> Crystal Yarborough, “Being the Only One: Finding Connection through the Shared Experience of ‘Otherness,’” *Smith College Studies in Social Work* 87, no. 2–3 (July 3, 2017): 191.

and practices of their endorsers. Army Regulation 165-1, the core Army regulation for the Chaplain Corps, states, “Endorsing agents represent various religious groups and each supports the pluralistic requirements of the Army without relinquishing their respective religious demands. Chaplains will inform the command when they are unable to perform (or provide) religious support because of their endorsement.”<sup>26</sup> This has led to archaic and hurtful decisions around shared chapel services, counseling practices, and Chaplain-led retreats. A Chaplain can refrain from provision of direct support to service members in the event the Chaplain’s faith and endorsing agency do not condone the topic at hand. What is intended to protect the freedom of religion for one Chaplain, isolates and fractures the communal connections with other chaplains and service members.

On a deployment, a female Chaplain was ousted unceremoniously from the Contemporary Worship team because a male Chaplain’s endorser did not permit him to share a pulpit with women. A separate male Chaplain on that same worship team preached openly against women in church leadership, abortion, and homosexuality without any regard to the fellow Chaplains on his post or the unknown Soldiers in attendance who may be directly impacted by his words. Other Chaplains have failed to refer LGBTQIA Soldiers to open and affirming Chaplains because, in their minds, doing so constitutes affirming the LGBTQIA “lifestyle” and sinful behavior. When challenged on these issues, Chaplains will often utilize their endorser’s rules for support. However, interpretation of provision of care varies widely and no policy exists to clarify these gaps and establish guidelines and procedures for conflicts with one’s faith and endorsement. When engaging with Chaplains and service members outside of

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<sup>26</sup> United States Department of the Army, “Army Regulation 165-1: Army Chaplain Corps Activities.” Washington, DC: Department of the Army (2024): 3-1a. [https://armypubs.army.mil/epubs/DR\\_pubs/DR\\_a/ARN32960-AR\\_165-1-000-WEB-1.pdf](https://armypubs.army.mil/epubs/DR_pubs/DR_a/ARN32960-AR_165-1-000-WEB-1.pdf)

one's religious tradition, Chaplains are expected to work together to ensure the spiritual needs of the service members are met. However, based on the experiences of many of the "other" Chaplains, those in the Christian majority may claim to be willing to work towards collegiality and togetherness, but their words and actions don't align. And with the strength of their endorser behind them, there is little that has ever been done to adjust these attitudes and actions.

These issues of exclusion, microaggression, and bias are becoming more paramount to address. The percentage of people identifying as LGBTQIA continues to increase. A 2021 poll conducted by the Centers for Disease Control found that just under 25% of youth identify as LGBTQIA, with the largest percentages being bisexual (11.9%) and queer (9%).<sup>27</sup> Many of these young people will soon be the next wave of service members to serve in the military.

Additionally, there is evidence that LGBTQIA persons do not necessarily report a positive relationship with religion, compared to their heteronormative counterparts. A study examining mental health in religiously diverse LGBTQIA persons "illuminates the individuality of religion's impact on LGBTQIA members. While some LGBTQIA individuals may find meaning, comfort, and social support in religion, others face discrimination, aggressions, and condemnation."<sup>28</sup> Within the Chaplain Corps, these experiences of aggression and discrimination have at least three major impacts: LGBTQIA service members, Chaplain well-being, and mission readiness.

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<sup>27</sup> Center for Disease Control, "Table 4: Number and Percentage of Students, by Sexual Identity — United States and Selected U.S. Sites, Youth Risk Behavior Surveys, 2021," Accessed April 25, 2023, [https://www.cdc.gov/healthyyouth/data/yrbs/supplemental-mmwr/students\\_by\\_sexual\\_identity.htm](https://www.cdc.gov/healthyyouth/data/yrbs/supplemental-mmwr/students_by_sexual_identity.htm).

<sup>28</sup> Craig A. Warlick et al., "Examining Fundamentalism and Mental Health in a Religiously Diverse LGBTQIA Sample," *Spirituality in Clinical Practice* 8, no. 2 (June 2021): 149-160, <https://doi.org/10.1037/scp0000228>.

## **“Religious Freedom” and Impact on LGBTQIA Service Members**

The balance of a Chaplain’s religious freedoms and the spiritual needs of their service members is one that warrants significant attention, especially as Chaplains increasingly serve on the frontlines of mental health care. The mission requirements and performance expectations of military service already amplify stress levels and emotional wellbeing. Suicidal ideation and mental health concerns are heightened amongst military members and the Department of Defense produces biannual reports to monitor these occurrences.<sup>29</sup> In the 2020 Annual Report, while most services suicide rates ranged between 24-28 per 100,000 service members, the Army National Guard’s suicide rate was almost 31 per 100,000 service members.<sup>30</sup> In the broader population, we also know that LGBTQIA individuals are 3-6 times more likely to experience suicidal ideation and attempts than their cis/het counterparts.<sup>31</sup> There must be a strong emphasis on improved and consistent access to mental health and spiritual care because of this. This means that as Chaplains entrench themselves into the holistic care of service members and the prevention programs promoting emotional well-being, they will almost certainly encounter LGBTQIA service members who are at even greater risk. Thus, we must address the moral, ethical, and religious responsibilities of chaplains to serve LGBTQIA personnel.

Army Regulation (AR) 165-1 directly links the Chaplain’s “role in response to and prevention of challenges to unit cohesion, morale, and Soldier resilience as affected by religion, such as suicide; sexual assault, harassment, and/or abuse; domestic violence; and substance

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<sup>29</sup> Department of Defense, “Annual Suicide Report: Calendar Year 2020,” accessed May 30, 2023, <https://www.dspo.mil/Portals/113/Documents/CY20%20Suicide%20Report/CY%202020%20Annual%20Suicide%20Report.pdf?ver=0OwlvDd-PJuA-igow5fBFA%3d%3d>.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid, 15.

<sup>31</sup> Rajeev Ramchand et al., “Suicidality Among Sexual Minority Adults: Gender, Age, and Race/Ethnicity Differences,” *American Journal of Preventive Medicine* 62, no. 2 (February 2022): 198. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.amepre.2021.07.012>.

abuse.”<sup>32</sup> A Chaplain’s roles and responsibilities do not start and end with religious/spiritual counseling and worship services. The spiritual implications within holistic Soldier care are immense, but many Chaplains are not equipped to step in healthily and pluralistically and religious freedom claims too easily allow them to simply opt out. Perhaps crisis situations provide for a “justified” blurring of the religious freedom argument, as urgency often narrows and refocuses a Chaplain’s priorities for care. However, this overlooks the unwelcoming groundwork already laid during the routine, day-to-day activities of the Chaplain. If an LGBTQIA Soldier is experiencing suicidal ideation, will they even entertain the Chaplain’s involvement? The door for spiritual care is likely closed long before a crisis ever arises.

In my time in the Army National Guard, the instances of these closed doors are unfortunately numerous. Worse, many Chaplains view their messages and actions as living in the footsteps and guidance of Christ. They do not see their words and actions as exclusionary and often defend the ways that they “embraced” all Soldiers despite endorsement and religious restrictions. On my deployment to Kuwait, I was often the sole unrestricted Chaplain in country. An unrestricted Chaplain can provide or perform religious services to any Soldier without reservation or constraint. I was called to meet with an LGBTQIA Soldier potentially seeking baptismal services as she prepared to return home from deployment. Going into the deployment, religion was already a contentious issue for her. She grew up in a conservative Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints community and was ostracized from this community because of her sexuality. Early in her time in Kuwait, several colleagues convinced her to go to the contemporary worship service and promised her that the service welcomed all. For the majority of her time, this was indeed her experience. The main Chaplain greeted her and engaged her in

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<sup>32</sup> Army Regulation 165-1: 8.

conversation regularly. She was open and honest about her sexuality and her wife back home. Towards the end of the deployment, the Chaplain planned and promoted a special baptismal service for the contemporary worship community. This Soldier made the decision to be baptized, having drawn closer to her faith throughout the course of her deployment. She felt the symbolism of baptism was necessary as she renewed her focus on faith and God. However, the excitement of her internal decision was soon vanquished when the Chaplain informed her that he could not baptize her because of her “homosexual lifestyle.” She was gutted and blindsided. How was this the same Chaplain who welcomed her to each service and engaged her in conversation about herself? She was offered the option of having a private baptismal service (just her) performed by a Chaplain without these restrictions. But the impact of the situation was too jarring to overcome in that moment. It was as if she were back at her childhood church, once again facing the rejection that chased her from Christianity all those years before. Some spiritual damage would still have occurred if the Chaplain had been honest about his beliefs and restrictions from the beginning; however, the spiritual embarrassment and extinguished hope could have been spared. Ironically, restricted Chaplains greatly dislike this label and insist they would ensure the spiritual request is provided, failing to recognize their onus in the damage and embarrassment of LGBTQIA Soldiers. Unless a Chaplain is truly willing to treat LGBTQIA individuals equally (i.e. baptisms, weddings, couples counseling), the banner “welcome all” is a dangerous and unholy lie.

### **“Religious Freedom” and Impact on Mission Readiness**

These interactions with LGBTQIA Soldiers simultaneously affirm the calling of progressive and LGBTQIA Chaplains and further isolate our position with the Chaplain Corps. Being the only unrestricted Chaplain in an area of operation (AO) is daunting and isolating.

Additionally, given the large number of service members in an AO, it is impossible for the unrestricted Chaplain to be a known, available resource to all LGBTQIA and other non-traditional service members. Throughout our careers, my progressive Chaplain colleagues and I have heard “I never knew Chaplains like you existed,” more times than we can count. These service members have spent most of their military careers not realizing there are Chaplains who not only affirm and uplift them for who they are, but also *are* them. LGBTQIA visibility opens doors and expands spiritual care in impactful and important ways. A mixed-methods study, published in 2021, looked at “outness” amongst LGBTQIA service members. It found that LGBTQIA service members were less likely to be out to Chaplains.<sup>33</sup> Many of the comments received during the course of the study reflected the overall assumption that Chaplains will not be accepting of LGBTQIA personnel. A bisexual Airman explained:

Honestly, nobody I know who is LGBT has ever told me that they went to see a chaplain... the two most religious members of my family are the two least tolerant of me and my girlfriend and so I think... there’s a separation that wouldn’t necessarily seek out any sort of religious services.<sup>34</sup>

Another stresses the missed opportunities for LGBTQIA service members to receive confidential Chaplain care, stating:

I know other [LGBT] people who are really anti-religion because they have had bad experiences [but] chaplains are kind of an exception to the rule as far as seeking counseling for security clearance purposes. So, yeah. I mean, to make that [mental health services] the only option, they’re robbing a lot of service members the ability to get support.<sup>35</sup>

No other entity in the military offers the confidential protections that the Chaplain provides.

Despite the progress of behavioral health services in the military, many service members still

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<sup>33</sup> McNamara, K. A., Lucas, C. L., Goldbach, J. T., Castro, C. A., & Holloway, I. W., “Even If the Policy Changes, the Culture Remains the Same: A Mixed Methods Analysis of LGBT Service Members’ Outness Patterns,” *Armed Forces & Society*, 47(3) (September 2020): 505–529. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0095327X20952136>

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

hesitate to utilize them due to fears of command disclosure or stigmatization. Combine these hesitations with concern or distrust to seek spiritual care from the Chaplain Corps and LGBTQIA service members may feel they have few options for care.

Mission readiness is the focus of every unit in the military. The call to fight our Nation's wars cannot be maintained without it. As previously mentioned, over the last decade, the military has increased its understanding on the importance of the individual service member's mental health. The Army's Field Manual (FM) 7-22, detailing their H2F program, contains an entire chapter devoted to Spiritual Readiness and explicitly calls upon the Chaplain to "support and advise" commands in their unit's spiritual readiness development.<sup>36</sup> However, as mentioned above, if large numbers of LGBTQIA Soldiers are not even attempting to seek Chaplain care, what are the ramifications and impacts of this element within the holistic health model? The importance of trust within the Chaplain Corps and overall holistic health are exemplified in two similar stories, yet with two different outcomes. While in Kuwait, an LGBTQIA Soldier discovered her wife was cheating on her and had left her financially unstable. This Soldier quickly isolated herself from others and experienced an onset of depressive symptoms in a short amount of time. Finally, a fellow company Soldier referred her to me. Initially hesitant, she ultimately decided to speak to me after her this Soldier assured her "No, no this Chaplain is cool. She's gay, too." After prolonged conversation, I assessed this Soldier and identified an immediate need for mental health support. Although initially hesitant to contact military behavioral health services, after a couple weeks under their care and guidance, the Soldier was able to return to the mission better equipped to handle the stressors she was facing.

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<sup>36</sup> Field Manual 7-22: 10-1.

In a different circumstance, a bisexual Soldier was struggling desperately with his sexuality. He did not trust behavioral health, fearing he may be accidentally outed amongst his peers and leadership. He did not trust his Chaplain because this Soldier's religious upbringing made him wary. He internalized his shame and mental health concerns until he ultimately couldn't bear the weight of them and shared his suicidal ideation with a Squad member. He was on 24-hour suicide watch until he was flown home with a Soldier escort. Not only was the suicidal Soldier out of the mission, but as many as 3-4 other Soldiers were also pulled from their normal duties during his immediate care. The mental health of our Soldiers is a mission critical requirement with impacts well beyond the individual. At the heart of it all, however, is the trust to be seen and cared for on the most basic of levels: for who we are.

#### ***“Religious Freedom” and Impact on LGBTQIA Chaplains and Allies***

The stress of isolation and otherness on LGBTQIA and ally Chaplains can lead to burnout and the question of their calling. The affirmation received when working directly with LGBTQIA or non-traditional religious Soldiers quickly dissipates as we are constantly asked to accommodate the restrictions of our more restricted Chaplain counterparts. Further complicating this, it is assumed we “understand” the dilemma conservative Chaplains face when having to choose their faith over certain Soldier situations (example: the referral of an LGBTQIA Soldier to a more appropriate Chaplain). Months before North Carolina's version of the Defense of Marriage Act was struck down by a circuit court judge in October 2014, a colleague Chaplain asked how he would “biblically counsel a gay Soldier.” The undertones to this question were clear: he could not fathom a Soldier coming to him for anything but biblical counseling and he would not be able to provide that to a gay Soldier.

Additionally, there is the never-ending cycle of “coming out.” With each new Chaplain, supervisor, or situation, our sexuality inevitably becomes a topic of conversation (and not by us). My supervisory Chaplain on deployment told every Command Chaplain in our AO that he had “eight Chaplains, one of whom was gay.” My unrestricted endorsement status may have been the more crucial update but that was overruled by my sexuality. The day-to-day of an LGBTQIA Chaplain, and ally Chaplains, can be as exhausting as it is rewarding. This constant roller coaster of emotions has led many of these Chaplains to leave the service after their initial time is served, and well before they assume any supervisory or leadership roles within the Corps. Potential Chaplain candidates don’t even apply. The mountain simply feels too steep and the effort too high.

I had the opportunity to meet with a lesbian Soldier interested in pursuing Army Chaplaincy. She was a branch officer in the National Guard and enjoyed the military but felt called to engage with Soldiers in a more meaningful way. Her Chaplain, an LGBTQIA ally, introduced us and joined us for the conversation. I chose to be honest but not blunt. I know that each experience with the Chaplain Corps can vary wildly and did not want my experiences with the North Carolina National Guard to influence her decisions. I did not name the specific instances of discrimination but rather spoke to the journey, remarking that it is not always an easy path. However, I also emphasized that the affirmation and reward of working with my unit and Soldiers were unmatched. As we departed, she promised to keep me updated with her journey, but her hesitancy was apparent. Although I didn’t speak to any specifics, she recognized some of the discrimination I spoke to, having seen it both in her state’s Chaplain Corps and her religious upbringing. The LGBTQ+ ally Chaplain that introduced her had previously spoken of his experiences with discrimination and isolation within the Chaplain Corps as a progressive

Christian. She was accepted and affirmed within the officer branch and unit with which she was currently aligned. After examining the path forward, she felt she had come too far with her own acceptance and spiritual health to jeopardize it for a fight that has no clear end in sight.

### **Moving from Radical Individualism to a Corps Community of Inclusion**

The First Amendment grants Chaplains the freedom of religion just as it does all US service members. This requires delicacy as the Chaplain Corps exists to “strike a balance between the Establishment and Free Exercise Clauses.”<sup>37</sup> The ability of those within the Chaplain Corps to practice their individual faiths is tantamount to its overall success. However, the foundation of the Corps is its recognition of religious and spiritual pluralism. If one’s faith is threatened or hindered by the requirement of pluralistic Soldier care, it is fair to question if military chaplaincy is truly their calling. The call for diversity within the Chaplain Corps is not a call to diminish or discredit the Christian (or male or conservative) majority. It is a call to embrace, within itself, the diversity that is yearning for its chance to flourish. This is an important lesson for Chaplains as we seek to engage those outside of our demographics and identities: assumptions of faith are dangerous and misguided. Christianity is the majority religion in the military, but the expanse of denominations and interpretations of this faith make it a far cry from the “one-size-fits-all” it is often treated as.

### **Part III: Construction**

Most of us were taught that God would love us if and when we change. In fact, God loves you so that you can change. What empowers change, what makes you desirous of change, is the experience of love. This alone becomes the engine of positive change.<sup>38</sup> —Father Richard Rohr

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<sup>37</sup> Army Regulation 165-1: 1.

<sup>38</sup> Richard Rohr, *Richard Rohr: Essential Teachings on Love / Selected with an Introduction by Joelle Chase and Judy Traeger*. (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, January 2018): Introduction.

It is necessary to recognize the unique challenge facing the National Guard Chaplain Corps when we speak specifically to theology and religious interpretation: many National Guard Chaplains are full-time pastors. A pastor's responsibility is to lead their religious congregation in the distinct teachings of the pastor's faith. They are being sought out by members of their community because of the pastor's specific denomination or theological leaning. Most crucial: the individual members of the congregation choose to join the pastor and the pastor's faith community. An Army chaplain's responsibility, however, is to "provide for the nurture and practice of religious beliefs, traditions, and customs in a pluralistic environment... conduct the religious programs and activities... and provide professional advice, counsel, and instruction on religious, moral, and ethical issues."<sup>39</sup> The chaplain is assigned a specific unit containing a demographically and religiously diverse group of Soldiers. Most crucial: the Soldiers have a no choice in the faith and background of their assigned chaplain.

Theology is the heartbeat that drives many Chaplains' calling into the Corps. For these Chaplains, theology doesn't just guide them, it dictates every action. I once had a fellow Battalion Chaplain say to me, "The difference between you and me, CH Joyner, is that you put the needs of your Soldiers above all else. For me, it has to start with theology." This Chaplain also proudly admitted he never referred a Soldier struggling with his sexuality because this could be seen as "affirming his sin." This illustration further emphasizes how embedded theological understandings unintentionally widen the chasm between a holistically healthy military unit and a spiritually wounded one. We are all made in the image of God and we are all so vastly and beautifully unique. Accepting humanity's expansive diversity also means acknowledging our inability to truly fathom the scope of our Creator. We may claim to acknowledge the mysteries

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<sup>39</sup> Army Regulation 165-1: 3-2a., 7.

of God, but more truthfully, it terrifies us. The ambiguity rooted in the mystery carries far more risk than many of us are comfortable with. Theology is our attempt to understand and interpret these mysteries. By deliberately examining our embedded theologies, as well as intentionally considering the theological voices of those we serve, a diverse and embracing Chaplain Corps isn't just possible, it's inevitable.

### **Embedded Theology**

Just as our race, culture, or geographical location can influence and filter our experiences, so too do our religious communities and practices. These early religious teachings embed themselves into our core and influence our thoughts and actions without any required acknowledgment on our part: they are a part of *us*. Pastoral Care and Counseling Professor Carrie Doehring defines embedded theology as:

Embedded theologies are those pre-critical and often unexamined beliefs and practices that have become a habitual part of one's worldview and practices. People may not even be aware of their embedded theology until they experience an existential crisis or de-centering experience that disrupts their world, pushing deep layers of sometimes unconscious beliefs, values, and practices to the surface.<sup>40</sup>

Embedded theology resides so deeply in our core that we often ignore our need to examine it until faced with a person or circumstance contradictory to what we've always assumed. Doehring alludes to the metaphor of an archaeologist: in these moments we must "excavate" our embedded theology and determine what elements remain impactful and important.<sup>41</sup>

Embedded theology is not innately negative. In fact, often it is our embedded theologies that ground us and provide immense comfort in times of stress. However, how we engage our

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<sup>40</sup> Carrie Doehring, "Spiritual Care After Violence: Growing from Trauma with Lived-Theology," Biola University Center for Christian Thought/The Table (June 23, 2014). <https://cct.biola.edu/spiritual-care-violence-growing-trauma-lived-theology/>.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

embedded theology, especially in conversation and care of others, matters significantly. Embedded theology can leave a path of unparalleled destruction when one wields it out of fear and control. Embedded theology should be viewed as a bedrock, a foundation, upon which to build a more expansive and reflexive theology. Gustavo Gutierrez explains, “A theology which has as its points of reference only ‘truths’ which have been established once and for all—and not the Truth which is also the Way—can be only static and, in the long run, sterile.”<sup>42</sup> God’s love is not static or sterile. It is evolving, complex, and mysterious. Our embedded theology should be a tool that provides confidence and hope as we dive into the questions and experiences that reform our faith. We do not have to completely disown the core of our theological roots, but we likewise cannot stubbornly hide beneath the embedded truths that may only exist within our context and spiritual community.

### **Theological Reflexivity**

In contrast to sterile or static faith, theological reflexivity invites us into a more dynamic, maturing faith. This approach is also not specific to any one religious or spiritual background and is especially important for chaplains, as spiritual caretakers, to implement and engage as we provide support to the religiously diverse Soldiers within our units. Here is Doehring’s description of theological reflexivity:

The process of theological reflexivity begins at this personal level in conversations that hold us responsible for identifying embedded theologies formed in childhood that still exert an influence which may be life-giving and life-limiting for us and/or others. Theological education, especially the kind of experiential education available through spiritually oriented clinical internships and clinical pastoral education, equips pastoral caregivers to think critically about these childhood theologies and whether they are still relevant and life-giving.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Gustavo Gutierrez. *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics, and Salvation*. (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1988): 10.

<sup>43</sup> Doehring.

Two phrases stand out from this description: “life-giving” and “life-limiting.” Theology can both confine us personally to a static, immobile worldview, and can also leach onto others and contribute to a wider degradation of spiritual health. Likewise, theology can enrich and promote holistically healthy spiritual lives when engaged reflexively and in the consideration of others’ worldviews. In a separate article, Doehring explains four ways one promotes theological reflexivity:

1. tracking their personal theology/orienting system (stress-related and intentional beliefs, values, and practices for coping) and discerning how it shapes a care-giving relationship;
2. using their theological education to assess whether their personal theologies are life-giving or life-limiting in particular contexts and in the ways that intersecting social oppressions attribute suffering to aspects of one’s social identity/religious authorities;
3. being accountable for drawing upon their theological education to assess the careseeker’s embedded beliefs, values, and practices; and
4. drawing upon personal as well as public theologies to collaborate with careseekers in co-constructing life-giving contextual beliefs and values that can be tested in practice.<sup>44</sup>

These four elements to theological reflexivity mirror the education and expectations of the Clinical Pastoral Education (CPE) programs across the spiritual care community. While the military does not require any units of CPE for entry into military chaplaincy, CPE’s concepts of self-reflection, reflexive theology, and empathy towards others is crucial to the overall success of the Chaplain Corps. In my own experiences of reflexive theology, I have discovered that spirituality is a far broader gift than I could have conceived from solely my own embedded theology. I came to understand shame as a spiritual distress, forgiveness as a holy blessing, and the sanctity of walking alongside others in their own spiritual discoveries.

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<sup>44</sup> Doehring. “Teaching Theological Empathy to Distance Learners of Intercultural Spiritual Care,” *Pastoral Psychology* 67, no. 5 (April 2018): 465.

When we take time to reflect on the world around us, and how our own theology fits in, we permit space to uncover the deeper mysteries of God. God does not reside in only the boxed safety of the Bible or the embedded theology we cling to. Gutierrez states, “Theology must be critical reflection on humankind, on basic human principles.”<sup>45</sup> These “basic human principles” are not confined to the interpretations of one person or religious group. Rather we must be ready to engage and review these principles through the eyes of those we care for in order to truly open our spiritual selves to an empathic and pluralistic chaplain practice.

As Chaplain and Professor Martha Jacobs explains, “chaplains must be able to move aside their own belief system(s)/theology and support the system of the person to whom they are providing chaplaincy care.”<sup>46</sup> Theological reflexivity is not denying oneself but rather uplifting all of our God’s creation. It points to the Sanskrit term *namaste*, a Hindu greeting of “I bow to the divine in you.” As Jacobs continues, she acknowledges, “In the end, my theology has become stronger and firmer as I have come to embrace the other and welcomed the other into my heart.”<sup>47</sup> Reflexive theology elevates embrace over fear and growth over assumption. When we truly take the time to examine the spirituality and experience of those we care for, our own personal lenses grow and the beauty of God’s love is granted space to nourish us all.

### **Theological Reflexivity and Genesis**

The creation narratives found in Genesis 1 and 2-3 illustrate how theological reflexivity can be utilized in the ministry and care of the Chaplain Corps. These passages are well known by many and shared across multiple faiths. By reexamining these stories and diving into the

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<sup>45</sup> Gutierrez, 9.

<sup>46</sup> Martha R. Jacobs, “Creating a Personal Theology to Do Spiritual/Pastoral Care.” *Professional Spiritual & Pastoral Care: A Practical Clergy and Chaplain’s Handbook*. Ed Stephen B. Roberts (Nashville: Skylight Paths Publishing, 2012): 11.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*

subsequent impacts on theology, we can begin to consider how theological reflexivity is a critical chaplain tool, especially in the presence of theological disagreements. Genesis 1:1-2:4a offers the first biblical account of creation, where God crafts the earth and all beings out of a chaotic void.<sup>48</sup> While it mentions the creation of “humankind” collectively in its account (not man and woman separately), its call to “be fruitful and multiply” (v. 28) has historically been used to justify a heteronormative, binary structure of creation.<sup>49</sup> Genesis 2:4b-3:24 is an etiological story depicting the beauty of this world, all humans created from the same god; a shared history that roots us together, no matter how different. I challenge that a dominant Christian interpretation of these text leads us away from unity and grace and into further division and discord. Our westernized reading of Genesis often overlooks the cultural norms and expectations of ancient culture found within its pages. Biblical Scholar Michael Carden notes, “Many of the stories of Genesis have been appropriated as a basis for conservative gender and sexual codes. The Genesis stories are used to give a trans-temporal and thus essentializing quality to what are often fairly recent normative social constructions.”<sup>50</sup>

To begin, I draw upon the words of biblical scholar Yair Zakovitch:

Whenever we want to interpret a biblical narrative, we find ourselves facing the challenge of determining its borders and context: is the narrative an independent literary unit that should be understood without connection to its literary context, or was it written, from the start, as part of a larger cycle of stories onto which it casts its light and from which it receives light? This question must be asked in the course of analyzing each and every biblical narrative. No single answer exists for all.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> Michael D. Coogan, *New Oxford Annotated Bible*, 3<sup>rd</sup> Edition (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989): 11.

<sup>49</sup> Ellen T. Armour and Susan M. St Ville, *Bodily Citations [Electronic Resource]: Religion and Judith Butler / Edited by Ellen T. Armour and Susan M. St. Ville.*, Gender, Theory, and Religion (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006).

<sup>50</sup> Michael Carden, "Genesis," *Queer Bible Commentary*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition, ed by Mona West and Robert E. Shore-Goss (London: SCM Press, 2022), 7.

<sup>51</sup> Yair Zakovitch, “Inner-Biblical Interpretation,” in “Reading Genesis : Ten Methods,” accessed November 29, 2023 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010): 96. <https://web-s-ebsochost-com.proxy.library.vanderbilt.edu/ehost/ebookviewer/ebook?sid=6481677d-8113-476d-ad68-a77b876bf346%40redis&vid=0&format=EB>. edited by Ronald Hendel

Theology, faith, spirituality... they are uniquely terrifying and beautiful. Terrifying because there is so much unknown, so much mystery within this creation existence. Yet this is precisely what makes it equally so beautiful. Our collective existence, together, is also part of the interpretation. The words in the texts of Genesis, the interpretations throughout history, and the experiential lens of each person who encounters the story *all* connect us to the roots of existence and to each other. How are we to know everything and be so certain in the midst of this truth? We should not be afraid to explore and invite the uncertainty into our theological space. This reflexivity allows us to examine theology from a multitude of perspectives and better meet others where they are, not where our personal theology tells them to be. As we dive into the text, may the words of theologian Susannah Cornwall serve as a guide:

[Theology] has often preferred to fall back on prescriptive (and proscriptive) ‘certainties’ which privilege the status quo. The erasure of a whole swathe of bodies and experiences demands a theological response motivated not by fear but by a desire to expand the ways in which human lives and bodies tell stories.<sup>52</sup>

To embrace and serve within the vastness of our calling, we need a grounding theology not motivated primarily by fear but alive in wonder, mystery, and compassion.

Our grounding of theological reflexivity in faith also reminds us that Genesis does not solely belong to the Christian faith.<sup>53</sup> Scholar Marcus Borg expounds, “They are not God’s stories of the world’s beginnings; rather they are ancient Israel’s stories of the world’s beginnings.”<sup>54</sup> As mentioned, Genesis’ creation stories are found in other faiths as well, further emphasizing the need for openness within its interpretations. More importantly, it began as an oral story that was passed on, generation to generation, until it was finally written in the ancient

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<sup>52</sup> Stephanie A. Budwey, *Religion and Intersex: Perspectives from Science, Law, Culture, and Theology* (Abingdon, Oxon; Routledge, 2023), 1.

<sup>53</sup> Carden, 7.

<sup>54</sup> Marcus J. Borg, *Reading the Bible Again For the First Time: Taking the Bible Seriously But Not Literally*, Revised edition (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2002); 62.

Hebrew language. Its vowelless symbols and use of diacritical signs (if included at all) instead continue to leave plenty of educational assumption for translators. Moreover, Dr. Annalisa Azzoni, in her work on the subject, contends that Genesis 1, particularly 1:26-27, argues for inclusive interpretation of gender and creation, not a binary one. Azzoni translates verse 27: “And G-d created the earthing in G-d’s image, in the image of G-d G-d created it; male and female G-d created them.”<sup>55</sup> In her work, *Religion and Intersex*, Dr. Stephanie Budwey accentuates Azzoni’s attention to the text’s flow from singular to plural, for both earthling and G-d, immediately mentioning Justin Sabia-Tanis’ recognition that God’s self extends far beyond the binary understandings of gender.<sup>56</sup> This consideration of the passage and God’s image require us to actively engage the possibilities of gender on a spectrum. God is not male, God is not female. God is not binary, but limitless. Budwey contends, “In other words, God created humans in God’s image, reflecting the multiplicity of all the possibilities of all manifestations of sex/gender on a spectrum between the poles of ‘female’ and ‘male.’”<sup>57</sup> An Interview Partner for Budwey’s article interpreted Azzoni’s translation one step further: “from male TO female” God created them.<sup>58</sup> These creation texts challenge us to think reflexively about gender and creation, and thus to engage in theological reflexivity within our own understanding and interpretations. Acknowledging these expanded views of creation likewise inform our own care of the “other.” If gender can be seen as a spectrum, and God’s image as limitless, then truly all creation—to absolutely include gay, straight, asexual, intersex, transgender, and beyond—are blessed, intentional creations of God.

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<sup>55</sup> As cited in Budwey, *Religion and Intersex*; 135.

<sup>56</sup> Budwey, p. 135

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

<sup>58</sup> Interview Partner. Ibid.

These texts in Genesis highlight the need for questioning, grace, and fluidity when we engage one another. The narratives and bible stories of many of our childhoods simply do not align with our lived experience. A closer look at the original text shows us that perhaps the rigid, certainty-filled interpretations so many have been taught are not the only interpretations available. As I reflect on my own childhood, filled with shame, otherness, and inauthenticity, I wonder how consideration for a non-binary (more specifically non-male), limitless Creator may have opened the door to grace and acceptance. Recognizing our unique yet shared creation in the image of God offers pathways further into the holy, wonderful mystery of our faith and universe. So I ask: does our current discord and lack of willingness to see faith from another lens start with creation? While the ultimate answer stretches far wider than one creation tale, it certainly dictates much of the conversation (“God made Adam and Eve, not Adam and Steve”). It can either set the stage for the dehumanization and de-sanctification of each other *or* remove the human-imposed barriers, allowing us all to see each other as God does, beautiful and marvelous.

For the Christian faith, Christ serves as another example in the case for theological reflexivity. Within the pages of the four gospels, Jesus’ own words and parables speak to the constant consideration and experience of the other. Judgment and condemnation are reserved for the religious elite, deceivers, and inhospitable hosts. The parables initiate reflection, introspection, and consideration for community. Why then, are Christian chaplains, Jesus’ modern-day followers, acting more the part of the religious elite than heeding the words of their Christ? Does Jesus not lay the groundwork for theological reflexivity within the very pages of these gospels? Amy-Jill Levine encourages the use of midrash, a Rabbinic interpretation method, as Christians navigate these passages and the implications within them.<sup>59</sup> This practice is utilized

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<sup>59</sup> Amy-Jill Levine, “When the Bible becomes weaponized: Detecting and disarming Jew-hatred,” *Studia Theologica*. Vol. 75 Issue 2 (December 2021): 197. <https://web-p-ebshost->

by an artist, David Hayward, in his work “Images of Christ.”<sup>60</sup> His framed print resides in my office, illustrating a profound interpretation of this person, Jesus. It serves as a beautiful reminder of the diversity and inclusion that is represented in the stories of Christ and, thus, ultimately of God.



Hayward is a former pastor who experienced a slow yet drastic deconstruction of his faith. As he began to research and learn more about other world religions and experiences, he acknowledged a profound awakening. He states, “In a flash I saw that we are all connected, one, at a deep and fundamental level. I saw that there is one reality, but countless articulations of it.”<sup>61</sup> This is quite apparent in this specific piece of art. Just as God created all of us in the image of God’s holy and wondrous self, so too does Christ reflect in the voices and stories of each and every person.

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com.proxy.library.vanderbilt.edu/ehost/detail/detail?vid=4&sid=fafb9d49-8bcc-4e76-a4df-e8ab3304d9c9%40redis&bdata=JnNpdGU9ZWhvc3QtbGl2ZSdzY29wZT1zaXRl#AN=153311380&db=rlh

<sup>60</sup> David Hayward, “Images of Christ - Christ Collage Print,” nakedpastor, accessed December 11, 2023, <https://nakedpastor.com/products/christ-collage-images-of-christ-print>.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid. accessed December 11, 2023, <https://nakedpastor.com>

Though a chaplain may be standing on a religious rule, for example when they limit the types of counseling they may provide to a LGBTQIA Soldier, they often overlook the greater theological implications. Theological reflexivity allows the chance to not only reflect on the voices and stories impacting our individual faiths, but also to truly allow space for the voices and stories of those we serve. As the stories and images of Christ illustrate, what Jesus truly stood against was assumptions and rigidity.

While I cannot expect this theological interpretation of Creation or the Christian Christ to be universally accepted (nor would I ask it to—remember, the vastness of God and the limitations of translation prevent any true certainty in my opinion), I do hope this interpretation offers consideration for the theological reflexivity required within our work as chaplains. Our work has the ability to create space for holy and sacred encounters with God. It also has the power to drive those we care for further into spiritual distress and doubt. Consideration for the other's experience, that our view of God is not the only view, that our Creator cannot be limited by binary or singular interpretations, may just bring the holy one closer than imaginable, for both our service members and ourselves.

#### **Section IV: Strategic Suggestions for Practice**

##### **The Way Ahead**

###### BLESSING OF BREATHING

That the first breath  
will come without fear.  
That the second breath  
will come without pain.  
The third breath:  
that it will come without despair.  
And the fourth,  
without anxiety.  
That the fifth breath  
will come with no bitterness.  
That the sixth breath

will come for joy.  
Breath seven:  
that it will come for love.  
May the eighth breath  
come for freedom.  
And the ninth,  
for delight.  
When the tenth breath comes,  
may it be for us  
to breathe together,  
and the next,  
and the next,  
until our breathing  
is as one,  
until our breathing  
is no more.  
—Jan Richardson<sup>62</sup>

This poem by Jan Richardson is found in a collection of her poetry entitled *The Cure for Sorrow*. While she wrote many of these from the viewpoint of the grief of losing her husband, this poem speaks to me from the grief and anguish I have often felt as a tolerated member of the Chaplain Corps. I dream of a Chaplain Corps where, at introduction to a new Chaplain colleague I can take that first breath, to breathe without fear. That the fourth breath will come and I will forget that anxiety was ever necessary in such an encounter. I pray my eighth breath represents the freedom of a diverse and welcoming Chaplain Corps, truly embracing the diversity that makes it so beautiful. I hope, I dream, I seek our journey of breathing, together, emboldened by our collective call to provide holistic spiritual care to all within our ranks.

### **Embracing Diversity within the Corps and Soldiers [Individual Readiness]**

Individual Readiness is the crucial building block from which every other success will hinge. A well-built course of action or mission plan will mean little if there are no Soldiers

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<sup>62</sup> Jan Richardson. "The Blessing of Breathing." *The Cure for Sorrow* (Wanton Gospeller Press, 2016), 90.

holistically healthy enough to conduct it. This makes it all the more important that the Chaplain Corps intentionally and intrinsically defines its role and purpose as the “Subject Matter Experts” of religion and spirituality within a pluralistic military environment. Individual spiritual readiness of all Soldiers, whether gay, Hispanic, Jewish, Muslim, white, transgender, atheist, etc., must be considered and given the same priority as those Soldiers within our own religious and spiritual traditions. In my interactions with other Chaplains, I have been most impressed with the fundamental understanding of these principles by Chaplains of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints (LDS) tradition. In the subsequent paragraphs, I will highlight key sections of the LDS Chaplain Guidebook which I believe the Chaplain Corps should consider as a thoughtful challenge and measure to develop the Chaplain Corps own modern-day Chaplain Policy. What it offers is a focus on the spiritual health and priorities of others, in our instance our diverse Soldiers, while simultaneously remaining true to the personal faith that prompted our call to military chaplaincy.

When we look at some of the “hot-button” issues that tend to divide restricted and unrestricted chaplains, we can see transgender rights coming under increasing scrutiny. While the military has largely implemented policy to support transgender Soldiers, feelings of uncertainty and ostracism rightfully remain. Knowing the increased mental and spiritual health stressors transgender individuals face, the Chaplain Corps should consider spiritual care to this demographic of utmost importance and concern. However, I have heard one too many sermons and witnessed too many social media posts by military Chaplains disparaging and lamenting such a “woke” agenda. Here is an area where the LDS faith has utilized its Chaplain Guidebook to impart wisdom and care in the place of judgement and shame. In Section 3.4.3.2, “Counseling Transgender Individuals,” it instructs:

Some people experience feelings of incongruence between their biological sex and their gender identity. As a result, they may identify as transgender (in this section, the term transgender includes those who identify as nonbinary or gender fluid). The Church does not take a position on the causes of people identifying as transgender. Transgender individuals face complex challenges. When a chaplain provides pastoral counseling to these individuals, he or she should do so with sensitivity, kindness, compassion, and an abundance of Christlike love. All are welcome to attend Church meetings and activities as long as their attendance and behavior are consistent with the meeting's purpose. If a transgender individual requests counsel regarding behaviors that conflict with the doctrines of the Church (such as sexual relationships or physical intimacy) or requests counsel regarding topics that are otherwise beyond the capabilities of the chaplain, those individuals or couples should be referred.<sup>63</sup>

Although brief, this paragraph acknowledges transgender individuals in a way that is congruent with their demands for the LDS Chaplains: sensitive, kind, and openminded. I have seen this exact instruction lived out amongst an LDS Chaplain colleague. An Army Active Duty Chaplain had been counseling a transgender Soldier for months when the Soldier received orders to relocate to a new installation. This Soldier had only recently been living outwardly as a transgender individual and the thought of changing units, especially in joining a Special Forces unit, terrified them. The Chaplain, recognizing the extreme duress and degrading mental health of this individual, walked alongside them, ensuring they had access to mental health resources as well as a safe place to name their concerns. This Chaplain gained the trust of the individual by simply providing presence and compassion. Their difference in spirituality was a non-issue (this Soldier is agnostic). Therefore, as the orders to relocate approached, the Soldier embraced and permitted the referral to a friend and fellow Chaplain near the Soldier's new installation.

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<sup>63</sup> The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints. *Chaplain Guidebook* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2023): 6-7.  
[https://assets.churchofjesuschrist.org/70/79/707985bd4dac11ee9cb0e9eeac1eca0544acfc0f/chaplain\\_guidance\\_of\\_the\\_church\\_of\\_jesus\\_christ\\_of\\_latter\\_day\\_saints.pdf](https://assets.churchofjesuschrist.org/70/79/707985bd4dac11ee9cb0e9eeac1eca0544acfc0f/chaplain_guidance_of_the_church_of_jesus_christ_of_latter_day_saints.pdf)

The Chaplain did not know an Active Duty Chaplain to which he could safely refer this individual, so he called me, a nearby National Guard Chaplain. With the Soldier's permission, he provided a thorough, detailed hand-off. The Chaplain wanted this Soldier to experience a smooth, safe transition to their new unit. It did not matter to him that the Soldier lived a truth incongruent with his church's teachings. It simply mattered that the holistic health of this individual was considered. Because this Chaplain opened this door, I was also able to refer this Soldier to the lead of the installation's Transgender Care Team, a psychologist aptly trained to assist them in their transition, both to a new duty location and their continued adjustment to life as their true self.

The actions of my Chaplain colleague also illustrate the importance of referrals. When we utilize the resources and wisdom around us, we cannot possibly fathom the full scope of expanded care this provides the individual. The Chaplain simply wanted to ensure a smooth transition for their Soldier by referring to a colleague they knew to be open, affirming, and safe. In combining our collective knowledge, this Soldier received far more care than either of us could have imagined during the initial referral. An appropriate referral and warm hand-off to a more aptly trained or experienced professional (in the example above, a fellow Chaplain) further amplifies the voice of the person within our care. A referral made with consideration and empathy expands the impact of chaplaincy into a system that not only works to hear the needs of those we serve, but to meet them with an intentional fervor as if those needs were our own.

Two areas in particular often lack the consideration of referral: spiritual counseling, specifically Christian-based counseling, and Christian worship services. In fact, I understand why many fellow chaplains may have read that last line and asked, "why would we?"...particularly in the relation to worship. However, these are two areas where the

restrictions of a Chaplain's endorsing agency may indeed mean a referral is the most appropriate option, even if it is not explicitly requested by the Soldier. I highlight again to the gay Soldier in Section II who spent an entire deployment invested in a Chaplain's specific worship service only to be told she could not be baptized by him as her time in Kuwait drew to a close. This Chaplain knew that this Soldier was gay and likewise knew that the Soldier was struggling with feeling at home in a worship community. This Soldier was not questioning their sexuality or whether they could be gay and Christian. They simply wanted a place to feel accepted and embraced as they worshipped their God. The Chaplain always knew there were restrictions to his care and restrictions to his worship's actions in regards to this Soldier. His silence indirectly communicated an inaccurate acceptance that ultimately set her up for a spiritual betrayal. This betrayal would further damage this Soldier's spiritual and mental health as well as the greater trust in the Chaplain Corps. As Chaplains, we do not get to choose the second and third order effects of our actions (or lack thereof) and thus must be quite careful with what we are communicating.

After her baptismal rejection, the Soldier went back to her friends and fellow Soldiers within her platoon and shared her despair. Many were as equally outraged as she was spiritually hurt. After I was brought in to speak with this Soldier, I silently lamented the damage that was done. The Chaplain never once implied to this Soldier that her sexuality may hinder her receipt of his ministry. She was blindsided and heartbroken while her friends bore her pain in their anger. The trust in the Chaplain Corps was lessened and the spiritual readiness within this unit faltered. Soldiers do not operate in a vacuum, nor do the choices of our ministry. Transparency, even the awkward or painful kind, allows for conversation, and it is in conversation that trust and understanding are built. When you truly respect those you are "appointed to serve," you own

your limitations and ensure you come equipped with the resources that make them obsolete. No Chaplain is equipped to individually provide full care for those they serve; the Corps needs each other.

One of the most refreshing elements of the LDS Chaplain Guidebook is the fact it names, very purposefully, the restrictions their Chaplains will face. Same-sex marriage may be an obvious restriction for a LDS Chaplain, but the restriction comes with an equal expectation: while the LDS Chaplain may not perform same-sex marriages or certain counseling/care of same-sex couples, they shall seek out resources who can. Section 3.4.3.1, “Counseling Individuals about Same-Sex Attraction,” states:

When a chaplain provides pastoral counseling to LGBTQ individuals or couples, he or she should do so with kindness, compassion, and a caring attitude—never in a condescending or judgmental manner. If LGBTQ individuals or couples request counsel regarding same-sex relationship issues or behaviors that conflict with the doctrines of the Church (such as same-sex sexual relationships or physical intimacy) or request counsel regarding topics that are otherwise beyond the capabilities of the chaplain, those individuals or couples should be referred to professionals who specialize in such counseling.<sup>64</sup>

Any attempt to explain this importance would be an understatement. Often Chaplains are hesitant to name their restrictions because they fear the backlash and claim to live by the “welcome all” mantra. However, as noted previously, this can lead to messy situations that not only degrade the trust of the individual Soldier but others within the platoon or unit as well. In my nine years of military chaplaincy, I have spent significant time ensuring Soldiers that the cross on my chest does not equal judgment or indifference. In the moment, I absorb their distrust and offer a new perspective, but it consumes me emotionally and spiritually. The ministerial wall is exhausting to climb. The time is ripe for a military Chaplain handbook, perhaps following the lead of the LDS

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<sup>64</sup> The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, 18.

community, that insists on an honest and transparent Chaplain Corps. It is time we made it clear that when we say “we serve all,” it’s not with an asterisk, but with an lemniscate, because the scope of those we serve is infinite.

### **Expounding Diversity within the Corps and Unit-Wide Spiritual Care [Mission Readiness]**

This is where individual readiness merges with mission readiness. Mission readiness requires holistically healthy individuals who trust in the leadership and organization in which they belong. For Chaplains, laying the foundation for a spiritually ready unit means understanding and uplifting the pluralistic and diverse populations within their units. Just as a Chaplain can amplify or hinder the trust of an individual Soldier with words and actions, the Chaplain’s messaging and actions in unit wide events and trainings can build or erode trust as well. Our words matter and Soldiers are not only listening to our words to demonstrate our commitment to our personal faith/ethic; they are listening intently for how we demonstrate our commitment and care to their unique faith, too.

This is witnessed in how Chaplains offer their messages and prayers at mandatory unit functions. In a mandatory event, the Soldiers present do not have a choice to abstain from the occasion, regardless of personal faith or belief. Our Chaplain policy already encourages us to be mindful of these mandatory events as we prepare our words. Something as simple as removing “in Jesus name,” can shift the reception of those in attendance because of the consideration the absence conveys. Though such a decision may feel subtle or unnecessary, to the non-Christian Soldiers in attendance, the absence of those three words speaks volumes. Their own faiths were respected; their Chaplain genuinely means “all” when they speak. The LDS Chaplain Guidance recognizes the power of intentionality in our public prayers (and words). Section 3.9, “Offering Public or Private Prayers,” explains:

When providing a prayer at a mandatory function, chaplains must be sensitive and respectful to all present and follow general, inclusive guidelines established by their supervisors. In this setting, chaplains function in their institutional or governmental role. A chaplain's participation at mandatory functions is classified as government or institutional speech, not religious worship.

When providing these interfaith prayers, ending the prayer in the name of Jesus Christ may be offensive to non-Christian attendees who are required to be present. In such situations, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints chaplains may end their prayers using words such as "in His holy name, amen" or "in His sacred name, amen." Additional examples include "For these things we pray in Your holy name, amen" or for Abrahamic religious groups you can use "In the name of the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, amen," or the However, when The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints chaplains are functioning in their ecclesiastical role and are giving a prayer in a Christian or Latter-day Saint worship service where those in attendance have come voluntarily, they should close the prayer with "in the name of Jesus Christ, amen."<sup>65</sup>

The LDS Guidebook identifies a crucial element about mandatory events: they are not a time of worship. This is not a situation where the Chaplains own personal faith views are appropriate. In a mandatory event, the Chaplain represents the entirety of that unit and organization. Carefully constructing a prayer that is respectful to all faiths and persons in attendance is a requirement, not an option. My Chaplain mentor took this responsibility seriously and added "As I pray according to my faith, I invite you to do the same" before every prayer she offered. She would even repeat it for the benediction despite having already said it at the invocation. She closed her prayers with a simple "amen." Even as a young Chaplain Candidate, her words impacted my development. I was in awe of her consideration for everyone in her audience. To this day, I honor her and all the Soldiers in my own audience with her opening words. However, I did not truly consider that Soldiers actually listened to these words until a Norse Pagan Soldier in attendance at a Change of Command ceremony approached me after the event. "Ma'am, I had

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<sup>65</sup> The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, 8.

not ever heard a Chaplain say that before. I'm pagan and don't generally think much of the prayers... but I appreciated your words."

I have heard time and again that the younger generation of Soldiers is lost and don't necessarily care about the Chaplain Corps or faith. This is false. They are deeply spiritual and inquisitive. However, many of them do not find God strictly in the pages of the Bible or stories of Christ. Our consideration of these differences in mandatory events amplifies our collective pluralistic voice. It does not diminish the Chaplain's personal Christian one.

This call to be mindful of our unit's pluralistic spiritual practices does not rest with mandatory unit functions. Indeed, particularly in the Army, the Chaplain is anywhere and everywhere their Soldiers are. Too often, these ministry of presence moments are viewed as unmistakable evangelical opportunities. Chaplains are not missionaries. Our purpose within our organization is not to convert Soldiers to Christ or hit a baptismal quota. However, we are quick to post social media clips of the baptisms and altar calls offered each week. Simultaneously, we never post of Friday Jum'ah prayers of our Muslim Soldiers. Or the weekly open circle celebrating their Pagan practices. This is a great discredit to our Soldiers and our mission readiness. We are free, as Chaplains, to live and display our faith. Within this, our goal cannot be to grow our own faith group. Those motives are for the missionaries, pastors, and churches. In the LDS Chaplain Guidebook, they astutely highlight this practice, discouraging it from the onset. Section 6.6 "Proselytizing" states:

Chaplains should be exemplary in the way they live the gospel of Jesus Christ and how they interact with others. They may answer inquiries regarding their beliefs and religious practices but should not engage in proselytizing activities with those they serve in their chaplain ministry. Those desiring to actively investigate the teachings of the Church should be referred to the full-time missionaries.<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, 18.

I appreciate how, even in the midst of an interaction with a genuinely inquisitive faith seeker, the LDS Chaplain Guidebook explicitly calls for the Chaplain to refer outward to the church. This allows the Chaplain to maintain the boundaries already in place of their profession. It is a difficult tightrope for even the most trained, to balance the true needs of the seeker without displaying a bias towards our own personal faith. No, it is not impossible, but it is unlikely that the deeper we dive into our own personal faith tenants with a Soldier, we maintain the ability to foster reflective spiritual curiosity. It is natural that leading, navigating, and pointed direction circumvent even our best intentions. When we blur the line between Chaplain and proselytizer, we shrink our ministry to only those interested in hearing faith from our perspective. The unit's spiritual voice is diminished and the opportunities for a spiritually nourished unit are eliminated.

### **Abiding With Each Other In Difference and Diversity**

Military service members are waiting to be seen, nourished, and authentically cared for. With a few intentional, proactive adjustments, the Chaplain Corps is capable and ready to provide exactly that.

- Require Clinical Pastoral Education as part of military Chaplain accessions packets
- Chaplain-specific training vignettes centered on respectful, pluralistic care to all service members (with a focus on topics such as microaggressions, unconscious bias, cultural sensitivity)
- Mandatory referrals when service members' needs exceed the parameters of a Chaplain's endorser
- Development of a Chaplain Guidebook, utilizing the LDS Chaplain Guidebook as a resource, to ensure clear, effective guidance on the expectations and actions of military Chaplains

The adjustments do not require a chaplain to act in a manner incongruent with their faith nor do they require drastic adjustment to the endorsement community. It simply calls for accountability and enforcement of the very principles we chaplains are constitutionally expected to uphold. The final tenet of the LDS Chaplain Guidebook this project will consider should likewise be the most obvious for our Corps to live into. Section 4.2, "Relationships with Other Chaplains" calls for

the collegiality and teamwork that ensures our service members are always provided for as their holistic needs demand. It states:

Since Latter-day Saint chaplains operate in an interfaith environment, all efforts should be made to meet and develop positive relationships with fellow chaplains from other faith traditions, as well as with other Latter-day Saint chaplains who are serving within the same or another organization. Other chaplains can also be utilized to perform faith tradition specific ordinances, rituals, and spiritual care as necessary.<sup>67</sup>

LGBTQIA Chaplains simply desire a seat at the table. We long to be engaged and utilized in the same manner as the rest of the Chaplain Corps. It is exhausting living behind the ministerial wall, climbing over to contribute yet never able to fully feel embraced or acknowledged. Just as other diverse minority groups have done, LGBTQIA Chaplains work harder to prove themselves and often live in the fear one unavailability or misstep could spell the end of their chance to belong. I have flown to the Midwest in the middle of a snowstorm to ensure a transgender Soldier and her wife could attend a chaplain-led couples' retreat.<sup>68</sup> We have been accommodators to the restricted chaplains who refuse to work collegially with us. We are asked to understand their limitations despite them never being asked to understand our right to exist. When I first joined in 2012, it was nice to simply be in the room. I was more than happy to eat the breadcrumbs that fell from the table and mouths of my peers. However, this cannot be the status quo. It is not what a truly diverse and healthy chaplain corps looks like. Toleration is little more than veiled disdain. We must be done "picking our battles;" the time to demand change is now. Not simply for the sake of the emotional and mental health of the LGBTQIA and other minority chaplains within the Corps; but also for the Soldiers that demand and deserve better. Author bell hooks writes:

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<sup>67</sup> The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, 13.

<sup>68</sup> Chaplain-led couples retreats: Restricted Chaplains can refuse to lead a couples retreat in the event a same-sex or transgender couple signs up, despite the events themselves being non-religious. This puts many states in a bind when non unrestricted Chaplains are available to step in. States often seek the help of the National Guard Bureau in Arlington, VA to identify and supply an affirming chaplain.

Dominator culture has tried to keep us all afraid, to make us choose safety instead of risk, sameness instead of diversity. Moving through that fear, finding out what connects us, reveling in our differences; this is the process that brings us closer, that gives us a world of shared values, of meaningful community.<sup>69</sup>

To care for one another is to risk. To authentically serve our community is to risk. To live into this holy, mysterious calling to serve in the military Chaplain Corps is to risk. We will not escape risk by living in fear, for it will find us in other ways. We will however lose out on the beauty and sacred wonder of a love fulfilled only in the confines of an embracing and diverse community. When we chose to abide with one another, in both difference and diversity, the richness of God's holy compassion is enveloped by all.

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<sup>69</sup> bell hooks. *Teaching Community: Pedagogy of Hope*, 1st edition. New York: Routledge, 2003; 197.

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