

## Clergy Appreciation Day

February 5, 2016

First, I would like to thank Brother Bill Baldree for conferring this special honor on me. You see, I spent several years as a teenager, thinking I might spend my career in the clergy in some way. Thank you, Bill.

As you know, for many years now, CIVITAN International and CIVITAN clubs around the world take a day to honor our clergy. Why this day or this week? As many of us know, it is first to remember and honor the courage and bold sacrifice that four chaplains made on the deck of the US Army transport ship the USS Dorchester, a troop ship carrying 905 servicemen crossing the treacherous North Atlantic. That ship was only hours away from port when they were torpedoed by a German u boat. The ship was hit broadside amidships and explosions and pandemonium ensued. As survivors scurried from below decks, the four chaplains,

**Methodist Minister Lt. George Fox,**

**Dutch Reformed Minister Lt. Clark Poling**

**Rabbi Lt. Alexander Goode**

**Catholic Priest Lt. John Washington**

stood on the deck, calming the frightened soldiers and leading them to lifeboats and relative safety. One sailor Petty Officer, John J. Mahoney, was seen by Rabbi Goode heading back into the ship. "Where are you going?" the Rabbi asked. "Back to my bunk to get my gloves," he said. "Here," said the Rabbi, "take mine." "I can't take them," said Mahoney. "Go ahead," said the Rabbi, "I have another pair." It was long after that, that Mahoney realized the Rabbi had no intention of ever leaving the ship.

Topside, the Chaplains opened a locker and started handing out lifejackets. Engineer Grady Clark then witnessed the most selfless act of love and humanity one could imagine. As they ran out of jackets and still had cold, frightened, skivvy clad soldiers in front of them; the Chaplains took off their jackets and gave them to four soldiers. Father Washington didn't look for a Catholic, or Rabbi Goode a Jew; each of these men only saw God's children trembling in fear and gave them the gift of life that they had at their hands.

In featuring this event as the focus of today's meeting, CIVITAN International made it clear that while these acts were heroic, they are but one example of the many ways that clergy serve the needs of all of us.

As is stated by CIVITAN International, ***"Clergy appreciation week aims to promote world brotherhood and religious understanding among all people of religious persuasions. It is a time to reflect on our individual beliefs and to promote an understanding and acceptance of the rights of others to participate in a religion different from our own."***

Now the Dorchester went down 73 years ago, and much has changed since then. We live in a global world where norms change and time does NOT stand still. ***“The growing diversity of the military population has meant focusing on really listening and hearing, rather than coming at them from our own theological backgrounds,”*** said Army Capt. Prathima Dharm who is based in Silver Spring Maryland.

Soldiers come home much more affected than in the past. There are many more cases of stress and emotional trauma than ever before. To meet these needs, Chaplains serve many more roles than in the past. The same is true outside the military. Let me describe one that Maureen and I know of personally.

Maureen’s mom, Caroline, became ill about 5 years ago and was in hospice care. The hospice services provide many benefits, but one that was most significant was served by a local minister. Rev. Angel Lorton of Broad Street Christian Church is both a Minister and Director of their Music Ministry. She also serves as a hospice Chaplain. She came to Caroline’s home and met with her several times. She listened and heard Mom’s needs. She didn’t preach or proselytize; she sought to find ways of delivering comfort to Mom. Caroline loved show tunes and the music of the forties and fifties. Finding this out after several visits, Angel then arrived at her next visit with a keyboard and music. The two of them sat and sang and spoke. Over the next several months, Caroline was transported to a better place and was more and more open and at peace. At one point as she was tiring of the process of dying, she turned to Angel and said, “How long does this take?” Instead of offering a theological response, knowing Caroline, Angel asked Mom to take off her slippers. Mom did, and Angel looked at the soles of her feet and said, “Well, I don’t see an expiration date, so I’m not really sure.” That helped Mom through a difficult time and strengthened the bond those ladies had and made her transition a more peaceful one. Angel listened and was able to hear Mom’s needs.

And just as life is more challenging for us, so it is for our clergy. Changing demographics, increasing financial concerns, the inevitable move and sway of the human experience make your roles even harder.

As recently as yesterday, right here in New Bern, Rev. Paul Canady, Rector of Christ Episcopal Church was castigated by a citizen in the editorial section of the Sun Journal for speaking out about the plight of the world’s refugees. That editorial was the paper’s singular item in the editorial section yesterday and was nearly half a page. Yet, you persevere upholding the values that have been the heart and soul of this nation of immigrants. But what we all must realize is that it is imperative that we also take care of the caretakers. We need only look back at the work and lives of Albert Schweitzer, Mahatma Ghandi, Mother Theresa and Rev. Martin Luther King as responses to hate and examples of the impact that clergy have in this world. Only love can conquer hate. And when we allow our simpler emotions of anger and fear to overtake our greater selves, then we allow those we revile to diminish who we are as a people and a nation. ***“Give us your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free.”***

We must expand our perspective and appreciation of the many ways that clergy serve the needs of God's world. Different positions and titles; Social service agencies, Refugee programs, community service groups such as RCS all have Clergy on staff. Many were started by faith based groups. Mental Health and counseling centers and drug and alcohol treatment facilities have clergy on staff as well.

While I was working in Westchester County, a young female high school student from our school ran away from home and ventured into Manhattan. Several days later, she wound up at Covenant House, and was counseled and supported by the staff there until she was able to return home. The staff was religious based, but just like the Chaplains on the Dorchester, they didn't ask if she was Catholic or Jewish, they just knew she was a young lady who needed help.

Just as times change so do religious views and beliefs. Our country now has a much wider variety of churches, mosques, cathedrals, and synagogues than ever before. But it is important to keep in mind that the first synagogue in America was founded in Newport Rhode Island in 1763 and the first mosque in 1880. Muslims were in America in the early 1700's as slaves (about 20% of the slave population was Muslim from the Spanish Moors incursions around the world). I don't know about your family, but mine emigrated here around 1895. And so, we need to reach out in love and respect, and never let fear and anger change who we are.

Just as our CIVITAN creed says, we ***"hear the cry of children and the call throughout the world for peace progress, guidance and unity."*** Just as the Chaplains on the Dorchester did God's work, they never asked what the men believed; they believed these were all souls worth saving, even at the loss of their own lives. That is the true measure of a hero. So as we enter this Super Bowl weekend, we will hear the term HERO bandied about. Let us reflect on the true meaning of that word, as embodied by those four and the folk we honor today, as the true embodiment of heroism.

And so today, we take time to honor and thank you for all you do. The world is a far better place for your efforts. And hopefully we can see that we have an even greater responsibility to reach out and help carry your burden. To expand our reach of the work that you and all your colleagues do. So that next year we may encompass a wider net of "clergy" in the broader definition and share our gratitude with them as well as we endeavor to do our part to ***"take care of the caregivers."***

***"That which you have done for the least of mine, you have done for me."***

***Thank you, and may God bless each and everyone of you, both here today and present around the world!***

*Delivered by Jim Comer*