

An unconventional path to Army chaplaincy

For Chaplain Major Sharon Browne, D.Min., the road to active-duty chaplaincy was, as she calls it, “a bit circuitous.”

At 19, Browne joined the Army and, as an enlisted Soldier, became a Christian. The example of a female drill sergeant was pivotal. “I watched her for about eight months, and she was an authentic Christian,” Browne recalls. “She didn’t swear, but she was very firm with her Soldiers.

“I want to believe that it’s because of her witness that I decided to become a Christian.”

“Where do you belong?”

Browne’s spiritual formation happened while stationed in Germany. As a divorcee, she says her Christian story wasn’t perfect; however, it made her relatable to fellow Soldiers. Although Browne wasn’t aware of the chaplain corps at the time — let alone in pursuit of it — people often sought her out for chaplain-type conversations.

“All that time, God was grooming me,” she says.

When Browne left active duty, she returned to New York, enlisted in the Army Reserves, and set about putting her life back together after the divorce. Unpaid, she taught youth classes and Sunday school in a Pentecostal church. She led revivals and supported funerals and weddings.

“I did it because I loved the Lord,” she recalls. “God challenged me.”

When Browne began her undergraduate degree at New York’s College of New Rochelle, professors encouraged her to consider seminary. She resisted; she had a well-paying job and “was surviving.”

But, September 11, 2001 was a turning point in Browne’s faith journey: on that day, she found herself standing at Ground Zero.

“I watched people jump out of the buildings because their options were to either burn or die that way,” she recalls. Among the chaos, she thought: *How many of those people are dying without doing what God told them to do?* “I didn’t want that to be my story,” she recalls.

Soon after, Browne enrolled in seminary. It wasn’t long before the dean of the seminary asked a crucial question: *Where do you belong?*

“I realized that the only people I knew how to talk to were Army people,” she says. So, on her 41st birthday, Browne reenlisted.

She was deployed right away. During that time, chaplains helped her plot her own path to the chaplaincy. Now, 10 years later, Browne is a Major and recently earned her D.Min.

She is one of 65 female chaplains on active duty — just 4.3% of the chaplain corps. For many Soldiers Browne meets, she is the first female chaplain they’ve ever met.

“My prayer is that there will be a woman somewhere, whether young or more mature, who will sense the call of God that says, *This is a possibility for you.*”

Answering the call

For Browne, the most rewarding aspect of Army chaplaincy is walking with Soldiers in varying stages of their lives — the highs and the lows.

She has married Soldiers in her unit and baptized and dedicated their children.

She has also officiated funerals and comforted Soldiers in battle. When a young man was killed on patrol and his body was brought back to camp, the young Soldier who had tried to revive his friend was in desperate need of comfort.

“He was so angry; he really just wanted to just explode,” she says. “He had blood on his face. I took a rag and started wiping it. I just talked to him. Maybe it’s maternal instinct, but that calmed him down.”

Joyful or tragic, Browne says she is grateful for any opportunity to minister to Soldiers.

“They help me to know that I’ve been inculcated into the unit,” she says. “It’s extraordinarily rewarding when people allow you into their space.”

While the rewards are many, Browne also strives to be transparent about what’s required of an Army chaplain applicant. First and foremost, one’s spiritual discipline needs to be secure.

“Actually, you’ve got to get your mind, body and spirit together,” she clarifies. “You need to be strong in whatever your theological formation is, and make sure your spiritual life is strong enough to handle the encounters you’ll face.”

Just as important, of course, is knowing what the Army chaplaincy is *not*. As an active-duty, full-time chaplain, Browne emphasizes that she’s “not jumping out of airplanes every day.” Rather, some days are quiet; others, mildly chaotic. “It’s important to understand that this is definitely a flexible environment.”

Another misconception Browne hopes to dispel is that the Army dictates how its chaplains pray and preach. “The Bible says, ‘with loving kindness have I drawn thee,’” she explains. “So, I try to be as inclusive and supportive as I can. But, if you catch me in the pulpit on Sunday morning, you’re going to get straight Jesus, no chaser.”

A great chaplaincy option for full-time church leaders

Naturally, active-duty, full-time chaplaincy isn’t right for everyone. For some — full-time church leaders, in particular — Browne suggests that Army Reserve chaplaincy can offer a better fit.

From a practical standpoint, it makes good financial sense.

Browne cites a recent Pew Research study showing the average age of clergy in the pulpit is 55. Pastors aren’t retiring — not because they don’t want to, but because they can’t.

“I believe that one of the things that we can do as wise stewards of the resources that God gives us — including our time and our young, strong bodies — is to create multiple streams of income,” she says.

Additionally, Army Reserve chaplaincy builds experience.

“If you’re viewing your worship space as ‘church,’ it becomes important for you to figure out how to stay relevant in whatever context you’re in,” she advises.

Finally, Reserve chaplaincy offers an opportunity to expand the church body. “Those 200 to 1,500 people you encounter during a drill weekend are potential members,” Browne points out. “If you want to take the church outside the walls, this is one way to do it.” **CE**

— Reporting by RaeAnn Slaybaugh

To learn more, visit GoArmy.com/Chaplain, call 1-888-550-ARMY (2769), or log on to GoArmy.com/locate-a-recruiter.html.



Chaplain Major Sharon Browne, D.Min.

United States Army 5th Medical Recruiting Battalion
Fort Sam Houston, Texas



Considering becoming a chaplain? Here are some requirements you should know



Official U.S. Army Photo

Education/work experience

In order to be a chaplain, you need to have a 72-hour master's degree of theology or divinity. "Often people with two or three degrees of lesser amounts want to combine them, but you need to have a single graduate degree of 72 hours," says Chaplain Captain Matthew Sanders of the United States Army 2nd Medical Recruiting Battalion in Redstone Arsenal, Ala. The exception to this is the Chaplain Candidate Program, in which someone who enters the military as an officer is already enrolled in seminary. In this case, the applicant would need to be assessed after the completion of his or her degree.

Despite the same educational requirements, there are differences in the amount of experience needed for active-duty chaplaincy and Reserve chaplaincy. As an active-duty chaplain, you are required to have at least two years of full-time pastoral work.

You also need to have performed at least one wedding and one funeral.

Chaplain Major Dave Keller of the United States Army Medical Recruiting Brigade in Fort Knox, Ky., provides reasoning for this difference: "You're going to gain experience while you're a Reserve Chaplain, because you're also serving as a civilian pastor or in ministry at the same time.

You're acting as a representative in the military. When you're on active duty, that's your full-time church experience. So, you need to bring experience with you."

As Chaplain Major Ted Hamm of United States Army 1st Medical Recruiting Battalion in Fort George G. Meade, Md., explains, pastoral duties for chaplaincy include preaching, teaching, counseling, marrying, burying, baptizing and administering the Lord's Supper. "The Army will teach you other elements of how the Army functions, but they want you to be prepared to do those types of functions for Soldiers," he adds.

An ecclesiastical endorsement is also required. This is given by the applicant's denominational endorser or an independent endorsing agency, and acts as a point of reference for the Department of Defense.

Physical

Physical requirements, including weight based on height and age, are available on goarmy.com. "It's one of the long-range benefits of being in the military, being able to have a lifestyle that includes physical exercise," states Chaplain Captain Ted Hamm.

In addition to age requirements, it is important to consider intellectual health, as well. "You need to be spiritually, morally, ethically and intellectually capable of serving as a clergy member in this context," says Chaplain Major Sharon Browne of United States Army 5th Medical Recruiting Battalion in Fort Sam Houston, Texas. "It is an ecumenical environment, and so one of the challenges is that you're going to encounter people who may not necessarily be like you, whether it be physically or theologically. The challenge becomes considering how we extend grace to people who are not like us, and I think that is perhaps the true hallmark of whether or not you can be a chaplain."

Age

Rules regarding age are fairly rigid. For an active-duty chaplain, you need to be less than 42 years old, and for the Reserves, less than 47 years old.

First steps

Visit goarmy.com/chaplain, and/or call a chaplain recruiter.

"Beyond a cursory search online, talk to a chaplain. Ask them what their experience has been like, and if they enjoy it as a fruitful ministry," advises says Chaplain Captain Ted Hamm. "If you don't know any chaplains, call that recruiter and get some perspectives and contacts from them. Shadowing a chaplain is easy in the Reserves."

Chaplain Major Dave Keller agrees: "Have a conversation with your pastor (or whoever is in a guidance position above you), to see if this is really something you're called to. We can talk about requirements all day long, but if you're not called to the military chaplaincy by God, it will be difficult to embrace it."

Faith denominations

The Army is accepting of different denominations, although shortages of certain denominations are present. "I think the biggest need right now is for Catholic priests," says Chaplain Lieutenant Colonel Jerzy Rzasowski of United States Army Medical Recruiting Brigade in Fort Knox, Ky. "But, we will not send away any chaplain that is recognized; there are about 300 different denominations or religious groups recognized by the U.S. government that need chaplains. If a person qualifies, they will have a chance to serve. Everyone is welcome."

Chaplain Captain Ted Hamm agrees. "The Chaplain Corps is diverse and wants to continue to be diverse because we live in a diverse nation," he says. "They respect the free exercise of religion, so they do want a wide range of chaplains." **CE**

— Reporting by Joyce Guzowski

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