

The General, the President, and Me

A Reflection on Endorsement

Sent—but not sent away.

In May of 2003, I was heading into a full month.

I was scheduled to be promoted to Colonel.

I was completing my Doctor of Ministry.

And I was preparing to accompany my commanding general on a three-week trip across the Pacific.

That last commitment meant I would miss my graduation ceremony.

That was simply the way things worked.

My promotion ceremony went as expected.

Colleagues, staff, family, and a few guests gathered.

There were short speeches.

My eagles were pinned on.

Hands were shaken.

Then something unexpected happened.

My general introduced a guest I had noticed but not really registered—the president of my seminary. He stepped forward, carrying a plain folder, said a few words, and presented me with my diploma.

Just like that.

A graduation ceremony—quietly inserted into a promotion ceremony.

I've carried that moment with me for over twenty years.

At one level, it was simple thoughtfulness.

A seminary president recognized that a student, because of the ordinary demands of military service, would miss an important milestone—and decided that milestone didn't have to be missed after all.

He made the effort.

And that mattered.

But something else happened in that moment.

I watched my general.

He wasn't stunned—but he was clearly struck by what he was seeing.

Here was someone from outside the military structure—a representative not just of a school, but of a church—who had stepped into *his* world to honor one of *his* officers. Not for rank. Not for position. But for vocation.

I suspect it may have been the first time he saw, up close, that what I did as a chaplain didn't begin and end inside the Army.

There was another identity at work.

Another system of meaning.

Another authority that did not compete with his—but did not originate from it either.

That moment didn't create tension.

It created connection.

A kind of hinge—where one world opened into another, and the traffic moved both ways.

And then there is what happened to me.

Standing there in uniform, in the middle of what was unmistakably a military moment, I found myself on the receiving end of something I did not expect.

Not recognition.

Not ceremony.

But care.

Whether he intended it this way or not, the president of my seminary was doing something pastoral. He was tending to a moment of formation that might otherwise have been lost—marking it, naming it, and placing it back into my life.

In that instant, I was not only an officer being promoted.

I was a minister being held.

Held in connection to a church that had sent me.

Held within a vocation that extended beyond the uniform I was wearing.

Held by an act that said, quietly but clearly: *you have not stepped outside the reach of the community that formed you.*

That is not administration.

That is ministry.

And there is still another layer.

The president of my seminary left the familiar ground of a denominational institution and stepped into a military setting—one that sits, in many ways, at the edge of our cultural and moral experience.

Whether he intended it or not, his presence did something more than honor a student.

It made a statement.

That the church does not exist only within its own walls.

That its concern does not stop at the boundary of its own institutions.

That its calling carries it into the places where decisions are made, burdens are carried, and consequences are lived.

And perhaps, more quietly still, that the presence of God is not confined to the church—but is encountered in the world the church is sent to serve.

That moment—simple as it was—has become, for me, a way of understanding endorsement.

Not as a bureaucratic process.

Not as a credentialing requirement.

But as a *ministry*.

A ministry that creates a gateway—
where the institutional life of the church
and the operational life of the world meet.

Where leaders in one system catch a glimpse of the meaning carried by the other.

Where those sent into that space discover they have not been sent alone.

Which is why this matters now.

Our tradition has always held that ministry begins in the church and is carried into the world—but moments like this remind us the church is meant to go with it.

It will always be tempting to treat endorsement as a technical function—something necessary, but administrative. Something handled by a director, a board, or an office somewhere in the structure of the church.

But moments like this tell a different story.

Endorsement, rightly practiced, is not the work of an office alone.

It is the work of a church that understands itself to be sending.

It requires people who will show up.
Leaders who will step across boundaries.
Structures that make that crossing visible, intentional, and real.

Because without that visibility, the connection fades.
Without that intentionality, the sending becomes assumed rather than enacted.

And when that happens, those who serve in these far reaches of the parish—the places where the church is not gathered but dispersed—can begin to feel less like they are sent, and more like they are simply gone.

What I experienced that day was the opposite.

A church that showed up.
A connection that held.
A moment of ministry carried across a boundary and placed, quite deliberately, into my hands.

That is what endorsement can be.

And when it is, it becomes more than a process.

It becomes a sign
that the church knows where its people are—
and intends to be present there, too.

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