



An interview with NRO's First Chaplain

"Be strong enough to stand alone, smart enough to know when you need help, and brave enough to ask for it." ~Unknown

By Karen Gilbert, NRO Public Affairs | Nov. 23, 2020

I recently had the privilege to interview NRO's first chaplain, Lt Col Regina Samuel, who joined the NRO in October. Lt Col Samuel carries on a long tradition of always being there in times of need, and NRO is pleased to welcome her to the organization.

Karen: Chaplain Samuel, thank you for this opportunity to talk with you.

Chaplain Samuel: Thank you it is my pleasure.

Karen: So let us begin with talking a little about your early life. Did you find your faith at an early age?

Chaplain Samuel: My grandparents raised my three brothers, a sister and me until they passed when I was 12. My mother was a single parent. My grandfather was a steward and my grandmother a deaconess at the Mount Zion African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church in Florence, SC. I had a strong religious foundation growing up and it shaped the person I am today, working happily for God.

Karen: I am sure you've been asked this question many times, but I will ask it anyway.

Chaplain Samuel: *(laughs)* Karen, go ahead, I think I know what it is.

Karen: So why did you become an Air Force chaplain?

Chaplain Samuel: When I enlisted in the Air Force, chaplains led the worship services at Basic Military Training and my Technical Training School. I became involved in the chapel community in my first assignment. On Fridays, the chapel team sponsored a home cooked meal and other activities for airmen in the dorms. This helped me adjust to being away from home for the first time and stay connected to my faith.

In the seminary, I learned about the Chaplain Candidate Program that allows seminary students to get a direct commission as a 2nd Lieutenant in the Reserves before making a commitment. After graduation, I continued in the Reserves while I worked as a Youth/Young Adult Minister at my home church. My first year was great, so I applied for active duty. I enjoy making a positive difference in the lives of young airmen and help families connect.

Karen: For those of us not familiar, what are the duties of a chaplain?



Chaplain Samuel: I provide spiritual care and ensure all authorized military and civilian personnel, and their families have opportunities to exercise their constitutional entitlement to the free exercise of religion, with consideration for the mission and good order and discipline within the organization. I also ensure the rights of those with no religious belief by preventing them from pressure or discrimination because of their choice.

I also advocate for those having challenges in life and at work. I advise leaders on every level about morale and other quality of life issues affecting the members, and ultimately the organization. I help all people, not just those who believe as I believe. I get to walk with families struggling with change from a death, a divorce, or a passed over promotion. Conversely, I get to celebrate births, marriages, promotions, and even retirements with those in the organization.

Karen: How different is a military chaplain from clergy in the civilian world?

Chaplain Samuel: Civilian clergy minister to or help those within their faith group, whereas chaplains are pastors to some and chaplains to all. I have learned so much about other faith groups because of the opportunities to work with chaplains and religious affairs airmen from diverse religious backgrounds. I think I am a better person, minister, and chaplain as a result.

In addition, while some civilian clergy may have to report some incidents because of state laws, military chaplains do not. Military chaplains also do not have to worry about asking the congregation for money for the new building fund either.

Karen: You are the first chaplain at NRO. How different is it being at an intelligence organization than other Air Force assignments?

Chaplain Samuel: It is such an honor to serve as NRO's first chaplain. Previously, the chaplain from Fort Meade provided service to the NRO when he visited personnel from his unit assigned here. In a Climate Survey conducted last year there was an overwhelming request for a chaplain. After leadership approved, the NRO began the process of obtaining two billets, one for a chaplain and one for a religious affairs airman.

This is a different culture and language than my past assignments. I am still trying to understand the NRO's incredible mission, but give me time and I will.

Karen: Are your duties here different from the other places you have served?

Chaplain Samuel: Yes. The major difference is here I do not lead or oversee worship services. My duties are centered on advising leaders, providing counseling, and assisting with religious accommodation issues. This is my first time not working with a group of chaplains and religious affairs airmen. I am looking forward to the religious affairs superintendent arriving in January. A religious affairs superintendent is a senior non-commissioned officer responsible for the leadership/management of Chaplain Corps programs. They can provide crisis intervention and can receive privileged and confidential communication the same as a chaplain. The two of us will be the NRO Religious Support Team.



Karen: Chaplain, NRO is a diverse workforce of military and civilian personnel, is this a more challenging environment? Have NRO civilians sought you out, as well?

Chaplain Samuel: No more difficult than my other assignments. I am here to support military, civilians, and their families. Let me repeat that, I am here to support everyone. I have had NRO civilians seek me out. While some issues may be unique to each group, I believe that life's challenges do not care what we wear to work or our position/job title, things happen.

Karen: What is the most challenging aspect of being a chaplain during these troubling times with the pandemic and other issues swirling around us?

Chaplain Samuel: Being a chaplain during these times is helping people not to lose hope—to help them to believe that better days are coming—that this too shall pass. I do not have the ability to tell them when it will happen—the date or time. Believe me, these times are hard, even for those who practice their faith.

Normally during any crisis, the chaplain is able to get out and freely check on people in their workspace. Because of the pandemic, not everyone is comfortable with people outside of their circle entering their workspace. I am used to sitting down and chatting with people in order to get to know them better, but I make the best of quick visits or chats in the spline. I want to respect people's space, while still letting them know I am here for them.

Karen: What assistance can you offer those who seek your help? Are conversations confidential and not shared?

Chaplain Samuel: People seek out a chaplain for various reasons. Some are looking for counsel and guidance, while others just need to vent. Talking to a chaplain is a safe place regardless of the situation. I have a Master degree in Counseling Psychology with a focus in Marriage and Family Therapy and Master of Divinity with Clinical Pastoral Education (CPE) training. I use my training and experience, religious and non-religious, to assist people as best I can. If the situation is beyond my scope of training, I refer the counselee/client to other agencies that may better assist. I offer individual, couples, and family counseling.

My counseling is 100% confidential. Nothing, I mean absolutely nothing, is reported to anyone. The counseling can be faith based or non-faith based, the individual decides. If the counselee needs information released, he/she must sign a release statement, with a witness' signature, in order for the chaplain to share any information. The statement must indicate exactly what information is releasable.

The services the Chaplain Corps offers is best summed up, ironically, as SOUL:

Spiritual Care (pastoral care ministry; 100% confidential counseling faith/non-faith based)

Opportunities for Religious Freedom (religious accommodation, rites, studies)



Unit Engagement (support spiritual resiliency; connection)

Leadership Advisement (spiritual, religious, ethical, moral, morale, and quality of life issues)

Karen: Chaplain Samuel, during these troubled times what keeps you going? Most people think a Chaplain is not affected by all this as you are the one others turn to for all the answers to their problems.

Chaplain Samuel: Being a chaplain does not shield me from all that is going on around us. I have learned personally and from others that trying to act as if I have it all together is not the right answer. I have talked to a counselor about family issues, forgiveness, and learning to accept things I could not change. Often we learn early in our lives we should handle our own problems. Being self-reliant is good to a point, but when we experience the unexpected, we allow pride to keep us from raising our hand and saying I need help. Some of us started wearing masks way before the pandemic; the mask that hides our real feelings. Asking for help is not an indication of weakness, but a mark of courage—that we know ourselves—we are smart enough to know we cannot continue to lift the load by ourselves without being injured. One of my favorite quotes is “Be strong enough to stand alone, smart enough to know when you need help, and brave enough to ask for it.” – Unknown. Let us not fake it during these challenging times.

For me personally my faith, my family, and laughter keeps me going during these times. I read scripture daily, meditate, and pray. I pray not just for my family, my friends or myself, but also for our nation and world. I group chat with my family every day and that is where I get most of the laughter. Laughter reminds me that life has joy.

I want to let the NRO workforce know there are opportunities to grow. I am available, along with the EAP professionals and others to help or just listen.

Karen: Do you have some advice for the NRO workforce to help them get through this pandemic and find some normalcy with the holidays upon us? I saw you exemplified that normalcy can happen during hard times when you were one of the judges for the pumpkin-carving contest.

Chaplain Samuel: NRO family, this year’s holiday celebrations will be different, but we make the best of our situation. I hope that each person will be with someone they love (if not, call me). Create new traditions this year to pass down to future generations. We can still be with loved ones, on a smaller scale, with more physical distance, and sanitary practices. Believe me— all is not lost—just different.

I was deployed last holiday season, so this year I was really looking forward to spending time with most of my family and meeting my grandniece who was born while I was away. Well that will not happen this year. My mother is 81 years old; she will not mind me telling you, (*laughs*). We decided that keeping her safe was more important than traditions. We will still gather as a



family, but in different households. Knowing my brothers, they will figure out a way to watch football together at different locations.

Karen: Even a pandemic cannot keep football fans apart as long as there is technology. (laughs)

Chaplain Samuel: (laughs) That is so true!

Karen: We talked about the challenges facing others, but what is the biggest challenge you have faced in your life and how did your faith help you through it?

Chaplain Samuel: It was accepting my mother's diagnosis of a mental illness that changed my entire family's world. I was 16 years old when we first learned she had a mental illness, but it took years for her to get a proper diagnosis. I remember praying and asking God to heal her. It seemed like the more I prayed, the worse things became and I was having a crisis of faith.

After much prayer, getting upset with God, and riding that spiritual rollercoaster repeatedly, finally, I experienced God's grace. Although God did not answer my prayer the way I wanted, God gave me the strength and mindset to accept what I could not change. We were told she would be unable to care for herself —to grocery shop, cook, or even properly dress, but my mother can do all of those things, plus more. As she gets older, she needs more care, but overall, she is doing better than some expected.

Because of my mother's illness, my family is much closer. Most of all, my faith is stronger and I have a better understanding of what prayer truly is. Sometimes when God says, "No," it is not because God does not care, it is because God has an "instead." In the Greek text, Paul penned the words in II Corinthians 12:8-9a, "Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. But He said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for My power is made perfect in weakness.'"

Karen: Chaplain Samuel, thank you again for your time. It has been an honor speaking with you. Thank you for your service to your country and to the NRO community.

Chaplain Samuel: You are welcome.