



# Pennsylvania Fire Chaplain: an occasional Newsletter

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DECEMBER 2016

## IN THIS ISSUE

### **A New Hope**

### **Fireman's Association of PA Chaplain Report**

### **How I Became a Chaplain**

### **Flooding in Bullskin Township, Fayette County**

This is the final issue of the newsletter for 2016. I wish all of you a Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year.

This issue leads off with an article by Doug Briggs, fire chaplain in New Castle County, Delaware. Doug is also a chaplain with the Cowboy Chaplains of America. He wrote this article for their publication and has allowed it to be published here. Paul Hammaker from Connellsville, Pennsylvania has written a report of his service during major flooding in his area in August of this year. Joel Hummel reports on his activities as the Chaplain of the Fireman's Association of Pennsylvania. Barry Smith from New Stanton writes of the renewal of the chaplaincy in his department.

A NEW HOPE

Doug Briggs

A long, long time ago, in a desert country far, far away....

Luke 7:11. There was a funeral procession. A son had died. We are not told if he was ill, or if there was an accident, only that he was dead. His body had been prepared and was being carried out for burial. The story goes that a large crowd was present. Like today, folks respectfully stood to the sides of the procession. They probably bowed their heads. It was a sad occasion. People were crying. The mother was alone – we are told she was a widow, and this was her only son.

Let that sink in – she was ALONE. No husband, no son, no one. In that time in that culture she was in a hopeless situation – she couldn't own property; there weren't a lot of job options for an old widow. Not only was she alone, she was looking at a life of misery – her options now were basically begging or prostitution. Everything was taken from her – family, livelihood, security. She was in a desperate place. Can you imagine the terror she had facing her life? She had no hope.

Then, to add insult to injury, a man steps out in front of the procession. How rude! Everyone else is politely standing off to the

side, showing some degree of respect and this guy – this Jesus of Nazareth – just steps out in front and interrupts the proceedings. Can you imagine how insulting and hurtful that must have seemed??? But Jesus didn't stop there. He looks at this woman and says: "Don't cry." Seriously?? Her husband is gone. Her son is gone. Hope is gone. She is alone. And Jesus has the nerve to just step up and interrupt this tragedy and say something so callous as "Don't cry." How could he do that??

But Jesus still wasn't done. He walks right up to the bier – the litter that they were carrying this dead body on – and tells the corpse to: "Get up." Now get this in context – at that time in that culture dead bodies were unclean. They were to be avoided. No self-respecting person, let alone a teacher or prophet, would mess with a dead body. But not Jesus. He wasn't worried about those rules. He saw a woman in great pain – deep, gut-wrenching, agony – everything she had and cared about was gone.

The Bible tells us that "His heart went out to her" – Jesus recognized and felt her pain. Jesus knew the desperation of her situation. When all hope was lost, he stepped in. Jesus told the boy to get up, and guess what? He did. The Bible account says the "dead man sat up and began to talk." Again, think about this in context – everyone knew this body was dead. It had been prepared for burial and was being carried to the grave. Think about the guys carrying the body – one minute there is a dead corpse, the next minute he is up and alive! If it had been me I would have dropped the litter!! I have to believe that people screamed out in surprise. AAAAAAGGGHHH. That had to be an amazing and terrifying thing to see. A dead body just sitting up and talking – and it was more real and tangible than any science fiction movie special effect we have ever seen.

But why? Why did Jesus do this? Why would he bother with an old widow-woman? Someone of low social standing and no great consequence? We are taught many things in this simple story. First, Jesus saw someone in need – suffering great personal loss – and His heart went out to her. He cared. As the story goes, Jesus came upon the funeral procession. He didn't go looking for a big, flashy event. He passed the town gate as the funeral procession came out. He encountered her in her time of need – right where she was. He is showing us that even in our daily walk, we can meet people who are hurting, in great need, and in Him we can reach out and help.

Second, Jesus wasn't concerned with what was "socially acceptable" He was more concerned with meeting a need. Many religious leaders in that day would have shunned being near a corpse. Not Jesus. He

walked right up. He was acting in the will of his Father – He was more concerned about the needs of that woman. How many times do we have the chance to reach out and help someone who is maybe not so popular? The weird kid with pimples and braces who smells funny – who will be his friend? The single mom trying to make ends meet – should we scorn her or recognize that she is precious in God’s eyes and needs our compassion more than our judgment? The guy on the corner with a sign asking for food, the old lady in the wheelchair that sits and talks to nobody, the guy that shows up to church with a ratty old t-shirt and dirty hands.... These are real people. They have real needs. Would Jesus lecture them about how unworthy they were? NO – Jesus came to meet people where they were and show them that God loved them, regardless of the circumstances. Think about the above story – this widow could not have been any lower – rock bottom was a step up for her. Jesus met her in her darkest hour, and gave her new hope.

Finally – and this one is hard – sometimes the power of God isn’t evident until all our resources are gone. Like the woman in this story, everything was gone – family, livelihood, hope. Could God have saved her son from dying? Of course, but then Jesus would not have been able to intervene and show God’s power. It is a bitter pill to take, and even harder to swallow. No one wants to face dark times or difficult circumstances. But sometimes that is how God has to clear the distractions so He can step in and let us know that He is still there and He is in control. I know in my life I have faced times where my job was swept out from under me – no warning, just gone. Let me tell you, as a young husband and father, that was terrifying and one of the worst times of my life. But both times God turned the situation around and provided newer and better opportunities that I could never have imagined. But that positive change could not have come with the old job still in the way – I had to legitimately walk “through the valley of the shadow of death” to realize that God was taking care of me. It was a very hard lesson, and one I hope I don’t have to be taught again.

At the end of this story, we need to recognize that Jesus laid out His life as an example to follow. He met people where they were – ugly, sinful people in need of the love of the Savior. Jesus was not worried about being popular, if anything he alienated the religious leaders of the day – and they were the one’s everyone looked up to. Jesus sought out tax collectors, lepers, the sick and lame. Jesus showed us that everyone is precious in God’s eyes, even a lonely, destitute widow. Pray that we can see our fellow men through Jesus’ eyes and reach out and share His saving love with a world that desperately

needs Him.

#### FIREMEN'S ASSOCIATION OF PENNSYLVANIA CHAPLAIN REPORT

York County Chaplain Joel Hummell is also Chaplain for the Firemen's Association of Pennsylvania (FASP). This is a report he submitted this past September.

- PA Fire Chaplains Network founded in Carlisle, November 2015
- Attended training at the National Fire Academy in Emmitsburg, MD in July 2016. He helped plan and lead the Memorial Service recognizing 6 LODDs in Pennsylvania.
- Attended the National Honor Guard Academy in Connecticut in August 2016.
- Co-hosted Essentials of Fire Chaplaincy course in York County in August 2016. John Long and Blake Bowers taught the class attended by over 20 chaplains.
- Attended the FASP Convention in September 2016. There was a Memorial Service for seven LODDs in Pennsylvania.

#### HOW I BECAME A CHAPLAIN

Barry Smith, Chaplain at the New Stanton Volunteer Fire Company writes about the fire chaplaincy in the company:

The office of Chaplain for our Fire Department was "dormant" until my election to the office 2 years ago. I was recently nominated unanimously for a third year. I have had nothing but 100 % support from the membership. I truly feel the need for spiritual guidance from my sisters and brothers in the Department. I feel they sense a comforting feeling having someone to guide them through the difficult times in their lives. I continually remind them I am here for the "good" times also and I feel they know that.

I was born and baptized a Lutheran. When I met my wife, I was introduced to the Byzantine Catholic religion. After 15 years I made the decision to join the church and I recently had my chrismation, the service that accepts me into the religion and allows me to partake of the most Holy Eucharist.

Serving as Chaplain for our department has been without a doubt the most rewarding time of my life. I have served as recording secretary, financial secretary, Assistant Chief and other offices in my 36 year career, but serving as Chaplain, I feel, is the most rewarding in a personal way and for the Department. I will continue to reach out thru our many networks for assistance which I am very thankful.

Flooding in Bullskin Township, Fayette County  
August 2016  
Paul Hammaker, Chaplain  
Bullskin Township Volunteer Fire Department

On August 28, 2016, life in Bullskin Township, Connellsville Township, and the City of Connellsville was dealt a blow from a storm that dumped 5 inches of rain in a 2 hour period. The Bullskin Township Volunteer Fire Department responded to a variety of incidents as a result of the storm. I stayed back from the first two calls, a tree down and basement flooding. Then everything went crazy. We experienced water rescues with people trapped in their cars and people who had to be rescued from their roofs. Swift water rescue teams came from Scottdale and North Huntingdon. However, before the Swift Water Rescue teams arrived on the scene, our fire fighters had to rescue people from their cars with water that was rising above the hood. Bullskin VFD attack truck was pumping out one basement and then answered another call just down the road where they were. As they approached the second call, water came out of nowhere and water was above the hood instantly. The engineer then feared for the crew and apparatus.

At this point no lives were lost and no apparatus were lost and all remained in service. Emergency shelters were opened in Bullskin and at New Haven Hose Co. in Connellsville. I received the call for the shelter in Bullskin. After communication with the Red Cross, we were able to take several victims to the Holiday Inn Express and I had information to help them get to their cars. Other victims I took to their homes taking the back roads to reach Connellsville. I had prayed with and for all of them before I left them. AS daylight broke reality set in. Where there had been roads and bridges, they were completely gone...and we still needed to proceed with rescue operations. There were houses in the affected areas that were uninhabitable.

This operation lasted for the Fire Services for six days. During this time the members from the state, Penn Dot Contractors, County EMA officials and numerous surrounding Fire Companies, and hundreds of volunteers met at the command post each morning. We started off with prayer. I used my pickup and utility trailer with a crew to deliver water, cleaning supplies, shovels, rakes, cleaning rags and numerous other supplies to victims. During the distribution of materials, my chaplain training really kicked in. This was one of those times that we all learned a slap on the back and you'll be ok

was not going to work. In fact, it might end you down on your backside. Water levels rose above the counter tops in the kitchens from 2 to 4 feet for some residents. Local restaurants' and businesses delivered hundreds of meals to families and volunteers. Volunteers spearheaded not only cleaning up houses but laundering clothing from victims whose homes were flooded.

I noticed one thing missing were the kids.... Families got the kids to relatives to ride out this disaster. As for many of our young fire fighters, I had many conversations on how it was amazing and how God watched over everyone involved. One elderly couple was ripping up carpeting.... Just so happened a volunteer that showed up was a carpet installer by trade. God at work! You see I never mentioned loss of life or major injuries to the hundreds of residents and volunteers. No injuries to the First Responders.

Are there things I would do differently? Of course. We all find something after a disaster that we can learn from. One thing I feel I should have done was to ask Pastors and Priests to be involved. I had to be apart of the mission to get the necessary cleaning buckets and tools for the residents. I didn't get to spend a lot of time to listen the way I would have liked to. I think I missed the boat by not having other chaplains and clergy available. So I have made contacts to local Pastors of different denominations to gather together the first of the year to put a plan into place for disasters, this meeting will include other chaplains from surrounding Fire Companies and our County EMA officials.

