

Crossroads: Episode 17

A Veterans Day Conversation with Canon John Dalton, former SECNAV

The Rev. Jo Nygard Owens

What do we find at the intersection of faith and the world? Our new podcast, Crossroads, explores this question in thought provoking conversations, featuring guests from around the world who are seeking to live faithfully in the public square. This is a safe space to discuss politics, technology, and our responsibilities as citizens. Pull up a chair and meet us as we search for a better way forward.

Welcome to Crossroads, where we discuss the intersection of sacred and civic. I'm your host, Jo Nygard Owens. Today, I'm joined by former Secretary of the Navy and honorary Cathedral canon John Dalton. Welcome, John.

John Dalton

Thank you very much.

The Rev. Jo Nygard Owens

Also with us today is Raleigh Duttweiler, Chief Impact Officer at the National Military Family Association. This organization works to support military families and the unique challenges that they face. Raleigh herself has faced these challenges firsthand when her husband was deployed. Welcome, Raleigh. We're so glad you're with us.

Raleigh Smith Duttweiler

I'm so glad to be here. Thank you for having me.

The Rev. Jo Nygard Owens

And today we are recording from our Cathedral offices in Washington, DC. So, John, you wrote a book, and you started to tell us before we got on air a little bit about it, especially the subtitle. Tell us the full story!

John Dalton

Well, this is my memoir, and I loved writing it, and it was a big task. And my wife Margaret says, if I decide to write another book, it's got to be with another wife.

The Rev. Jo Nygard Owens

Those are probably wise words.

John Dalton

I'm not writing another book. And anyway, the subtitle of the book is "My Journey with

Family, Faith and Friends to Calm the Storms of Life”. And they have been there for me, family, faith, and friends, all my life. And they've been there with me through tough times, and they've been there with me for delightful times. And I praise God for my life.

The Rev. Jo Nygard Owens

Well, your life has been filled with service. You had a time in the Navy, and you also served as the Secretary of the Navy. And you serve here at the Cathedral as an honorary canon, lay reader and patron. So how did these different types of service relate, and do you have any advice for people who might feel called to serve and are discerning how to use their gifts?

John Dalton

Well, I would say lead ethically, and if you're truthful and fair and honest, you have no problems. You'll have problems. But they are achievable. You can overcome them.

The Rev. Jo Nygard Owens

Thanks, John. When we have sure footing, we can respond to problems that arise in life. So Raleigh, you have personal history with military families. You work with military families all over the country. How do you see faith impacting our military families?

Raleigh Smith Duttweiler

Well, you know, it's in this context I will take off my National Military Family Association hat, which is not a religious organization, but we support all military families. And that means that we support people who believe, people who don't believe, people who have found themselves at church for food pantries, who have found themselves there for pumpkin fest, and have been engaged with so many of us who are called to serve because of our relationship with our faith.

And one of the things that we say at MFA is that military families serve, too. And so when I think about faith and service, I think so much about the things that I have learned growing up in a military family, the skills that I have had to develop in my own marriage, and raising three military kids and supporting a service member through some of the hardest parts of what war can throw at a family, and how I bring that to my community.

But that's really something that I have seen demonstrated for generations before mine, from the military family that I grew up in, from the women I saw, raising kids through deployments, being single moms while dad was overseas, finding ways to build community. It's the family and friends in the hardest parts of life. And I think that when I think about faith, I have three kids and one of them is very, very faithful.

And she always has been like, she was the kid who, at 2, wanted to understand the idea of God as a parent and how God would relate to Jesus as a parent, and how that made sense in her little head. She's a kid who, after her dad's first experience with sort of a PTSD episode in her own home, came downstairs and said, mommy, I want to call our pastor.

And she was little, and I mean you do you have kids? So, I don't think the pastor is going to know intimately where your little heart is today, let alone what we're dealing with. Our family is a reserves family now, my kids' dad used to be active duty, but he's now in the reserves.

And so by the time PTSD had really opened up doors in our family life, it was away from the support system of a base and an installation. And like the cultural competency that we could rely on, where people looked at it and said, oh, I know what this is and we know how to help. This was sort of in the wild in Cleveland, Ohio, where the veterans we knew were people I was related to who couldn't identify it in the same way.

And that morning, this morning, after our first experience of PTSD, she came downstairs and she said, mommy, I want to call our pastor. And I looked at her and I was like, that's a great idea. We should totally call another trusted adult in conversation. How about grandma? How about, like, one of your uncles? How about literally anybody who has any idea of what our family is going through?

And she said, no, no, I want to call Pastor Lindsay because my heart is tired and she knew who to go to with a tired heart. And I think that that's like the interplay of faith and service, particularly for military families, is faith. Whatever it is that like, gets you up in the morning and keeps you going in those hardest times.

That's the way that we then can stand up and serve each other. And I think in the military community, I don't know what it's like to put on the uniform. I have a lot of family members who've done it for generations. And inevitably, one of the kids in my home, if not two of them, will too. But I know what it's like to be on the supporting side of that and to be that infrastructure that keeps our community strong through really hard times and all of that as an active service. And for so many of us, and in my family in particular, that is one that is grounded in faith.

The Rev. Jo Nygard Owens

Thank you for being so vulnerable and open with us, because the reality is that it's not easy to serve in the military and to integrate back into life after what has been seen and experienced, especially on deployments. And faith can be that anchor that helps to hold us steady in the troubled times, the wavy seas, that raucous. But if we have that anchor of faith, we have a much better chance of staying steady.

John Dalton

Absolutely.

The Rev. Jo Nygard Owens

And I'm so intrigued. We were chatting also before we went live, that you were sharing about a couple of last year's acolytes who have gone on to military schools. Tell us a little bit more. That is an amazing intersection of faith, military and the Cathedral.

John Dalton

Well, the head acolyte is now a midshipman, and I wrote a letter for him to help him get admitted and swore him in on the first day. And he called me this week to thank me for what I had done for him. And I said, you are ideal midshipmen, and the Academy should be calling me to thank you for all you're doing.

The Rev. Jo Nygard Owens

What a legacy to have these young people who are coming up in the Cathedral, and then to see your times of service and others within the Cathedral community. And the Cathedral has such a history of honoring our veterans and those who have served in the military and are currently serving. What a legacy it is to have some of our young people who have served the Cathedral go on to the Naval Academy, to West Point and other places to continue this.

John Dalton

His name is Jackson Wilson, and he did a great job at the Cathedral and is doing a fine job as a midshipman.

The Rev. Jo Nygard Owens

I can't wait to see him at Christmas when he comes home. So this is to both of you. How do you think our churches, because we have people listening from all over the country, all over the world, how can our churches and even individuals support our military and their families through faith, through service? What is it that we can do?

John Dalton

I try to love my neighbor as myself, and I try to lift others up and treat everyone with dignity and respect. And those are the pillars for me in dealing with other people. What do you think?

Raleigh Smith Duttweiler

I think that those are exactly the tools that we need people to be using to see military families wherever we are. And I think that it is so easy to sit down on Sunday in a pew and not realize that the family next to you is experiencing military service, or that their family might have been marked by it.

Less than 1% of America serves. So when we think about who those families are and how we can support them, step one is to love your neighbor as yourself, and to look at them and think about what they might be going through and we're here. We're in your communities. We're not just at Lejeune or at Naval Base Norfolk. We're not just in San Diego or at Fort Riley. We are wherever you are. And for our guard families, reserve families, families on

recruiting duty, families working in small posts throughout the country, we need you to know we're there and that our experience is just like yours, plus some. And that's where like, military life is really great. It is also really, really hard sometimes.

And this is part of why when we talk about service, I mean, we talk about like the thank you for your service. It's so much more than that yellow ribbon. It's seeing us and acknowledging us. And I think about my kids in particular. They need somebody to look at them and know that it might have been a couple weeks since they've gotten a hug from their dad, and that they maybe just need like, somebody to put their arm around them and tell them they're doing a good job, that it just helps to hear from somebody else.

But that's sort of the surface level stuff, is the seeing us and knowing where they are. What would be really incredible is if we were able to take our faith and let it guide us into some of those harder conversations about the experience our military families are having. At NMFA, we do a lot of work with military families in community.

We represent them, of course, on the hill and at the Pentagon. But so much of what we really do is serving families where they are. And we have families who are thrilled to keep serving this country, are thrilled to have children who might consider serving this country. And that's through financial instability. It's through food insecurity. It's through PTSD and the visible and invisible tolls of war.

They come home and when they come home, that service member doesn't just come home and things are suddenly fine. There's a family that absorbs that support system. And when the family is doing that, those kids can take on additional roles at home that might not necessarily be seen. And so we talk a lot about what are called hidden helpers.

And that's this great name that we have given to these kids who are working in a caregiving capacity for a wounded or injured service member or a veteran in their home, and there are millions of them across the country. I have three of them and they aren't helping change bandages or helping dad walk. Dad does all these things by himself, but what they have learned to do is to see some of the warning signs of PTSD episode, to look for how to be careful to like, not say something that might change the emotional tempo of a situation.

And that's hard work for a little kid to do. But it's also the way they serve. I mean, it's not... like you never grow up and think, wow, I really want my kids to do extra work. But this is like having grown up in a military family. You talk about the moments that you were drawn to faith. For me, I grew up in a military family and wanted nothing to do with it ever again.

I moved to New York City and I was like, enough of this. I am going to go be a great reporter. I am not going to marry into the military. I'm not going to. I'm never going to live in a base. I will never be a military spouse, and sooner or later a handsome young marine showed up and he just kept showing up. And he is so handsome and so charming, and I loved him so much. And then I ended up married at Camp Lejeune and pregnant and looking for work,

like every Marine Corps spouse has once been. But all three of my grandfathers served in World War Two, and I had a step grandfather thrown in there. And so everybody I knew for generations had served.

And when my mom's dad, who was career military, career army, when he passed away, we went to the funeral and obviously we went to the funeral. It's me and my grandmother and my mom and my dad came and I remember thinking, I have no idea what this is going to be like. Like who shows up to this?

This was sort of my first funeral that I was kind of taking in as an adult, but like a kid, but like, you know, an adult kid. And I was in college and I was blown away when, like, I stepped out to get some coffee. I just, like, I was struggling with how to support the women in my life who are grieving.

And I walked back into this room. I was standing room only. All of these people that I had never met, I hadn't even heard of, who had served alongside my grandfather at various points in his career, showed up. I mean, it was there were just people left and right shoving their hands in my faces and saying, your grandfather changed my life.

Your grandfather and I have always been so proud of him. But this was something where, for the first time, I grasped so much of what this service was and so much of what it meant to be part of this family in a way that I'd taken for granted growing up. Like it was just the life I knew. I didn't think anything of it.

And then all of a sudden I saw how exceptional his service was. And so when we talk about this, like families and community, we often look at how exceptional service is and think about how great that is on the inside. It just feels normal. And that's where, like having people who can stop and recognize that service can completely change a kid's life. Even in my 20s, it changed mine. So, see us we're here.

John Dalton

I think praying for the service personnel is great and their families, and I always thank them for their service and sacrifice, big time.

The Rev. Jo Nygard Owens

I was going to say that, at my husband's church every week in the bulletin, it lists service men and women who have connections to congregation members. And we pray for them. And I always make sure to look at the names and if I can see who the connection is and just try to follow up, you know, if I see a name has been on there for a few years and it's not there anymore. Oh, where are they now? How are they doing? So I love having them in the bulletin each week, and as part of the prayers.

Raleigh Smith Duttweiler

I love that so much, and I had no idea that they were doing... so the only churches that I've ever been to that did that were ones near bases. The years that we were there was like in the height of the wars. And there's just like the pages of people deployed that you're praying for, I mean, just page after page.

But since we left active duty, I have not been to a church where that has been something other than an afterthought on Veteran's Day. And it has been really hard to have kids navigate deployments when nobody else is experiencing that or even aware of that. I love that simple act of awareness and prayer.

The Rev. Jo Nygard Owens

Yeah, well, and here at the Cathedral, this is the other side of that. Not for active service folks, but we do have the honor roll. Are you aware of this, John?

John Dalton

No.

The Rev. Jo Nygard Owens

So we have the roll of honor, where people who have served in the military, they can be alive or have been deceased, and people can go online and submit names and they get added to the roll of honor for the Cathedral. And it's placed in War Memorial Chapel. So remembrance and tribute to those who have served our country is built into the very fabric of our Cathedral. We have carvings and stained glass windows. We have the kneelers, a cross made from the stone of the Pentagon from 9/11, and of course, War Memorial Chapel. So do these tangible reminders speak to you in any way as you worship here regularly, John?

John Dalton

I love the military chapel. That is a favorite place for me and to see that display with all the services is really special, and I really appreciate that.

The Rev. Jo Nygard Owens

Yes, and we have services throughout the year with our branches of our armed forces. We just had, a service...

John Dalton

Today's Air Force Day, birthday.

Raleigh Smith Duttweiler

Happy birthday Air Force!

The Rev. Jo Nygard Owens

They had their service on Sunday, so that all ties together. And for those of you listening, we are recording a few weeks before this episode drops, so everything won't quite match up on today being Air Force Day.

Raleigh Smith Duttweiler

When does this drop?

The Rev. Jo Nygard Owens

This drops just after Veterans Day.

Raleigh Smith Duttweiler

Which means that we owe the Marines a happy birthday.

John Dalton

Absolutely.

Raleigh Smith Duttweiler

Devil dog birthday.

The Rev. Jo Nygard Owens

Excellent. Well, as we are wrapping up, we always ask our guests about hope. And where do you find hope for our military members? For our military families, Raleigh? What is the hope that you want to offer folks?

John Dalton

Hope springs eternal, and I love hope and faith and service. It all goes together for me.

The Rev. Jo Nygard Owens

Thank you.

Raleigh Smith Duttweiler

I find so much hope in community. When NMFA started, it was 55 years ago, it was 1969, the height of the Vietnam War, and five military spouses got together at a kitchen table here in DC, determined to do better by their widowed friends. They put on their gloves, as was the era, and went to Congress and knocked door to door, and a couple of years later, the survivor benefit plan was born. When NMFA started, we were the only ones in the room saying, what about the family? I love that now I'm going to go to an event tonight with hundreds of other organizations asking the same question. We are no longer alone. We do it in community.

I feel so much hope every time I get to gather with other veterans, service members, their families and champions of our military family community that are committed to making life better for those who are committed to service.

The Rev. Jo Nygard Owens

Thank you.

John Dalton

I had the privilege of having the Protestant lay leader and when I was on collateral duty, for two of my submarines that I served on, and I got to conduct worship services when we were underway at sea. And that is a highlight for me.

The Rev. Jo Nygard Owens

And speaking of submarines, I hear there is a submarine that will be named for you.

John Dalton

That's true, but I salute Carlos Del Toro, who made that happen. The Secretary of the Navy has sole discretion of naming ships and naming sponsor of ships. And Margaret is the sponsor of the U.S.S. John H. Dalton.

The Rev. Jo Nygard Owens

Thank you. Margaret. She's in the room with us here.

Raleigh Smith Duttweiler

I love the idea though, that there you are, and like, in the middle of doing all of the work of military, that you get to still stop and take that moment to recenter yourself in faith, I love that.

John Dalton

Well, I loved it too, and I cherish the opportunity to serve as the Protestant lay leader.

The Rev. Jo Nygard Owens

What a gift and a treasure. Well, thank you, John, and thank you, Raleigh, both for being here today.

Raleigh Smith Duttweiler

Thank you for having us in conversation.

John Dalton

Thank you very much for what you do at the Cathedral, and we're grateful to you.

The Rev. Jo Nygard Owens

Well, it is always my pleasure. I am so thankful for this important conversation on the role of faith for those serving in the military and the families who support them. On our next episode, we welcome Peter Wehner, writer at The Atlantic and a senior fellow at the Trinity

Forum. We'll be talking about faith and values in our post-election world. Thanks for listening to Crossroads. And until next time, peace be with you.

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