

A Fork in the Road

A California native has completed training as a Navy Chaplain. Lieutenant Lee Yi from Orange County, California recently graduated from the Naval Chaplaincy School in Newport, Rhode Island. He is a graduate of the Talbot School of Theology in La Mirada, California and is endorsed for military chaplaincy by the Evangelical Church Alliance. Yi's first assignment will be as one of three chaplains assigned aboard the aircraft carrier USS Nimitz (CVN 68), homeported in Bremerton, Washington.

His decision to become a chaplain came after what initially seemed to be a string of unrelated coincidences, but would later take shape as carefully orchestrated steps. The first step was addressing negative connotations of military life. Yi said two former church colleagues shared how becoming a military chaplain was a great experience for them, with one declaring it was the best thing to ever happen to him and his wife.

"No more two for one," his friend said, explaining there was no longer an expectation or obligation for spouses to be laden with a variety of volunteer roles simply because of their relation to the chaplain. Yi said this was surprising and exciting news.

He explained that after this, a high school friend reached out to him. The friend, a Marine, needed to talk to someone, share some of his burdens and get some things off his chest. The friend chose Yi, a person to whom he had not spoken in more than a decade, but heard Yi served in ministry.

"That broke my heart," Yi said. Shortly after this, a Navy chaplain recruiter contacted Yi to encourage him to consider becoming a chaplain. After a little time, Yi researched Naval chaplaincy and made the decision he wanted to be a chaplain for Marines. As soon as he thought the decision was made, he came to a fork in the road.

"This happens to me over and over again whenever there is a major life event," Yi said. "It's never a right or wrong, but this or that [right option]."

Yi could continue on the path to becoming a Navy chaplain or accept an offer to serve at Saddleback Church in Lake Forrest, CA, under the leadership of the Rev. Rick Warren.

"In pastoral ministry, that's like working for Apple or Google, I mean, it's the opportunity of a lifetime," Yi explained with a chuckle. He accepted the call and began providing ministry at Saddleback Church.

Then COVID. After months of halted in-person attendance, full staffing became unsustainable and Yi's position was part of the cutback. He decided to not search for work and considered the time off as a sabbatical. When Yi decided it was time to start the job search, he prayed, asking God for direction. Less than a week later, another phone call. It was a Navy chaplain recruiter inviting him once again to consider becoming a Navy Chaplain.

Yi has travelled both sides of that fork in the road. Rather than a string of unrelated coincidences, Yi said he believes in some way each step was beneficial in helping him reach his goal as a chaplain.

“My goal is to help each person to attain spiritual readiness based on whatever belief system they have.”

Navy Chaplains provide religious ministry to their own, facilitate for the religious needs of other faiths, and care for all Sailors, Marines, and Coast Guardsmen. There are more than 800 Navy Chaplains from more than 100 different religious organizations and are deployed world-wide with Navy, Marine Corps, and Coast Guard commands.

