

About Me

First, a word about me. Although I'm new to Briarwood, I feel like I'm back home. I am a Citizen of the Chickasaw Nation who grew up, for the most part, in south Oklahoma City. So I'm not all that far from home. In fact, when I moved into my new apartment on OU-Texas weekend, I told the guys helping me I thought of Denton as far southern Oklahoma. I'm glad they kept lifting the furniture!

After graduating from Oklahoma State, I went to seminary in Minnesota. My developing passion for interreligious engagement led me to complete an MA in Islamic Studies. After that, my interests brought me to Baylor University, where I completed my PhD in Religion, Politics & Society with an emphasis in Jewish-Christian relations.

While at Baylor, I was invited to start preaching at St. John Lutheran in Coryell City, a place I grew to love and which I hope to visit soon. Sometimes, the folks there didn't know what to make of a person like me, always mentioning European politics and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. But it was St. John that made me into a pastor. I was proud to be ordained for service there in 2004.

In Chicago, I served as a campus pastor and in the Global Mission Unit of the ELCA Churchwide offices. The last four years saw me in Jerusalem, teaching for the University of Notre Dame. Throughout this journey, I have sought to better understand what it means to be a pastor, an educator, an effective administrator, and a mentor to emerging leaders. I have rarely confined my efforts to Lutheran communities alone. I hope to pour these experiences into my work as Director of the Briarwood Leadership Center.

Director of What?

People haven't been too sure what my title—Director of Briarwood Leadership Center—actually means. In some ways, that's because the position results from a new vision for Briarwood catalyzed by a new investment from the Northern Texas-Northern Louisiana Synod. We are building a new thing.

That doesn't mean that Briarwood is changing fundamentally. Our strong commitment to camping ministry for children, youth, and young adults and our highly developed model for hosting retreats will continue to be our durable foundation for future directions. The opportunity to commune in and with nature will continue to be our hallmark.

The new vision for the Leadership Center builds on the established strengths of Briarwood while reinvesting and improving structures and programming as we develop into the future.

My initial attempt at articulating a vision for the Briarwood Leadership Center starts with the big picture: promoting the flourishing of human communities. This phrase—promoting the flourishing of human communities—is a less specifically religious way of proclaiming the Good News of Jesus, who says “I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly” (John 10.10).

This news is for everyone—not just Lutherans. Our call is to be in service to our neighbor, whether they are Hindu or Muslim, recent immigrant or Native American. This call to service enlivens our

commitments to inclusivity, affirmation, and embrace—a holistic ministry with a vision for the whole person. How does that translate into how the Briarwood Leadership Center connects with the world?

Just yesterday, we hosted a major event with civic leaders and law enforcement. People may ask what this has to do with a church-related camp or leadership center. In my greeting to the group, I quoted from Martin Luther's 1523 treatise on "Temporal Authority": "Just as one can serve God in ... farming or a trade, for the benefit of others ... so one can serve God in government, and should [do so] if the needs of his neighbor demand it. For those who punish evil and protect the good are God's servants and [workers]."

Leadership Today

One can define leadership as the ability to bring others along a path toward mutually desired change. Where does that ability reside? As we have seen the deterioration of the political sphere and the appropriation of churches into political and economic camps, the time has come for churches, alongside other religious communities, to find their voices. What is the change we desire, and how do we lead the way there?

Each of you is aware that we are living in a time of social challenge and change. In his "Letter from a Birmingham Jail," Martin Luther King, Jr., challenged the churches of his day to be "not merely a thermometer [recording] the ideas and principles of popular opinion," but instead to be "the thermostat [transforming] society." It is time for us to do our part to set the temperature.

In recent years, various movements have challenged structures within American society. These include the #MeToo movement and the Movement for Black Lives. Churches have been represented on the frontlines of these social movements—and on the frontlines of rejecting to social critique and change.

Corporations have created public controversy as Nike embraced Colin Kaepernick and, in the past few days, the Gillette razor company released a commercial calling men to stand against sexism and bullying of all kinds. As churches and as a society, we must ask however, why our representative moral guides are emerging not from civil society but from the economic, commercial sphere.

In times of profound social change, leadership is about taking the risk of challenging normativity. This means not merely asking for cosmetic changes to behavior and etiquette or advocating token representation. It means critiquing the ideological assumptions underlying toxic societal norms.

Briarwood is on the leading edge of this struggle. Our theme for Summer Camp this year is "Transformed Communities." One of our themes is that communities are not transformed just because we say we want it, sit back, and wait. The transformation of communities—the result when we pursue the flourishing of human community—requires leadership.

Late last year, I listened to a radio interview with child psychologist Michael Thompson, author of *Raising Cain: The Emotional Life of Boys* (1999). In response to the #MeToo movement and what is now being called "toxic masculinity," Thompson was asked how boys can best develop empathy and compassion for others. "If I were in charge of everything ... every boy would take care of children at some point in his own boyhood," he said. "Boys who have been camp counselors—18-year-old boys who have taken care of a cabin of 10, 11-year old boys—they are different. Because they have had to

take care of somebody else's hurt and loneliness, homesickness, and pain. It changes the older boy; it makes him a better young man." This is just one of the benefits camp brings to our congregations, our homes, and our communities.

The new vision for Briarwood Leadership Center integrates the lessons of camp and its focus on children and young adults with an even broader concern for the flourishing of human communities. I am deeply grateful for the NT-NL investment in what can be accomplished here at Briarwood. And I equally grateful that you are here, eager to be part of the thriving, sustainable mission of Briarwood for the sake of God and for the world.