

# South Dakota National Guard

## Public Affairs Office

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### **FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE:**

## **Yankton church receives Department of Defense award**

ARLINGTON, Va. – The Department of Defense presented St. John's Lutheran Church of Yankton, S.D., the 2011 Secretary of Defense Employer Support Freedom Award, Sept. 22, 2011 at the Ronald Reagan Building in Washington, D.C. The Freedom Award is the highest recognition given by the U.S. government to employers for their outstanding support of employees who serve in the Guard and Reserve.

The award was presented to St. John's, along with 14 other recipients, at a ceremony attended by members of Congress, senior military officials and business and industry leaders.

Prior to the ceremony, Mr. John Marquardt, St. John's Lutheran Church congregational president, and the other Freedom Award recipients met with Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta who thanked him for superior support of our nation's citizen warriors.

South Dakota Army National Guard Chaplain Lt. Col. David Gunderson, who's also the senior pastor at St. John's, said he nominated his church for the Freedom Award because of the "generous support" received when he was deployed to Afghanistan.

"Many churches send care packages, but St. John's Lutheran Church wrapped me up and sent me as the care package," Gunderson said.

St. John's supported its pastor, even though churches are reportedly exempt from the federal law that protects servicemembers' jobs.

Gunderson offered to resign before deploying, but St. John's refused, and instead offered to continue his pay and benefits, he said.

When Gunderson declined the pay, St. John's used it to support his military mission in Afghanistan.

Upon arrival in Afghanistan, Gunderson's chapel only had ten hymnals, which was not enough for those who were attending the service. The hymnals happened to be the same hymnals used by St. John's. Gunderson shared the need with the church and they immediately responded by sending two-dozen hymnals to Afghanistan.

Gunderson also soon realized they didn't have the materials to deal with grief. There was an immediate need for grief counseling items and ordering through the Army system can sometimes take some time. Again, he shared the need with the church that sent over several grief counseling books and in two weeks they were gone. Within another 10-14 days, the church had responded to yet another call and sent over more counseling materials.

St. John's also sent so many care packages to Gunderson that he gave some to other servicemembers and sent still more to troops in remote areas. He said he also was able to give clothing to Afghan children.

Back in Yankton, St. John's established a place for family grief counseling when a local deployed unit experienced a series of losses.

The congregation supported Gunderson's wife, he said, by mowing the lawn, repairing the heating system and bringing over food.

Because of the congregation's support for "Pastor Dave," Gunderson said he was able to focus on his mission in Kabul, knowing his family was well taken care of at home.

"St. John's truly deserves this award," said Gunderson. "And it's because of these various reasons that I join St. Paul in his words to the Philippians where he says, 'I thank the Lord for your partnership with me and the ministry of the Gospel.'"

Portions of this story from Terri Moon Cronk, American Forces Press Service

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**PHOTOS:** High-resolution photos for this release are available upon request or at:

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**ESGR\_VMO\_069:** South Dakota Army National Guard Chaplain Lt. Col. David Gunderson (left) and St. John's Lutheran Church Congregational President Mr. John Marquardt (center), accept the 2011 Secretary of Defense Employer Support Freedom Award from David McGinnis (right), Acting Assistant Secretary of Defense for Reserve. The Department of Defense presented St. John's Lutheran Church of Yankton, S.D., the 2011 Secretary of Defense Employer Support Freedom Award, Sept. 22, 2011 at the Ronald Reagan Building in Washington, D.C. The Freedom Award is the highest recognition given by the U.S. government to employers for their outstanding support of employees who serve in the Guard and Reserve. (Photo by Johnny Bivera)



**ESGR\_VMO\_137:** South Dakota Army National Guard Chaplain Lt. Col. David Gunderson accept the 2011 Secretary of Defense Employer Support Freedom Award on behalf of St. John's Lutheran Church in Yankton, S.D. The Department of Defense presented St. John's Lutheran Church the 2011 Secretary of Defense Employer Support Freedom Award, Sept. 22, 2011 at the Ronald Reagan Building in Washington, D.C. The Freedom Award is the highest recognition given by the U.S. government to employers for their outstanding support of employees who serve in the Guard and Reserve. (Photo by Johnny Bivera)

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