

Babs M. Meairs

PART ONE, Essay on Bishop Suffragan for Federal Ministries

I got a call from admitting. (Joe) had reached the crisis point and was being admitted to the mental health clinic. I was summoned to assist in getting him admitted for overnight management. His friends, also combat veterans, were there—watching me as well—typically hyper-vigilant from years with PTSD. In an instant, I was THEIR chaplain. I had to be strong, compassionate, able to listen, willing to stand by when the darkness came and prepared to provide the faith to get through.

As a hospital chaplain for twelve years in the Department of Veterans Affairs, I met many dear ones like (Joe). Other chaplains in the Federal Ministries meet persons like him, on aircraft carriers, in prisons, on patrol in Afghanistan, or at a worship service on base. The stories of our service men and women are often very difficult to tell and to hear, tales often times filled with guilt, grief, heartache, betrayal and isolation. And similar stories are heard from pained souls in Federal prisons, most of whom are minorities, requiring chaplains to be able to cross not just the boundaries of bars and locked doors but of cultural divides.

We are formed as chaplains because of our experience and practice of ministry. We are sustained by being a part of the community of chaplains, grounded in faith and engaged in ministry beyond the usual walls. As for my formation, I served as an officer in the Marine Corps, sixteen years as an Episcopal priest, as a early responder in New York after the 9/11 World Trade Center attacks, and as the Presiding Bishop's liaison to the Standing Commission on Health. Chaplains, often challenged about their role, must be prepared to help their Church, their federal environment, and their communities in a specialized application of spiritual direction. Besides the duties of Chapel services,

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sacramental rites, and pastoral counseling, chaplains teach about moral codes, living in diversity, and personal health. In VA medical centers our chaplains have been leaders in end of life care, on medical ethics committees, in treatment of substance abuse, and in healing of combat stress. Support of our chaplains is important for their ministry in diverse, often difficult, and sometimes deadly situations. Providing and mediating for them is the Bishop Suffragan's mission.

The Bishop Suffragan for Federal Ministries has the unique role of representing these chaplains in the House of Bishops and to the greater Church. As pastoral support for the chaplains, the Bishop Suffragan epitomizes "ministry by walking around." This walking around is global, bringing a strong voice in places where those who influence, ordain, and sustain our chaplains are located. Included in this ministry are the thousands of Episcopalians and many more thousands who are in the care of our chaplains. The expertise of our federal chaplains is also a valuable resource to the Church.

As Bishop Suffragan for Federal Ministries, I am committed to pastoring our chaplains on behalf of the Presiding Bishop and the wider church. But I need your help. I will continue to call on the dioceses and organizations of our Church to honor and support the ministry of those who serve in the Armed Services, our veterans, their families, those in prison—all of this unique flock we call Federal Ministries—bringing into the global arena the power of Christ to bring all nations forward in hope and healing.

Remember (Joe), well, he returned to me not in crisis but in hope and asked me to preside at his wedding. As a Vietnam veteran he had never thought he could be comfortable with Asians, yet he fell in love with a Chinese employee at the VA. That is healing; that is the fruit that blesses a chaplain's ministry. As your Bishop Suffragan for

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Federal Ministries, I serve for (Joe) and others. This Episcopate, extended through our chaplains, shares Christ's love in the strangest places. We do this ministry because we are called to do it. We do it with your prayers and support. We do it because it is what Jesus told us to do.