

Babs M. Meairs

PART TWO, Essay for Bishop Suffragan for Federal Ministries

Support for chaplains in situations of adversity requires a commitment to leadership that seeks fairness and understanding. It also takes confidence and courage to address issues at levels that may also put one's self at risk. When Director of the Chaplain Service at the VA San Diego Healthcare System, I worked with the National Chaplain Center to set-up a Clinical Pastoral Education (CPE) residency on the West Coast to serve jointly the VA and the Navy. Administrative responsibilities were shared with the Chaplain Office at the Navy Medical Center in San Diego. The selection of the first CPE Supervisor was handled carefully, as was the selection of students, a mix of civilians and experienced Navy chaplains.

The Supervisor had expertise in Clinical Pastoral Education, held a doctorate in pastoral psychology, and was experienced in disaster relief, ready to train chaplains who would be serving in areas of potential trauma and caring for those suffering from varieties of duress. Attention was paid to CPE guidelines for professionalism. Yet, in the middle of the first year a student charged the Supervisor with sexual harassment. I responded to investigations by the Association for Clinical Pastoral Education and the VA, reported to the hospital Director, worked with the Navy Medical Center staff and regularly contacted the VA National Chaplain Center.

Throughout the investigations I maintained sensitive pastoral support to the Supervisor while seeing that the students, who were not allowed contact with him, did not have their professional training compromised. My contacts with the Supervisor balanced compassion with reserved judgment and disappointment with finding new ways to use his expertise in the hospital. As his supervisor and senior chaplain I made sure he was

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getting professional therapy and maintaining duties in the medical center. We prayed when he was overwhelmed by potential problems for him and his family. At all times an attitude of support and respect was maintained among the staff so that he did not feel abandoned or shamed before his colleagues. My faith that God brings good out of the bad things that happen sustained me and encouraged the Supervisor, who was exonerated and appreciative of my pastoral leadership.

Clinical Pastoral Education grew in the military following September 11, 2001, and the subsequent War on Terrorism. It was found that chaplains were not adequately prepared for the expectations on them in combat areas, and increased attention is now given to the aftermath of combat stress, on veterans and their families. The Navy chaplains in our CPE program brought real experiences to share from coping with their own and their family's adjustments. As a chaplain and a chaplain endorser, I emphasize the importance of self-care as necessary spiritual stewardship. My pastoral care of families goes back to my own active duty time, when I extended my responsibilities to include meeting with the spouses of my troops to hear their concerns. Personal contact remains essential in pastoral oversight. Besides direct interventions, useful resources are now available through the military, organizations like the Armed Forces YMCA, and a variety of family-oriented programs around the country.

Our chaplains have additional issues: many are in the Reserves or National Guard and return from military assignments to parishes that likely have no idea of their experiences and needs. Some churches maintained excellent contact with their rectors during deployment and prepared well for support on the rector's return, supporting family retreats and adjustment time. As with other reservists, chaplains worry about whether

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they will have their civilian job when they return from duty. Some resign from their parishes, and some seek interims. Congregations are asked to be understanding when their rector is called away. A local Episcopal chaplain serving in the Guard recently contacted me for prayer support; he continues in the difficult work of informing families when a member has been killed in the line of duty and sometimes doing the burial. These extra duties take a toll on chaplains and their families. The spiritual ache in these chaplains, who often bear their own combat stress, relies on the knowledge of our Lord's compassion and comfort, a focus for pastoral care from the Bishop.

. With women now more present in uniform, the military is dealing with new issues, such as the effects on children of separation from mothers as well as fathers, parents of both genders who come home with multiple injuries including amputations and brain damage, and the possibility of both parents being deployed at the same time (as happened to two of our chaplains). Families are being expected to step up when a single-parent is deployed and children are left behind. This is also a major issue in ministry to those who are incarcerated and their families. Our chaplains today are expected to be experts in family counseling as well as in combat ministry. Our chaplains require support and training that meets the current needs of our nation and our Church.

Serving now on the Board for the National Committee on Ministry to the Armed Forces, I know the work that endorsers share in support of our chaplains and their ministries. I also see the rise of new concerns, among them being the rescinding of the "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" policy and the ramifications of that for chaplains ministering to the diversity in their commands. Chaplains may have their consciences tested, and their action may affect promotion. Endorsers are the advocates for chaplains in their

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ministering for the nation and the Church. The recent move to Washington, D.C., places our endorser in a better position to maintain dialog with the heads of the federal chaplaincies and represent the work and concerns of our denomination in the milieu of the government's policies. The Bishop Suffragan for Federal Ministries safeguards the chaplains, their charges, and the doctrine of our Church in these challenging times.