

Carl Wright “Episcopal Bishop Suffragan for Federal Ministries” Essay Notes

PART ONE

Episcopalians often ask me, “Why does the Church have an ‘armed forces bishop’?” (Implicit in the question is the suggestion that we should not have one.) The short answer is that chaplains and their families need a pastor. The longer answer follows.

Bishop as Pastor to the Chaplains

For me the need for a Federal Ministries bishop is personal. As a 19 year old in my first assignment I met the late Bishop Charles Lee Burgreen, who confirmed me. Bishop Charlie made the annual conferences the centerpiece of his episcopate. At these “family reunions” the bishop would preach, teach, and, most interestingly, gather us around the piano for Compline each evening, ending with his own arrangement of the “Nunc Dimittis.” Anybody who knew Bishop Charlie can attest to his spiritual dynamism. He taught me that the Bishop is first and foremost a pastor to chaplains and families in federal service.

Bishop as Leader

Federal chaplains serve the Church and the State; or, as we prefer to put it, God and Country. This is one of the tensions we live. We are frequently called upon to reconcile the sometimes contrasting demands of our faith and the institutions we serve. Such decision making is not easy. If it were, there would be no need for a Federal Ministries bishop, and those who see no need for the position would be justified. But, precisely because of the moral dilemmas we face, we need a shepherd.

The Rt Rev Charles Keyser, greatly assisted us in navigating the federal government minefield. He epitomized the bishop as leader. Once appointed, Bishop Keyser’s leadership skills were first quickly tested, resulting in his decision, along with the Episcopal Peace Fellowship, to have an all-night Peace Vigil preceding his consecration in the Washington National Cathedral. (I remember the joy of fasting and praying all night.) This Vigil was significant not only because of the power of prayer, but because it made us consider, perhaps for the first time, that military chaplaincy and pacifism are complementary.

Bishop Keyser was a high energy, widely travelled shepherd. He was so respected by leaders outside the Church that he always left our situations better than he had found them. He excelled at helping us cope with the demands of serving God and Country.

## The Bishop as Diplomat

When our present Bishop Suffragan for Federal Ministries, George Packard, took office, some disgruntled parishioners confronted him with the news that they were without a chaplain, and that he needed to act immediately. In a moment that, for me, defined his episcopacy, Bishop George diffused the situation by joining our hands with us and praying for God's guidance. It was a "be still, then, and know that I am God" moment and a reminder that God was in charge.

Bishop George's ministry has shown me that chaplains can be change agents in this troubled world. In him we see that positive change won't happen by confrontation, but by the hard work of diplomacy. After the 9-11 attacks, following Hurricane Katrina, and in other crises, Bishop George led by example, joining hands, pulling together, and, making the world better bit by bit.

Since its inception this office has been defined not so much by a job description as by the servants who have occupied it. Thus my vision of what the Federal Ministries Bishop can be is very much informed by my experiences of these bishops. This bishop should be a pastor to the pastors, a strong leader who can speak confidently to power, and a wise diplomat who can help us balance our ordination vows and our federal service.

## My Expectations of Federally Endorsed Chaplains

Building on what I've learned from the bishops, I would expect the chaplains to be:

- (1) Chaplains: those who "walk beside" those in need, and, like St. Christopher, bear Christ on their backs. They are not primarily evangelists, educators or pastors - although these are important aspects of our ministry- but chaplains.
- (2) Priests, faithful to their baptismal and ordination vows.
- (3) Representatives of the Episcopal Church, who understand that because we Anglicans are the "via media," we are uniquely postured to be bridge-builders and reconcilers.
- (4) Christian Missionaries who understand that because the majority of our constituents are non-Christian, they should present the Gospel, in a loving and non-confrontational way.
- (5) Federal employees who understand their role not as "either/or," but "both/and;" that their witness greatly depends upon being respected as a fully-qualified member of the government team.

## My Expectations of the Bishop Suffragan

I would expect the Bishop Suffragan to be:

- (1) a pastor to the federal family, utterly committed to this work
- (2) a person of prayer and a godly example to the federal flock
- (3) an energetic servant, highly visible and available
- (4) an expert at conflict resolution: either by nature or through training

- (5) a reconciler, passionate about cultivating close pastoral relationships: with chaplains and their families; with federal authorities; and with fellow Bishops
- (6) a flexible leader: as history teaches, the work of this office will continue to evolve. This bishop must anticipate and prepare for contingency ministry.
- (7) a colleague in the Gospel: with chaplains, fellow endorsers, and with brother and sister bishops. Because of the worldwide constituency and national staff membership, this bishop can have a unique voice in the House.