

Question One: Editorial on Federal Chaplaincies

The Episcopal Church, which has seen a long history of its members serving in uniform, should embrace and support its clergy and lay members who continue this tradition. Walking with combatants through the fog of fear, but with the confidence that “nothing in all creation can separate us from the love of God” (Romans 8:39), military and VA chaplains can serve both the Lord and the service members by reminding them that they will not face anything (including a horrible death or disabling injury) that Jesus has not already faced and destroyed. The chaplain also hears the service member’s grief at having committed acts of great violence and death, and alleviates guilt through the assurance of pardon. The chaplain present on the battlefield provides the military combatant one resource to find the way all the way home, not only restored to society, but prepared to lead the nation in future years. Chaplains present in VA hospitals continue to heal the loss and separation that continues long after the noise of battle is ended.

When this nation engages in war, we send our young men and women to commit acts of great violence, acts that by definition are outside the norms of society. It is the responsibility of the nation to train their service members to make right decisions, to keep them connected to the national ethical “lifeline” while they are deployed, and to restore them to normative society when they return. Clergy exercising their ministry within the Department of Defense are vital in the care and counsel of our military members; and those exercising their ministry within the Department of Veterans Affairs continue the lifeline work of bringing our men and women all the way home – in heart, body, mind and soul – from the rigors of battle.

The mission of Chaplain Services is to serve as a visible reminder of the Holy, to provide spiritual care and the opportunity for members and their families to exercise their constitutional right to freedom of religion, and to assist commanders in ensuring the right of free exercise of religion for all military members. The core competencies for all chaplains are to provide for the spiritual needs of military members and their families by providing for their diverse religious needs, and to provide religious, spiritual and moral advice to leadership about the religious requirements, spiritual needs, and moral issues that impact mission, quality of life, and religious freedom. In short, military chaplains nurture the living, care for the wounded, and honor the fallen.

Through its chaplains, the Episcopal Church ministers to and assists its members who choose the profession of arms to make war-fighting decisions from a foundation of ethical virtue. To fulfill this mission, chaplains serve on the staff of commanders as advisors on religious, ethical, and quality of life concerns. In order to be an effective guide and counselor, chaplains must not see themselves as training troops to “fight God’s fights”. Nor must they speak out of a vacuum of knowledge and understanding of the life situation of those to whom they would bring the Gospel. In other words, the minister must know how the service members think in order to speak to them. Otherwise, the ministry will consist of mixing apples and oranges; and the helpfulness of the chaplain’s voice will be negated. Worse yet, the chaplains may so misread the values of the combatants that they would create even greater ethical tension. It is incumbent on our priests in uniform to be well-trained and educated in both the pastoral skills and ethical decision-making that will enable them to be truly effective in the culture of the armed forces.

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Priests trained in both Christian moral ethics and in the demands of military service have long served both God and nation. The Bishop Suffragan for Federal Ministries, working together with Bishops Diocesan and with seminary deans, must actively identify, encourage and support priestly vocations in young adults in order to provide chaplains to our men and women in uniform, since the services do not accept new members much older than their mid-30s. More seasoned priests, with the gifts and talents for ministry in hospitals and counseling centers, need to be recruited to work with our combat veterans in VA hospitals and Vet Centers. As we provide dedicated and capable priests for these chaplaincies, we as a Church provide significant influence upon the young people of the nation who are willing to live with the moral ambiguity of military service and its long term effects on the soul.

While chaplaincy in federal prisons is substantially different from ministry focused on military members and veterans, the Episcopal Church does well to recruit eligible priests who have a heart and a calling for this ministry and to support them in finding employment in the prison system. Not only is this particular ministry a response to Our Lord's admonishment in Matthew 25, it is also a way to bring "perfect freedom" to those who are "in chains" by giving their past and their future over to the care of Christ Jesus.

Since Christians live in both the "divine city and the human city", we will always need clergy who live with them as they strive to be faithful disciples and responsible citizens. I consider federal ministries to be a matter of urgency both for the Gospel and for national security.

Question Two: Support of Chaplains by the Bishop Suffragan

Should I be a Bishop, my responsibility to priests in uniform will be to serve as their chief pastor, to encourage and guide them in their ministries, to intervene in their behalf when necessary within the military community and with their Bishops Diocesan, and to support their return to civilian ministry when discharged from active duty. Because of my accumulated life experiences in both the Church and the Air Force, I have become both comfortable and capable moving among policy-makers and leaders, speaking for the people they lead to execute their policies.

As a Bishop Suffragan, my responsibility to other Bishops will be to care for their priests who are dispersed to military service around the world and separated from their families and civilian congregations, and to assist in their reintegration into civilian ministry when the battle is done.

It is important that our chaplains in the practice of federal chaplaincy return to their home dioceses for clergy conferences and annual councils/conventions. While they serve outside the parochial culture of the Episcopal Church, they share the same faith and must be supported by the larger Church. Their presence and participation in diocesan events will serve in part to keep them connected to their roots, and will also provide opportunity for them to educate civilian clergy about the concerns of ministry in the unique settings of the armed forces, veterans hospitals and centers, and federal prisons. Because of the unique concerns of the Armed Forces, we need to continue budget for annual retreats for our military chaplains to build their community as a subset in the interfaith, ecumenical and pluralistic ministry in which they are engaged.

While the Bishop Suffragan must be available to the chaplains for spiritual nurture, family support and career enhancement, the various Bishops Diocesan who host their state-side ministries should also make their resources available to chaplains and their families living within their jurisdictions. Dioceses should include federal chaplains and their families in the full range of care offered to their parish clergy families. I would encourage parish priests to invite their counterparts in federal service to address their congregations about the nature of chaplaincy, the stresses of service to the nation, and ways in which congregations can extend their ministries to care for our troops and their families left behind in our own communities.

Our chaplains can help civilian congregations to maintain an awareness of the existence and needs of those sacrificing their time and effort to protect our country, and to create an environment of acceptance within the congregation for extended family members who worship or visit the congregation by responding to their needs (physical, material, and spiritual), and through a willingness to join in their struggles, whatever they might be. As the founding president of CareForTheTroops, Inc., I am working to develop a grass-roots network of faith communities, marriage and family therapists, and combat stress counselors to care for our young veterans and their families as they live through multiple deployments to southwest Asia, and to restore them to civilian society when they return.

As a former combat aviator, I personally experienced the necessity for clergy in uniform when I was fighting in Southeast Asia and needed spiritual respite and nurture. As a long-time chaplain (active duty and reserve), I experienced the difficulties associated with deployment and reintegration, with the divided loyalties between parish and military, and with the sometimes

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enigmatic presence of veterans living silently within the local parish. I have witnessed the laudable service of our chaplains, as well as the difficult times they have had reestablishing their ministries as they have returned to their dioceses and parishes. I would like to see CREDO establish programs specifically for reserve, National Guard, and retired chaplains to better equip them for return to civilian pastorates.

For the past two years, I have served on the Defense Health Board (advisory to the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Health Affairs) and on its committees concerned with Medical Ethics, Psychological Health, and Suicide Prevention. This work has given me access to policy makers in government as well as to the service members in the sand. It has also given me a renewed appreciation for the dedication of our chaplains and for the need of our civilian community to care for the “stranger in our midst” who often wears desert camouflage.

Spiritual care of the men and women who serve and who have served this nation in the profession of arms is a noble pursuit. Our priests in uniform serve them, the nation and the church in important ways. As long as this nation has troops deployed in harm’s way, the chaplains who care for the troops before, during and after the battle, will be the central concern of the Bishop Suffragan, but without neglecting, insofar as budgets and time allow, those who are sent by us to care for those in prison.