

Part One: Federal Ministry - An Impossible Oxymoron or an Inspired Opportunity?

The Episcopal chaplaincy offered within federal settings (Department of Defense, Veteran's Administration and Federal Bureau of Prisons) is one of the most demanding and least understood ministry environments within the purview of The Episcopal Church (TEC). After serving twenty-nine years of active military service I am rightly sensitive to the predicament of our federal chaplains (and recipients of their ministry). For example, from the perspective of our diocesan ecclesiastical structures, just how legitimate and authentic are chaplains who serve in federal institutions? Most dioceses categorize federal chaplains as "non-parochial." One implication of this designation is that these NP clergy who live out their vocations as chaplains in federal institutions are somehow less genuine than their parochial, or parish counterparts. Currently I am in a diocese in which NP clergy cannot even be counted within the necessary number of clergy for a quorum at the diocesan council! Though similar NP bias is applied to other clergy in addition to federal chaplains, the message is clear. There is and has been partiality, intentional or otherwise, within the church against federal chaplains and the congregations to whom they deliver their sacramental and pastoral ministry.

Notwithstanding, I contend that it is vital for our church to provide professional priestly ministry to persons within the federal milieu. Even a cursory reading of the Gospels demonstrates how effectively our federal chaplains embrace Jesus' intentions as they care for persons in the military, for veterans and for prisoners. When we read about Jesus' compassion for the centurion (Mk. 15.39), or His words in the Beatitudes regarding care for persons in distress (Mt. 5.3-12 or Lu. 6.20-26), or His words concerning being visited in prison (Mt. 25.36b) we begin to see indications of our Lord's concern for the people who receive the ministry of federal chaplains. Federal ministry, an act of faithful obedience, is as valid as any ministry supported by TEC.

For this unique ecumenical environment TEC directs that a bishop suffragan be provided to lead and manage these federal ministries, and take a share of the councils of the church in the House of Bishops. Much in the spirit of 19th century Bishop Jackson

Kemper, the Bishop Suffragan for Federal Ministries (BSFM) is like a missionary bishop whose territory or episcopate spans the globe and resides in highly concentrated pockets of parishioners and their attendant chaplains. The missionary nature of this episcopate is a primary concept which must be understood and grasped by the incumbent BSFM. Likewise, because of the uniqueness of this ministry the BSFM has a prophetic responsibility within the House of Bishops, a responsibility to bear witness to the significant issues that are dealt with on a daily basis by chaplains engaged in federal ministries: that as our country is engaged in two wars much of the burden is shouldered by Guard and Reserve servicemembers from their dioceses, that the Veteran's Administration's expanding PTSD program needs local parish support, and that there are individual opportunities to support our prison chaplains through engagement with such as Kairos Ministries to inmates, the warehoused and forgotten citizens of our country.

Federal chaplains provide ministry in a unique environment of extreme ecumenism, an environment rarely if ever experienced by most Episcopal clergy. Always the focus in federal ministry is upon the unique needs of ministry recipients. Though there will be Episcopalians within range of their ministry for whom TEC is very important, federal chaplains are very aware that many of those to whom they minister will have little concern for the Episcopal Church, *The Book of Common Prayer*, or even our sacraments. If practicing federal chaplains are to be effective, this principal of ecumenism and pluralism must be understood and accepted. This is not to say that our federal chaplains will ever cease to be Christian or cease to be Episcopalians, but that they will care for all persons.

As the BSFM visits with federal chaplains, a primary leadership task is to communicate that the heart of their ministry is found within the embrace of Christ's incarnation. The Nativity story reminds us that God took on human flesh in order to be in the midst of broken people and to offer them a new relationship with God. In a letter to Christ-followers at Phillippi the Apostle Paul challenged believers to effectively bear witness to the truths about Christ which they held in their hearts. Paul knew that following Christ was in some ways counter-intuitive: "Let each of you look not to your own interests, but

to the interests of others. Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus.” (Philippians 2.4-5, *NRSV*) In other words, whatever the interests of the person in front of you, let the Christ-likeness within you connect with those interests, cares and concerns. Above all else priesthood within the federal context is an incarnational exercise of love for the other. Time and again the service member, veteran or prisoner will be so physically, emotionally, or spiritually exhausted that the incarnational energy of the chaplain could be the only sustaining force in that person’s life.

Beyond a shadow of a doubt, as our chaplains step forth in faith to meet the challenge to care for the souls of service members, veterans, prisoners, and their families, federal ministry is an exciting inspired possibility!