

Assessment of Armed Forces and Federal Ministries Episcopacy

The prior Suffragan Bishops for the Episcopacy have each moved it forward and left it in good stead. Thinking in process improvement terms there are always opportunities to make things better even when everything is going well. I have appreciated Bishop Packard's pastoral concern and his outreach to his own Chaplains and to those who were interested in transitioning from another faith group to the Episcopal Church. His staff carried out his vision and pastoral charge when he was undergoing medical treatment, which is a testament to his leadership and spirit. Bishop Magness' organization of the office, standardization of the transition process, aggressive visitation schedule and work toward updating the Canons to more accurately describe the Episcopacy were instrumental in bringing us into the 21st Century. The need to provide relevant continuing education via the spring and fall clergy conferences, as well as opportunity for fellowship and support, has been effectively fulfilled. Representing the Chaplains, their accomplishments and their needs to the house of Bishops and the wider church will continue to be a prime emphasis for the Episcopacy. Integration of the Suffragan Bishop into different boards and committees supports the work of the church and provides networking which facilitates the work of the Episcopacy. These foundations are necessary to the Episcopacy and should be used to their best advantage as we move forward.

Our culture is steadily becoming more technical, computerized and, to some extent, isolated by our technology. Striking a balance between using technology for its benefits while uplifting interpersonal/communal connection is critical to ministry within the Episcopacy. It is what Chaplains do on a daily basis. They are challenged to keep up with the latest technology while the stock and trade of relating is in one on one encounters. Having a webpage for the Episcopacy is important, more important is that the webpage be up to date. This speaks to the technology expectations of future Chaplains and the broader society who might be interested in what the Suffragan Bishop is doing or has to say. Staying connected with the individual Chaplain will mean visits, phone calls, emails, skype calls and any other communication system which may develop. Connecting with each other is doing the work God calls us to, as we model the relationship God wants with each of us, for those in our care.

I see three stages in Chaplaincy which comprise the life of the Chaplain:

1. Pre-Chaplaincy-the time a clergy person considers entering Chaplaincy which may or may not include Chaplain Candidate programs.
2. Chaplaincy itself whether active duty, reserve, national guard, civil air patrol, Veterans Administration or Bureau of Prisons where the Chaplain is providing ministry to members of our armed forces or those incarcerated by the Federal government.

3. Post-Chaplaincy or retirement when Chaplains may find other places to use their gifts and training. This may be more challenging to Chaplains who were on active duty for their entire career.

The challenges in Pre-Chaplaincy are recruiting and preparing interested seminary students and clergy. Some of the challenge comes from the requirements of the military and the Veterans Administration. Helping the aspiring Chaplain understand the specific requirements for their desired area of service will enable them to be successful in their career goals. Connecting them with Chaplains who are currently serving in their area of interest and can mentor/explain the nitty gritty of that ministry will allow them to move forward with their eyes wide open.

Active Chaplaincy provides any number of challenges. Some who begin find it is not what they expect or are sidelined by trials and tribulations which are part of military life. Supporting our Chaplains and their families is a crucial part of the Episcopacy. Deployments, work-ups, training, duty hours make the short list of stresses on Chaplains and their families. For people who strive to serve, give of themselves and seek the best for others these can take a huge toll. This can be greater on the Reserve/Guard Chaplain who is juggling Church employment, or any employment, with the demands of weekends and two weeks a year (which is as much a misnomer as 40 hours a week for clergy.) Self and family often suffer for the work of the Chaplain. Encouraging self-care, wholeness, boundary setting and setting aside time for family relationships is critical to enabling the work of the Chaplain. Clergy training symposiums function as a down time for Chaplains, but may also add stress depending on what else is happening in the Chaplain's life. The Episcopacy must continue to advocate balance while recognizing it is not always possible. Providing a safe place to vent, an opportunity to find perspective and support while struggling is central to the office of the Suffragan Bishop. When a Chaplain decides to leave Chaplaincy they must be assisted in every way possible to transition to meaningful work. Continued pastoral care until they are settled in their new life and beyond is the least that can be provided.

Post-Chaplaincy challenges are most evident for those who serve careers on active duty, but are also present for Reserve/Guard and VA Chaplains. What to do after we retire is a question everyone has to consider. For Chaplains who have essentially been outside the institution of the church it is a bigger question. Even when communication is continuous between the Chaplain and their Diocesan Bishop there is a separation from the Diocese and an estrangement which is most evident in retirement. Having been both a Navy and a VA Chaplain this sense of being part but separate is true in both areas. Many people in the church see Chaplains as extra-ordinary clergy. Real clergy serve in churches. Transitioning back to church is challenging as the skill sets for Chaplaincy and congregation overlap but are not the same.

Some Chaplains will simply want to retire and live their lives in peace. Most want to continue to do ministry of some kind. A variety of opportunities are present in retirement. Military Chaplains may want to work in VA hospitals continuing to serve the same subculture with the knowledge, skills and abilities they have acquired. More generally to all Chaplains, positions within the church, especially in underserved areas such as Native American reservations or rural areas, may be places to continue ministry. Interim ministry is another area where skills developed in Chaplaincy prepare former Chaplains to assist congregations in transition. Those with administrative gifts may look for positions within Dioceses, Provinces or within the National Church. There are other places of service which can and should be investigated and considered. Preparing Chaplains for this stage of life is the last challenge for the Episcopacy. It is the natural flow for caring for those who served our country.

In summary I believe there are opportunities to improve in the Episcopacy. Using the foundation which exists and making changes where necessary to improve I envision more comprehensive care for Chaplains. Care begins as clergy contemplate Chaplaincy and continues through retirement, or conclusion of Chaplaincy, in active supportive ways. Fortunately, the Episcopacy is either already doing much of this or the ground work has been laid for it.