

“Military Chaplains: Healing Agents in a Troubled World”
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Psalm 11

For the director of music. Of David.

¹In the LORD I take refuge.

How then can you say to me:

“Flee like a bird to your mountain.

²For look, the wicked bend their bows;
they set their arrows against the strings
to shoot from the shadows
at the upright in heart.

³When the foundations are being destroyed,
what can the righteous do?”

⁴The LORD is in his holy temple;

David’s absolute trust in God implies a passive human stance toward human brokenness. What can he or any of the righteous do in the face of a very troubled world? Nothing! Only in God can they find refuge and help! The remainder of the Psalm reinforces that implication and describes a God who cares, a God who watches, a God who in the end will bring the destruction the wicked have chosen and who insures the close relationship with Him the righteous seek. This God is the one who sees to it that justice is done.

But David’s very active life counters the assumption that he was advocating human passivity in order to let God act. David was the shepherd who killed the lion and the bear. David was the giant killer who took up the weapons with which he was familiar and did what those less courageous would not do. He did not stand by presuming God would intervene. David was a warrior. Yet David’s refuge was in the Lord.

To some, contemporary military chaplains exhibit a similar conundrum. On the one hand they represent God, advocate for God, speak favorably of God. On the other hand they belong to and provide support for organizations that exist, in the harshest description, to kill people. How can chaplains be both God’s servants and military personnel at the same time?

Educators

Chaplains play several healing roles. Among them is the role of educator. Two hundred thirty four years ago the first clergyman was hired to serve as a chaplain in the Navy. His duties included leading weekly worship, of course, and reading daily prayers. But he was also a school teacher. Many of the ship’s crew were young and had little if any education. Being among the most educated in that time, chaplains worked as teachers.

With some adaptations, chaplains are still educators. They provide or arrange for training for lay leaders of religious groups. They teach or coordinate bible studies, prayer groups and religious instruction. They teach or coordinate classes regarding family life, relationships and finances.

As educators chaplains bring healing to broken spiritual lives, broken dreams, broken relationships.

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Moral and Ethical Advisors

Chaplains are also tasked to advise the commander regarding morale, morals and ethics. All ranks have direct access to the chaplain and the commanding officer relies on the chaplain to have the pulse of personnel, to know what concerns unit members have and what troubles them. The chaplain thus becomes the advocate of unit members as well as advisor to the commander.

Chaplains are expected to be spokespersons for high standards and morals. Their ethical and theological training prepare them to be sensitive to all, especially the weak and powerless, and to have the good of all at heart. As such they have an important platform from which to speak of eternal values.

My friend, Navy chaplain Abuhena Saiful-Islam, is a good example. He is an Imam. When terrorists were first taken to Guantanamo Bay he was sent to work on the staff. He describes providing needed religious support for the prisoners as well as advising the commanders and educating the staff about Muslim beliefs and values. At a volatile time post 9-11 his was a calming voice that brought understanding and healing to many.

Community Relations Projects

Military chaplains intend to be healing agents in this chaotic world. Their long-standing practice of coordinating Community Relations Projects (ComRel) has become even more important in the current environment where suspicion and misunderstandings destroy trust and erode the essential ingredients of fruitful dialogue.

My first exposure to this came twenty five years ago in Japan. Working with a Marine unit there, I joined them one afternoon for a visit to an orphanage. Successive chaplains had developed a relationship with this facility where physically and/or developmentally disabled children were placed by their families. The Marines did work projects there painting and doing light maintenance. And several times each year they visited. With them came barbecue grills and lots of food, toys, games and gifts. They spent the afternoon feeding and playing with children whose lives were shattered. Even though unable to communicate verbally, the acts of kindness brought healing to the disadvantaged children—and no small portion of healing to the Marines too.

During our years in the Gulf I made two visits to that part of the world. Both times I was amazed at the innovative and redemptive ways in which military chaplains reached out to the communities around their military units and by doing so have increased understanding and cooperation between wary or antagonistic peoples. Their work has prompted sincere appreciation from the host nations and contributed to the healing of the causes or consequences of conflict.

Pictures

Babylon and Emilio Marrero, Jr., *A Quiet Reality: A Chaplain's Journey into Babylon, Iraq with the 1st Marine Expeditionary Force*, Lima, OH: FaithWalk Publishing, 2009.

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