

Chaplaincy in the Forces

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A well-known Methodist once declared that ‘the world is my parish’, rather than, as Methodist Forces chaplains were reminded at the celebration of the 150th Anniversary of the Methodist Forces Board, by the Revd Martyn Atkins, ‘the parish is my world’. Chaplaincy to the forces of this country has been a concern of the Methodist Church since the time of John Wesley. Wesley visited and ministered to troops, and in early 1756, when this country was under threat of invasion by France, ‘Wesley even briefly considered to raise a troop of 200 Methodist volunteers for the defence of London against an anticipated French attack’.² Wesley was not the first Methodist army chaplain, however, as it is widely acknowledged that John Wesley lived and died an Anglican.

Methodists have not always had an easy time in the forces. In Gibraltar in June 1803 five soldiers (two Corporals and three Privates) of the Queen’s Regiment, pleaded at a court martial, that they had had their Colonel’s verbal permission to attend a Methodist meeting. They were found guilty; the Corporals were reduced to the rank of Private and each awarded ‘five hundred lashes each’.³

John Reynolds, a local preacher, was press-ganged into the army at the age of 15, and was a cavalry soldier in the Peninsular War. Press-ganging was a favourite method of those opposed to Methodism, when they would charge them ‘with vagrancy, and then, under the law of those feverish days, when the French and the Pretender were national bogies, to “Press” them as soldiers’.⁴ The Primitive Methodist Magazine of 1859 records that, whilst serving in Egypt in a battle with a French officer, Reynolds ‘received a severe cut on the back of his neck, the marks of which he carried to the grave’.⁵ Interestingly, he was accompanied to war by his unnamed wife, and they both ‘underwent great privation and suffering’.

One of the Duke of Wellington’s continual requests to the headquarters of the Army in London, was to be sent more ‘respectable and efficient clergymen’.⁶ Why were they needed? Wellington feared the preaching of moralistic sermons by Methodist soldiers to their officers, and his chaplain, the Revd Samuel Briscall, was tasked to keep an eye on the Methodists. These soldier-preachers did, however, have a wider impact; throughout the world which meant, throughout the Empire soldiers were often key figures in extending the reach of Methodism. The earliest Methodist societies in

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South Africa (1803) and Tasmania (1820), for example, were ‘directly the result of military mobility’.⁷ Many Methodist societies began as a result of these evangelical soldiers meeting together, although not always without some attack on an individual or the society as a whole.

When a country goes to war and prisoners are taken, the question arises: ‘What do you do with them?’ A Methodist minister serving on the *Medway*, the Revd Boase, ‘while attending to the duty of his Circuit’, (10 prison ships holding about 7,000 prisoners), ‘received an invitation from the commander of one of those ships named the *Glory*, to come on board and preach to the prisoners’.⁸ By 1810 Boase was appointed by the Methodist Conference as chaplain to the French prisoners.

Whatever the perception of ministers in a civilian context, within the military there is no doubt that they are able to bring a spiritual dimension to the military community. There is no doubt also, that in the past, and especially outside combat zones, chaplains may have been seen as religious welfare workers, whereas in an operational theatre of war, more recently in Iraq and Afghanistan this is certainly not the case.

For a forces chaplain in the twenty-first century, the world is most certainly a chaplain’s parish. Wherever a chaplain goes, and wherever he or she sets up the cross, there is the church. I have set up church in such diverse places as a briefing room in Iraq, in the middle of the Canadian prairies, in a hangar in south-west Scotland, or on a parade square in many places. Other chaplains have held church services on flight decks, and in many other places too numerous to mention. Why is this important? In Scripture the church is the *eklesia*, the gathering of a people, in our case the people of God.

Chaplaincy can be found in Scripture, for example in the story of Nehemiah, a man of prayer. When Nehemiah heard the catastrophic news from Jerusalem, it distressed him so much that even the king noticed. The king asked, ‘What do you request? Instead of answering immediately, Nehemiah first turned to God in prayer to seek how he should respond (2:4). Soldiers expect their chaplain to be a man or woman of prayer, praying for them and their families. There are special times of prayer when soldiers are killed or injured, especially with their colleagues. There may be prayers prior to a major operation, for the safety of the soldiers concerned. What effect does it have on soldiers? There are a variety of reactions, but they want to be sure that their chaplain, like Nehemiah, is a person of prayer.

Chaplains also have the opportunity, especially on operations, to develop the faith of the soldiers around them. Nehemiah also had the same oppor-

tunity. Nehemiah faced a difficult period during the rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem. In 4.2 Nehemiah and those rebuilding the walls with him are mocked: 'What are these feeble Jews doing?' The adjective *feeble* is used of a fisherman whose trade fails or to describe the inhabitants of a defeated land. It would have been easy for the rebuilders to have given up, but Nehemiah would not give up.

Chaplains, however, do need to be genuine. In some sectors of chaplaincy, those to whom you minister see you only occasionally, but within the military, chaplains are seen around 24/7. The soldiers, sailors and airmen and women get to know if you are genuine very quickly. Soldiers are constantly reminded that the chaplains are available to those who have a faith and those who have none, those of the Christian persuasion and those of other faiths. Military chaplaincy is truly an ecumenical and multi-faith experience.

Chaplains must have a routine of prayer and study, and try to stick to it. Soldiers want to know that their chaplain is praying for them, as well as being seen 'around the bazaars' talking to them, finding out their concerns and, if necessary, bringing those concerns to the attention of the chain of command. It must be said that the chain of command finds all chaplains indispensable, but it is the chaplains serving with the Battlegroup on operations, who are especially valued. Their efforts bring with them the benefits of religion to the front line, as well as their ministry to the wounded and dying, and above all, their personal conduct as men and women of God, under the same conditions as the troops whom they serve.

Whilst on operations chaplains often have the freedom to move around the battlefield, a freedom which is not available to other people, though this activity is often restricted through lack of transport. When this occurs, it is up to the chaplain to seek out where other transport is heading and coordinate his or her movements on this basis. Military chaplains can also be a useful 'tool' in moving small amounts of equipment from area to area, whilst at the same time visiting the servicemen and women. There are, however, items which the chaplain should not handle: arms and ammunition are probably the biggest areas where 'lending a hand' is inconsistent with the chaplain's role, whereas in assisting to evacuate a wounded soldier when other transport is already overwhelmed, the chaplain can be a great asset. Centuries ago, in the Peninsular War, Revd Charles Frith 'was so truly praiseworthy and humane, that it deserves to be recorded'. Frith, strong man, 'carried down on his back, one after the other, three or four of the officers of our brigade who had been severely wounded, from the

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heights where the action was fought [the Pyrenees], to the village of Maya, a distance of a mile and a half'.⁹

Military chaplains often depend on the help offered to them by their civilian counterparts when they return from operations. The old question of 'Who pastors the pastor?' is a genuine concern for chaplains returning from operations in Iraq and Afghanistan. This concern has come more into focus recently with chaplains who have become ill because of what they have seen whilst deployed. In Camp Bastion, when a seriously injured soldier is brought in, the hospital chaplain often waits quietly in the background, and if the soldier dies on the operating table, the chaplain is then invited forward to offer prayers for the soldier and his or her family, as well as the medical staff who have been fighting to save another life. The hospital and unit chaplain then have to minister to the soldiers, especially those who knew the recently deceased.

As we saw previously, Nehemiah was under great pressure to give up, but his faith in God would not allow this to happen. There is a need for chaplains to develop their own personal faith, undertaken through personal reflection, along with courses at Amport House and pre-deployment training. Chaplains need to develop their knowledge of Scripture, whilst at the same time getting to know their soldiers better, so that they at the same time get to know the chaplain better. This is important, especially in the area of possible ethical dilemmas that need to be discussed with the chain of command.

In conclusion, Anne Aldridge, in her article 'The Unique Role of a Chaplain', says that the 'future of chaplaincy is in the balance'!¹⁰ However, the military chaplaincy remains important to the spiritual and physical well-being of the soldiers to whom they minister, especially whilst soldiers are deployed on Operations. Having said that, chaplains still need to be seen, often undertaking their ministry just by 'loitering with intent'. I believe that Anne Aldridge's summary of the role of a chaplain remains constant across all disciplines. The five areas she identifies are:

Acceptable to all in appearance, action, adequate preparation, although there are occasions when a situation arises when you just have to react.

Available and Accessible to all. There has to be a balance between the amount of time spent in the office, and how much time is spent 'on the ground' engaging with soldiers.

Adaptable to situations. this is especially true within the military; although you may have a plan of action in your mind, other factors may change your plans.

Active in providing spiritual and confidential advice as well as promoting the Christian Church.

Accountable to both the Sending Church and the military. Chaplains remain under the discipline of the Church as well as under military discipline. Accountability is also undertaken through annual reports raised on the work of chaplains.

Military chaplains have the unique and privileged position of planting the seed of the gospel to young people whom they encounter through their ministry. Military chaplains are also in a position of helping to support the civilian church, but this can only be effectively achieved if the civilian church helps to support the military church and its chaplains.

Often when speaking to soldiers about chaplains whom they have encountered, they will tell you of a fantastic chaplain, but sometimes cannot remember his or her name. But the seed of the Christian faith has been sown by that chaplain, and all we can do is to pray that that seed will grow into a mature faith.

NOTES

- 1 Revd Roy Burley is a Methodist Forces Chaplain.
- 2 Mark Noll, *The Rise of Evangelicalism* Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 2004, p. 246.
- 3 Owen Watkins, *Soldiers and Preachers Too* Royal Navy, Army and Royal Air Force Board, 1981, pp. 52–53
- 4 John Fletcher Hurst, *The History of Methodism, Volume 2*, 1901, p. 524.
- 5 *Primitive Methodist Magazine*, 1859, p. 195.
- 6 Richard Holmes, *Redcoat* London: HarperCollins, 2002, p. 117.
- 7 David Hempton, *Methodism Empire of the Spirit* Newhaven: Yale University Press, 2005, pp. 20–21.
- 8 PLP 28 Letters and Papers of The Reverend Thomas Coke LL.D 28.2.4.
- 9 Charles Cadell, *Narrative of the Campaigns of the Twenty-Eighth Regiment since their Return from Egypt in 1802, 1835*, pp. 166–67.
- 10 Anne Aldridge, 'The Unique Role of a Chaplain', *Scottish Journal of Healthcare Chaplaincy*, Vol. 9 No1, 2006, p. 21.