

Military Chaplaincy

IS THIS MY CALLING?



The Resource Mission of the PRCC:

The military is a culture unlike any other. It brings challenges, temptations, and struggles that are unique to its mission. Uncovering what these issues are and addressing them is vital for churches and organizations that are connected to those who serve or have served in the Armed Forces.

To assist civilian ministry in this effort, the Presbyterian & Reformed Chaplain Commission (PRCC) offers resources to make the gospel relevant and accessible to military life. What we provide is based on the beliefs (a) that overcoming any challenge in life begins by turning to Christ, and (b) that apart from the enlightenment of the Word and the regenerative work of the Spirit a person will not find their greatest purpose, peace of mind or recovery from sin or afflictions. With this vision, we hope this pamphlet will offer a way to understand issues confronting military members while pointing to how we can call upon God to bring hope. Please give feedback as we want to refine this ministry to offer greater impact in the kingdom of God.

This booklet provides an overview of the Military Chaplaincy. It invites the reader to investigate this calling, see the critical need for ministers, and appreciate how incredible it can be to serve one's country and the honorable men and women in the Armed Forces.

We are grateful to Dr. Dwight Horn for his authorship of this booklet. It is our hope this will be beneficial to you and your congregation.

Dr. James R. Carter

Executive Director & Endorser, PRCC

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I could share numerous experiences I had as a Navy Chaplain on board ships, in jungles, mountains, and deserts, in front-line combat, and at the highest levels of military leadership. It was a rich and diverse career that allowed me to be an ambassador for Christ in countless ways. To provide a glimpse into the ministry side of this and show how critical the role is, I offer this story. It involves a girl who attempted suicide. She would have died except a suitemate rescued her before she expired.

This young girl, a sailor on one of my ships, was overwhelmed because of several issues that consumed her mind and ultimately broke her. After she was found on the verge of death, she was taken to the emergency room. She stayed in the hospital only a short time before being transferred to a psychiatric unit. I went to see her a few times and did what I could to help, listening to her story, sharing the gospel, and praying with her.

One evening, to my complete surprise, I was told that she had been released from her psychiatric treatment facility without any attendant or care plan. I was incensed. I could not imagine why she would be let go without these two things in place, especially knowing as I did her fragile state of mind. I raced over to her quarters, knocked on the door, and when I entered, I could not believe my eyes. She was in a pitch-black room with curtains drawn, bandages still on her wrists, standing alone in the very spot where just days before she had tried to take her life. That picture is frozen in my mind. She looked so frail, helpless, and dejected.

I was grateful by God's grace and providence to be there with her at that moment. I got in touch with our military command and her family. Before I left, she had her brother, who lived a few hours away, by her side and our command had a plan developed to care for her.



That is sometimes the role of a chaplain: to enter someone's darkest moment of life and bring the light of the gospel and the love of God. It is something any prospective chaplain can offer to those in the military, serving in uniform as a witness to the only true faith, bringing life and restoring goodness. Is this your calling?

Isaiah represents a moving account of finding one's call to serve God. He lives in a period where the Israelites are in rebellion against God. Because of this, God will remove His blessing of protection upon His people. As this is unfolding, we read in chapter six of the book of Isaiah that this prophet is transported into the heavenly throne room: "I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, lofty and exalted, with the train of His robe filling the temple."^[1] Isaiah then hears his Lord call out to the counsel assembled with a question of who should be sent to give a prophetic message to the people. To this question, Isaiah is somehow able to offer a reply, speaking boldly and saying, "Here am I. Send me!"^[2]

This unhesitating willingness by Isaiah to submit to this call is remarkable. There is no consideration on his part of what it fully



means to take on this responsibility. He simply hears the Lord's call and submits.

This is undoubtedly the example of what it means to follow God. Service to the Lord is not about finding a calling that is self-ingratiating or seems acceptable. It is to go wherever the Lord leads, putting aside worldly satisfaction, notoriety, or the promise of future security. It is to face the cost of true discipleship, and thereby to live triumphantly in the Lord's presence as He leads you and the Holy Spirit directs you in ministry. That will involve confronting your inadequacies and uncovering many places where you presently lack giftedness to serve. Yet, by trusting in the Lord to provide, you uncover the wonder and beauty of living for God through Christ. There is nothing greater that life can offer.

This is what awaits you in the military if God has placed the calling upon your life. If you sense it, if the Spirit is at work to move you to this calling, do not hesitate to follow God, and like Isaiah call out and say: "Here am I, send me."

3

The Mission Field

Like a missionary going into a foreign country and learning a new language, assuming different customs and traditions, and taking on new habits, so is the calling to be a chaplain. The transition moves one into an entirely new world. Yet, however awkward or demanding the changes may be, there is a rich ministry awaiting the one heeding the call. Consider a few compelling reasons why this is so.

a. The Need for Evangelists

Unlike church ministry where you are surrounded by people who are mostly familiar with biblical concepts and want to learn about God, you will be mainly with those who have little to no faith background. Your primary audience comes out of a secular culture, having increasingly eroded any religious connections as a Pew survey reveals: “Since the 1990s, large numbers of Americans have left Christianity to join the growing ranks of U.S. adults who describe their religious identity as atheist, agnostic or ‘nothing in particular.’ This accelerating trend is reshaping the U.S. religious landscape.”^[3]

If caring for the lost and sharing the gospel with those who have not heard the good news is your passion, the military is a wonderful calling. As Jesus told His disciples: “The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; therefore beseech the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into His harvest.”^[4]

b. The Need for Guidance

Studies show that those without religious affiliation are more likely to engage in risky behaviors, substance abuse, and less meaningful social relationships.^[5] Also, they tend to suffer with increased depression, anxiety, and other psychiatric issues.^[6] Plus, they have far less resilience and an increased risk for suicide.^[7] They are a demographic that the church should be intensely focused on.

Interestingly, it is this group that makes up about 80% of the military.^[8] They are the 18- to 38-year-olds who sociologists have termed the Millennials and Generation Z. They have grown up in a secular society, which has caused them to miss out on all that

spiritual formation brings.^[9]

If you become a chaplain, your job description will include being a mentor and coach to these people. You will have a great opportunity to offer compassion and wise counsel to those in dire need of it.



c. The Need to Find Purpose

To know your purpose and have a vision for how this directs every decision in life is vital to well-being.^[10] Yet, in our society, with a growing religious disaffiliation and the desire to seek identity, meaning and fulfillment in temporary pleasures rather than God, people quickly lose themselves. They fail to uncover what ample studies show about the keys to success:

“Scientific research shows the important role of religion, religiosity, and spirituality as protecting factors in people’s life, which is evidenced not only in their health but also in the way they interact with the environment, affecting their family, romantic, academic, work and social relations and impacting their visions about themselves and the world around them. ...**Religion contributes to a greater sense of purpose**... Religiosity provides a greater subjective psychological well-being, a better sense of meaning in life, happiness and self-actualization [emphasis mine].”^[11]



This is where you come into the picture. By virtue of your faith, you have a vivid sense of purpose in life, which directly grounds your well-being. As a Chaplain you will have daily opportunities to show and communicate this. Military policy, as based on the Constitution, gives you this right.^[12] It is your unique function as a chaplain to care, advise, facilitate, and provide religious services and counsel to those in the military.^[13] You are authorized to help people find meaning, and thereby, to lead them to God so that they can be healed and gain their truest purpose in life.

The annual report on the mental state of Americans says that “rates of reported sadness and hopelessness have steadily increased from 2011 to 2021,... bringing about significant mental health challenges in each successively younger age group.”^[14] The military needs what you offer, and we are committed to help you get there.

d. The Rise of Suicidality

The number of deaths by suicide in America increased by 2.6% in 2022.^[15] It is one of the leading causes of death in the United States.^[16] Amongst Active-Duty Service Members, the 2022 numbers for suicide are higher than 2021, and the first quarter of 2023 is higher than that of first quarter in 2022.^[17] The trend is not good.

Of significant concern too is that despite tremendous investment by military leaders to overturn this phenomenon in the services, the problem not only continues at an alarming rate, but it is worse than what is found in the civilian population.^[18]

What is the answer to this horrific situation? As we know, it is God. To be one with your Creator through Christ is to live in goodness, free from ultimate despair. As a chaplain, you can bring forward this message and allow people to turn away from the idols and false beliefs that corrupt their souls and bring on the depression that becomes the fertile ground for suicidality.

One evening, I rushed to the emergency room because a member of my command had attempted suicide. When he saw me, a few hours after recovering from his almost lethal attempt, he looked at me with such derision and said forcefully, “Why are you here”? It was truly a devilish glare that he offered, and I could feel the hostility in his voice. I was taken aback. I recovered somewhat quickly from this moment by saying what was truly on my heart. I said, “I came here when I heard the news about you because I care.” I told him further that I was sad to hear about what happened and promised that if he wanted, I would be with him through this difficult time. Once I offered these words, his first response was “well, I wish I was dead.” But slowly, he embraced my presence and through my

continued visitations over the next six months, that man became a Christian and was a completely new person. No one at the command could believe how much he had changed. That is the power of Christ when one turns from sin and gains a regenerated soul.

That story can be your witness for Christ too. I had that kind of experience many times as I helped service members who were suicidal. Satan is out to destroy the beauty of what God created, but you can be on the front lines of this battle by doing your part under God's guidance to revive the dead and bring new life.

e. Aligning the Military to the Just War Cause

At one command where I was stationed, I met with a Major in the Marine Corps who served as a Judge Advocate General or JAG as we call them. They are the legal advisors to commands and their members. They are in essence military lawyers. This Major was having serious problems, which came to the attention of the command, and which were threatening his career. His list of personal issues and challenges were lengthy. Yet, underneath all of that, the core issue boiled down to his time in war where he was responsible for advising his command on the legitimacy of targets for destruction. His job was to give his commander an opinion on whether a bomb strike on a target had sound ethical justification.

The Major had no problem doing this kind of job in theater. Once he got back home, however, his conscience began to question the legitimacy of what he had done. It plagued him and he slowly began to lose sleep, focus, and energy. Guilt and shame consumed him, and before long, he did not care if he lived or died. The only way he could silence the demons that haunted him was to black

out from drinking alcohol and this he did almost every night.

We spent some time together in counseling sessions and a significant part of our time was centered on justice, how it was carried out in war, and how that related to his mission. Thankfully, this really helped him process and deal with what he had done in war.



More amazing, though, from our continued conversations about justice and how that connected to the death of Jesus on the cross, he came to realize in his own life what God had done for him. It convicted him and ultimately resulted in him receiving Jesus as his Savior. It was a miraculous conversion. From that day on, he turned his life around and became focused on serving God, restoring his broken relationships, and building his career.

What really struck me from that experience, though, was that if a JAG in the military did not understand the issue of justice as it related to war, what about others who are called to kill the enemy? Who is helping them connect the dots? This is another vital reason why we need chaplains who know ethical foundations for truth and can teach them.

I was asked by several Marines “during” the Battle of Fallujah whether it was right to kill people. How did it come to this? The issue of justice in war needs to be addressed first at boot camp and it should continuously be taught throughout one’s service. Combatants must know before they go to war whether it is just to take a life. Become a chaplain and bring moral truth to those in uniform. You will save lives by doing it and prevent injustice from occurring in battle.^[9]



4

The Practical Details of a Chaplain Call

There are many ways that God might call you to serve as a chaplain and there are great advantages to all of them. Let us review some of this.

a. The Variety of Opportunities

If you sense God calling you into this mission field, it can happen in several ways: Chaplain Candidate Program, National Guard, Reserve or Active-Duty Forces. All branches of the military offer these opportunities.

If one chooses to begin this process before ordination, while in seminary and under the care of a presbytery, the Chaplain Candidate Program is a great place to start. This program allows one to explore the military calling while gaining invaluable ministry experience as permitted by one's church, presbytery, and the endorsing agency of the PRCC.

For those already ordained, there are several chaplain options from all branches of the service. Each can lead you through incredibly diverse experiences. Plus, one can pursue one of these opportunities either along with civilian ministry employment or by receiving a commission into the active-duty component. There is tremendous flexibility when it comes to the chaplain call.

b. The Honor of Service

What is truly gratifying about being in the military is having a chance to serve your country. God has blessed the United States with the greatest opportunity to experience rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. Choosing to defend these rights in the military creates within a powerful feeling of honor and gratitude. It is felt every time the flag is raised, the uniform is worn, salutes are rendered, or heroes are recognized or laid to rest. It is also felt as one travels around the world and sees how our military and the American Flag are regarded so highly by other nations. If you join the military, you cannot help but know the pride and honor of service.

c. The Benefits of Service

Aside from the ministerial blessings that come in military service, there are some tangible advantages that come with this

opportunity. No matter what program you choose, there are educational, commissary, exchange, medical, financial, housing, home loan, insurance, and retirement benefits available. Also, in many situations, your family members can receive free education through the GI Bill and other State programs. Imagine the value of serving in a mission field while getting all these other practical benefits. The value is incredible.

d. The Experience of Service

In the military, one gets the chance to be involved in things that few experience. For instance, you can travel across the world. You can be stationed in foreign countries where you will be immersed in other cultures and traditions. You might find yourself in the middle of the ocean, a vast desert region, a mountain range, or in some distant and remote region of the world providing a sermon, Bible Study, or sacraments. You might find yourself as well serving as a chaplain in war, providing ethical guidance, a moral example, a memorial service, or comfort to the wounded and grieving. Perhaps too, you might be one who helps shape operational briefs that directly impact battle plans, or you could write Department of Defense (DOD) Policy that guides the military on matters regarding the religious welfare and well-being of service members. This career might further call for you to serve in the White House, Camp David, the Pentagon, on Senior Flag-level staffs, or in a number of places where your unique voice and wisdom needs to be heard and regarded. It is amazing to have the chance to experience these kinds of situations.

e. You will be better equipped to do ministry when you are done!

An unexpected benefit of chaplain service is how much you will personally grow. This is a diverse ecclesiastical, religious, and non-religious environment, which will require skills, wisdom, and ability to carry out your ministry. You will never be forced to compromise what you believe or to do any kind of ministry that overturns the doctrines of your faith. This is guaranteed by DOD policy (DoDI 1300.17), the Constitution and the First Amendment to it, Religious Freedom Restoration Act, and other such guidance. Yet, the chaplaincy will test you and deepen your understanding of who God is, what scripture teaches, and how Jesus can work in you to proclaim the gospel. It will force you to wrestle with the doctrines of your faith and defend to yourself and others what you believe and why. The more effective you are as a chaplain, the more these challenges will come. However, when you are done, you will have a profound depth of wisdom about how God works in and through you. Also, you will gain a level of knowledge about how to reach the lost and care for the souls of all. It will make you a better evangelist for Christ, having been forced into the fire and purified in the sanctified work of the Spirit. No greater experience, in my opinion, can be found.





The above picture is from Army Chaplain David Carter who is serving with a unit that is in Syria. The Chaplain Flag, hanging outside of the field Chapel, is the same one that was used in a different combat zone by David's father, Jim Carter, the current PRCC Director. This image is powerful on so many levels. Consider a few of them.

First, it represents the amazing legacy of the Abrahamic Covenant to carry forward God's blessing from one generation to another (Gen 17:7). Also, in that it shows the Chaplain pennant with the field tent, it marks the promise of God to be amongst His people no matter where they go, much like the tabernacle in the wilderness wanderings as recorded in the Pentateuch. Further, because this picture captures that place of assembly for worship in combat, it shows where countless warriors have and will receive the gospel,

sacraments, counsel, and love to steel their spirits in war. Overall, what this image provides is testimony that wherever defenders of justice and truth are, chaplains will be with them to bring hope, courage, inspiration, and the opportunity for redemption and renewal. Chaplains will be there in the darkest of times and in the most extreme forms of peril, no matter what service members face. What an incredible and inspirational picture.

If God is calling you into the Chaplain Corps, you can be assured that you will have the same incredible access to be with those who most need to hear the gospel, no matter where they are or what they are doing. It might be on a ship, in a plane or parachuting out of one, in a warzone, in a hospital or brig, on a HUMVEE doing a logistical run, at a training exercise, at a foreign duty station, with new military recruits, or with the Military Service Chiefs. There is no limit to how and where God will use you. You simply need to take the first step and sign up. What follows will be a walk with God through an amazing ministry story. Contact us today. We will be delighted to serve with you through every part of this journey!

About the Author

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The material is written by Dwight Horn. He retired in February of 2023 from 28 years of active duty service in the Navy as a Chaplain (CAPT, CHC, USN, Ret.). His advanced education includes a D.Min, M.Div., M.A., and ThM. He works for the Presbyterian and Reformed Chaplain Commission (PRCC) for Ministry to Veterans. He has authored articles and a book on war, [Emasculating Warriors: A Nation at War with its Warriors](#) (ISBN: 179298443X).

Resources to Explore on the Chaplaincy:

Websites:

1. For the Army, Air Force or Navy, which includes service in the Marine Corps, Space Force, and Coast Guard, google search for military chaplain recruiters.
2. Shannon Corbeil, "7 things you probably didn't know about chaplains", <https://www.wearethemighty.com/mighty-culture/military-chaplains-and-religious-diversity/>, (May 12, 2020).
3. Kevin Mungons, "The Fellowship of Suffering", Sharper Iron, <https://sharperiron.org/article/fellowship-of-suffering>, (08/15/12).
4. Stephen Bedard, Christian Week Columnist, "What exactly does a military chaplain do?", <https://www.christianweek.org/exactly-military-chaplain/>, (July 13, 2016).

Book:

Jim Browning and Jim Spivey, The Heart of a Chaplain: Exploring Essentials for Ministry, (Birmingham, AL: Iron Stream Media, 2022).

To Make a Donation to PRCC:

PRCC directly supports Active Duty, Reserve and National Guard Chaplains in their work for all branches of the military as well as many Civilian Chaplain settings. If you would like to support this ministry and help those serving our country and nation, send donations to the following:



PRCC/MNA
1670 Springdale Dr.
Unit 11A, PMB #164
Camden, SC 29020

You can also call to find out more (678-825-1251).

Endnotes

- [1] New American Standard Bible: 1995 Update (La Habra, CA: The Lockman Foundation, 1995), Is 6:1.
- [2] New American Standard Bible: 1995 Update (La Habra, CA: The Lockman Foundation, 1995), Is 6:8.
- [3] Pew Research Center, “Modeling the Future of Religion in America,” <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2022/09/13/modeling-the-future-of-religion-in-america/>, (September 13, 2022).
- [4] New American Standard Bible: 1995 Update (La Habra, CA: The Lockman Foundation, 1995), Lk 10:2.
- [5] Twenge, Jean M et al. “Generational and time period differences in American adolescents’ religious orientation, 1966-2014.” PloS one vol. 10,5 e0121454. 11 May. 2015, doi:10.1371/journal.pone.0121454.
- [6] Ibid.
- [7] Katherine Santucci, “Why Depression is on the rise Amongst Millennials and Gen Z”, <https://ecommons.luc.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1543&context=ures>, (16 August, 2023).
- [8] Department of Defense, Office of the Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Military Community and Family Policy, “Demographics, 2021 Profile of the Military Community”, <https://demographics.militaryonesource.mil/>.
- [9] “Young adults today have had entirely different religious and social experiences than previous generations did. The parents of millennials and Generation Z did less to encourage regular participation in formal worship services and model religious behaviors in their children than had previous generations. ...We have long known the importance of formative religious experiences in setting the trajectory of faith commitments throughout life. For as long as we have been able to measure religious commitments, childhood religious experiences have strongly predicted adult religiosity. They still do. If someone had robust religious experiences growing up, they are likely to maintain those beliefs and practices into adulthood. Without robust religious experiences to draw on, Americans feel less connected to the traditions and beliefs of their parents’ faith.” Daniel Cox, “Generation Z and the Future of Faith in America”, <https://www.americansurveycenter.org/research/generation-z-future-of-faith/>, (March 24, 2022).
- [10] “Failure to create meaning in life results in a condition of apathy and aimlessness that depletes the appeal of existence and undermines interest and energy for new significant experiences. ...[W]ithout meaning people are apathetic, inactive, and prone to psychopathology. Consistent with these ideas, studies have also shown that when people do have meaning, they tend to experience life satisfaction, posi

tive affect, subjective well-being, mental health, and sensory health.” Richard Ryan and Edward Deci, “Motivation, Meaning, and Wellness”, Paul Wong, ed., *The Human Quest for Meaning*, (New York, NY: Routledge, 2017), p. 96.

^[11] Ana Cecilia Salgado-Levano, “Review of empirical studies on impact of religion, religiosity and spirituality as protective factors”, *Propósitos y Representaciones* 2:121-140, DOI:10.20511/pyr2014.v2n1.55, (June 2014).

^[12] “It is DoD policy that the Chaplaincies of the Military Departments: 4.1. Are established to advise and assist commanders in the discharge of their responsibilities to provide for the free exercise of religion in the context of military service as guaranteed by the Constitution, to assist commanders in managing Religious Affairs (DoD Directive 5100.73 (reference (e)), and to serve as the principal advisors to commanders for all issues regarding the impact of religion on military operations.” Cf., Department of Defense, Directive Number 1304.19, June 11, 2004, “SUBJECT: Appointment of Chaplains for the Military Departments.” <https://www.esd.whs.mil/Portals/54/Documents/DD/issuances/dodd/130419p.pdf>

^[13] DEPARTMENT OF THE NAVY, OFFICE OF THE SECRETARY, Secretary of the Navy Instruction 1730.7E (SECNAVINST 1730.7E), 11 Mar 2019.

^[14] Newson JJ, Sukhoi O, Taylor J, Topalo O, and Thiagarajan TC, *Mental State of the World 2022*, Sapient Labs, <https://mentalstateoftheworld.report/>, (March 2023).

^[15] Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, “Suicide Data and Statistics”, <https://www.cdc.gov/suicide/suicide-data-statistics.html>, (August 2023).

^[16] Ibid.

^[17] Defense Suicide Prevention Office, FY 2023 Quarterly Suicide Report, 1st Quarter, CY 2023, Dr. Liz Clark, Director, Defense Suicide Prevention Office, https://www.dspo.mil/Portals/113/Documents/QSR/2023/TAB%20A_20230623_QSR%20Rpt_Q1%20CY23_vf.pdf.

^[18] Konstantin Toropin and Steve Beynon, “In the Wake of High-Profile Suicides, the Army and Navy Are Trying to Adapt”, *Military.com*, <https://www.military.com/daily-news/2023/06/16/wake-of-high-profile-suicides-army-and-navy-are-trying-adapt.html>, 16 Jun 2023.

^[19] For answers to question of justice in war, read Dwight Horn, *Emasculating Warriors, A Nation at War with its Warriors*, <https://www.amazon.com/Emasculating-Warriors-Nation-War-its/dp/179298443X>.

Notes



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