

Practice of Chaplaincy Ministry
Introduction to Chaplaincy - ATS Spring 2023
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Chaplaincy calling

At this time I cannot say with certainty that I am called to chaplaincy (although I am definitely called to ministry and have been in various ministries for many years), but I have a strong interest in it and curiosity about it, which is why I chose to take this course. I have had some interesting circumstances these last couple of years that have caused me to seek God on the possibility of becoming some kind of chaplain - military, hospice or hospital.

Concerning Army chaplaincy, I made an attempt to join the Army when I was about 22 years old (I am 45 now.). I was meeting with a recruiter and went as far as going to MEPS in Atlanta, GA for the physical exam and some other screenings. At that time, I was not allowed into the Army because when down on the floor on my hands and knees, I wasn't able to stand up, rolling my heels back to stand up straight without losing my balance. So at that point, I gave up on the idea of the Army. In those days there was no YouTube to give us tips on how to prepare for MEPS like we have now. But yet the idea always stayed in the back of my mind.

Fast forward about 20+ years later, which was 2 years ago. I was looking at Indeed.com and saw the Army chaplain job posting and suddenly I became curious again, not knowing anything about age limits or age waivers. So I contacted an Army chaplain recruiter. In this conversation, I learned 2 potentially life changing things I did not know before. First, I learned that the Army gives age waivers between ages 47-52. Second, after I mentioned to the recruiter that I have a Master of Arts in Intercultural Studies from Alliance Theological Seminary (from 2005), he said some seminaries allow graduates to return and "roll over credits" from the MA into an MDiv.

So, I went onto the CMA Workers Network Facebook page and in a post asked if anyone had experience rolling over credits from the MA to MDiv, as this was foreign to me. Several people shared their experiences doing so. ATS Dean Dr. Ron Walborn saw my post and in a

comment said to email him for more information. In my email correspondence with him and a couple of other ATS people I learned that our school had just changed their policy a month prior to allow for rolling over credits even after 10 years since graduation (At that point it had been 16 years for me.). So I did and a little over a year later (May 2022) I began my first semester as an online MDiv student at ATS!

I do not believe that this is a coincidence. My coming back to ATS 17 years later is a divine appointment. I know that this doesn't necessarily mean that I am called to be a chaplain. But God used an Army chaplain recruiter to bring me back to this school! On top of that, taking this class by my 3rd semester (that I did not know existed until my 2nd semester) I would like to think is something in the providence of God for my life.

In addition to this, over the last year I have been in conversations with friends who are hospice and hospital chaplains and they speak positively of their experiences, so it has me curious about these avenues of ministry as well. Therefore, chaplaincy of some kind is something I want to pursue unless God closes the door.

As far as my aptitude for chaplaincy work, I think I have potential because I am inclined towards ministry outside of the four walls of the church. I am firmly aware of why people are turned off by church and that the church needs to go to where they are. I have a holistic outlook on ministry to the whole person. I am solidly evangelical but do have an ecumenical outlook and understanding of Catholicism, Eastern Orthodoxy and mainline Protestantism, as well as a basic understanding of Judaism, Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism, Sikhism, etc. (part of which I credit my training from my previous MA in Intercultural Studies from ATS). I have a lot of ministry experience but also a lot of experience working in secular environments.

Therefore, I believe this potential for chaplaincy is something I need to continue to explore and cultivate. Being in the ATS MDiv program is part of that exploration and cultivation process.

Ministry in a pluralistic environment

Chaplaincy, regardless of whether it is military or institutional, is done in a religiously pluralistic environment. Thus, it is very different from a local church ministry where the majority of the people profess to be Christians or are at least open to Christian faith. Therefore, chaplains need to be aware of this and go into chaplaincy with a different mindset and skill set than local church ministry. Chaplains not only serve people of multiple faiths or no faith at all, but work professionally with chaplains of multiple Christian faith traditions as well as other religions altogether.

Alan T. Baker says, “Most organizations seek faith-group diversity in their chaplaincy program in order to better serve the broad spectrum of religious needs represented throughout their workforce. The benefit of having chaplains endorsed from a variety of faith groups is a wider breadth of ministry, rites, sacraments, ordinances, and liturgies across the organization.”¹

Chaplains need to learn the principle of “cooperation without compromise”.² Chaplains work professionally and cordially with chaplains of other faith groups which may or may not be similar to their own, but are still free to be who they are, in their own faith group identity. This approach to pluralism is called “cooperative pluralism”, which is to be inclusive without compromising your faith.³ So, as a Christian I affirm John 14:6 and Acts 4:12 and believe Jesus Christ is the only way to salvation. As an evangelical in particular, I disagree with many of the

1 Baker, Alan T. 2021. *Foundations of Chaplaincy: A Practical Guide*. William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company.

page 138

2 Baker, page 139

3 Baker, page 139

beliefs of Roman Catholics and Eastern Orthodox Christians. But this does not give me the right to be rude to people from other faith groups or to look down on them, their beliefs, customs, convictions, cultures, etc. I want to see them move towards Jesus, not be driven away.

Cooperative pluralism does not come without tension and the need to find balance. Baker states, “There is a four way balance for chaplains: serving God, serving people, serving the institution that employs them, and serving the endorsing faith group. There is a tension between their ecclesial body and the institution that employs them. There is the tension of being a spiritual caregiver to all people while serving as a religious provider to some...There is another tension between being inclusive of all faith traditions and not compromising a chaplain’s specific beliefs.”⁴

A way to find this needed balance is to understand the difference between performing and providing. The Chaplain performs spiritual care for people within his/her faith tradition but provides (or facilitates) spiritual care for people outside of his/her faith tradition. For example, a Christian chaplain preaches in chapel services and leads Bible studies, but if a Jewish person wants his/her son to have a Bar-Mitzvah, the Christian chaplain works with Jewish chaplains to help provide what the Jewish person needs. These kinds of situations are indeed very different from what would occur in local church ministry. Baker says, “Unlike the parish minister, chaplains develop strong competencies in facilitating the spiritual care, religious requirements, and faith expressions of others within their institutions.”⁵ So, when a chaplain cannot perform, he/she needs to provide. One of the ways to provide is by giving an assessment survey tool to learn the religious requirements of the people they serve.⁶ For evangelical Christian chaplains,

4 Baker, page 141

5 Baker, page 115

6 Baker, page 116

some of these situations can be uncomfortable. However, we can be reminded that we would want someone to do this for us if it was the other way around and that we are serving people.

Balancing the roles of minister and staff officer

Christian chaplains, both military and institutional, are serving in 2 worlds - the world of the Church and the world of the secular organization that employs them. More specifically, they are working through the 4 way balance described in the previous section. Baker states, "It's been said that a military chaplain has 'one foot in heaven and the other in a combat boot.' A similar analogy could be made for all organizations and settings typically served by chaplains. A chaplain is not simply affiliated with, but is fully a member of, two major social institutions."⁷

Due to this dual nature of the chaplaincy, the potential exists for conflict between the faith group and secular organization. Thus, there is a great need for strong communication and dialogue together to make decisions. The chaplain is both a minister and staff officer and needs to be committed to both roles. However, at times, these roles may not be in agreement, so it is important for the chaplain to possess the relational skills to work things out with both sides.

One of the ways that chaplains exercise this duality is by serving as an advisor to the secular organization they are employed by. Baker mentions some Proverbs that remind us of the value and importance of advisement. That would be Proverbs 15:22, 11:14 and 24:6.⁸ All of these Scriptures remind us of how there should be multiple advisers. Chaplains can be among those advisers and offer priceless wisdom and insight for spiritual matters as well as moral, ethical and other matters that are important to an organization's health and success. The chaplain needs to earn the trust of the organization he/she serves so that when the opportunity arises to give advice, it is well received. Even if the advice is not explicitly spiritual in nature, the advice

⁷ Baker, page 95

⁸ Baker, page 200

can add to the chaplain's credibility for speaking on spiritual matters, which for Christians, means pointing people to Jesus Christ.

Freedom of religion

Chaplaincy ministry in government organizations promotes freedom of religion and is protected by the 1st Amendment. Therefore, chaplains of all faiths need to be aware of different faith group distinctives and advocate for the freedom of all. A Christian chaplain would strongly disagree with the beliefs of Muslims, for example, Jesus not being the Son of God (Allah) and following the Koran as the sacred text over the Bible. However, a Christian chaplain still needs to advocate for the first amendment rights for the Muslims to have the freedom, as American citizens, to choose these beliefs and practices. Likewise, the Muslim chaplain (Imam) would strongly disagree with the beliefs of Christians, for example, Jesus being God's Son and following the Bible alone as God's Word. Yet, the Muslim chaplain still needs to advocate for the first amendment rights for the Christians to have the freedom, as American citizens, to choose these beliefs and practices as well.

One of the ways that Chaplains can champion religious freedom and care is through conducting spiritual screenings to assess the backgrounds of people and using that data to create a Religious Support Plan. In being aware of the religious needs of the people the chaplain serves, the chaplain is able to advocate for them appropriately. For example, if a chaplain knows that a certain number of people are Muslim and will be observing Ramadan, proper accommodations will need to be made to allow them the freedom to practice their religion.

Accommodations can include holidays, dietary restrictions, hair styles, grooming, items of clothing, medical practices, etc. ⁹ Baker says, "One reason institutions employ chaplains is to accommodate the religion of people in the institution." So, clearly this is part of the job of all

⁹ Baker, pages 120-124

chaplains. However, Baker also says, “Religious accommodation must not impose unreasonable burdens on non practicing employees. There can be no hardship imposed on third parties.”¹⁰ So there are situations where exceptions need to be made and that can be challenging and controversial to determine. One example Baker gives is the use of 5,000 gallons of drinking water to baptize Marines, while in a desert in the Middle East.¹¹ That’s a situation where the chaplain should have used better judgment by baptizing by pouring or sprinkling, instead of immersion. Thus, drinking water would have been saved and Marines could still be baptized. In our zeal for the Lord and His work, we still need to be courteous to the needs of others. Otherwise, we are harming our own ministry credibility and testimony.

Ministry with chaplains of other faith groups

On this issue, how each chaplain responds to this depends on the individual. Clearly, everyone needs to be able to get along with each other and be professional, even if they strongly disagree with one another’s theology. I think there are varying degrees of challenge, depending on the individual chaplain. For me, it simply depends on the faith group. There are some I will click with more than others and some less.

I am an evangelical, but not a fundamentalist. I have been exposed to a wide variety of evangelical groups, such as the C & MA, Church of the Nazarene, Salvation Army, Assemblies of God, Calvary Chapel, Evangelical Free Church, Baptist and Christian Reformed Church, among others. Those who are hardline Calvinists or hyper charismatic might annoy me, but fellowship is still possible. I am very familiar with Roman Catholicism and Eastern Orthodoxy and while I strongly disagree with many of their doctrines, we can still find agreement in some areas and have some level of fellowship. They may be surprised to hear that I go to Midnight

¹⁰ Baker, page 136

¹¹ Baker, page 136

Mass for Christmas Eve and Stations of the Cross on Good Friday, or that I have read *The Orthodox Way* by Kallistos Ware. With mainline Protestants, it depends on the chaplains I encounter. There are evangelicals in mainline Protestant churches, although usually more of the progressive evangelical kind. They still hold to the same traditional beliefs but express those beliefs in ways that may be more socially moderate/progressive. Then there are others who totally deny basic Christian doctrines and are also affirming of LGBT ways. Where there is disagreement on historical & biblical truths, we cannot have spiritual fellowship but we can still be professionals and friendly with each other in other ways. With Jewish chaplains, that also depends on what kind of Jew they are, so while we cannot fellowship around Jesus Christ, I think I can learn from them about Hebrew, Jewish culture and how they interpret the Hebrew Bible. With chaplains who are Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus, Sikhs and other religions, obviously we cannot have spiritual fellowship, but we can still be friends and be professional towards one another. I would probably want to ask them, “What’s your story? What does your faith mean to you? How did you decide to become a chaplain?” to have some get to know you conversations and be respectful. They probably have stereotypes about Christians and I likely have stereotypes about them. These conversations can build respect and perhaps open the door for sharing the Gospel.

These situations are where the chaplain needs to remember the concepts of “cooperation without compromise” and “perform or provide”. With other Christian chaplains who I would be working with more closely, there are situations where we would need to agree to disagree and flex with each other in co-leading chapel services together, so as to maintain unity in the Body of Christ and supporting our common mission as Christian chaplains. This will make an eternal difference in those we minister to together.

Assessment of my strengths and weaknesses for chaplaincy ministry

Whether I go into military, hospital, hospice or another kind of chaplaincy ministry, by the grace of God I believe I carry good strengths and assets into such ministry that could bless others.

- I have been walking with the Lord since 1991 (32 years).
- I have a wide variety of ministry experiences in various churches.
- I have experience in urban, suburban & rural settings with people of different walks of life.
- I have a Bible college degree, seminary degree and am working on my 2nd seminary degree.
- (For military chaplaincy) I have a close friendship with a U.S. Army Officer who has shared a lot of personal details about his personal & professional struggles and his decade long Army journey. This has shown me much about Army life.

Yet, I am also aware of my liabilities and weaknesses that need to be addressed.

- I am almost 46 and am no longer a young man. For the Army chaplaincy, I hope that those age waivers for ages 47 -52 work.
- While I am healthy, I do not possess great physical fitness or hand- eye coordination. I hope that with the help of a personal trainer and being in a good workout program I can overcome this and pass the ACFT.
- I am not yet ordained by any faith group, so I understand that's something I need to acquire to be endorsed for chaplaincy.
- I do not yet have my MDiv but am working on it. I understand the MDiv is required for chaplaincy of many kinds.

- I do not yet have any CPE Units. I know that is needed for most chaplaincy work.

Therefore, I do realize that while I carry good potential, there are some things I need to work on in these next few years to qualify for chaplaincy of some kind.

Plan to maintain overall fitness

Ministry in general requires focus and discipline. Military chaplaincy requires focus and discipline all the more. Some local church pastors may be able to “get away” with being out of shape. Military chaplains cannot afford that. Regardless of the type of chaplaincy or type of general ministry, focus and discipline is very important for ministers.

Therefore I need to have a plan in various areas of my life. These are my thoughts:

- *Spiritual* - Practice spiritual disciplines and use what I learned this semester in the ATS Initiation in Spiritual Formation class. Be intentional about spiritual growth, soul care and staying close to the Lord. Have accountability and boundaries to uphold guardrails in my life for spiritual protection.
- *Mental* - I have been in a Master of Divinity program for about 1 year. I have 2-3 years left. This is good for my spiritual life but also the life of my mind. I like to read, study and learn new things. I enjoy having my mind stretched to be exposed to new concepts and information. So I need to continue with this.
- *Emotional* - I have experienced a lot of hurt in the ministry, some secular employers and in my family of origin. So over a year ago I decided to start meeting with a therapist to address these hurts. It has been extremely beneficial to my emotional health. In the ATS Initiation in Spiritual Formation class this semester, I read Emotionally Healthy Spirituality by Peter Scazzerro and that has been a good reminder of the importance of keeping my emotional health in check.

- *Physical* - I am physically active to an extent, but if I am going to do Army chaplaincy, I need to get into an intense program. At the current time, I do take walks, ride an exercise bike, use an elliptical machine and do cardiovascular and strength building exercises with a fitness trainer who offers wellness workouts weekly at my job. So it's not like I don't do anything, but due to the busyness of life I am not as consistent as I ought to be. But I understand that Army fitness is a whole new level of fitness. The ACFT is demanding. But I researched online and saw that there are personal trainers who specialize in getting people ready for that.

Personal vision of ministry opportunities/challenges

Opportunities and challenges will vary from one kind of chaplaincy to another, although there are some overlapping similarities. At this time, as mentioned earlier in the paper, I am inclined towards Army, hospice and hospital chaplaincies.

In the Army, there is a unique opportunity to minister to soldiers and their families. Military families require specialized care as they deal with issues that civilians generally don't have to deal with.

In all 3 chaplaincies, there are opportunities to reach beyond the limits of the average local church. There is a very diverse audience, culturally and religiously. There are unique opportunities to minister to people in crisis, who are in danger, sick/injured, dying, traumatized and to give them hope.

All of these chaplaincies, but I think mostly the Army (and military overall), provide opportunities for incarnational ministry - "being with the people instead of in the church". All chaplaincy ministry requires the "ministry of presence" with a lot of listening and providing comfort to people. There are unique opportunities to be what Pope Francis calls being

“shepherds with the odor of the sheep”. There are a wide variety of Christians and a wide variety of nonChristians chaplains encounter, which broadens the horizons of the chaplain.

Although the Army chaplaincy (and military chaplaincy in general) can be quite transient (people come and go), I would imagine that it is not as transient as hospice or hospital chaplaincy, because in hospice and hospital chaplaincy the chaplain may only have brief encounters with people. Yet in the military chaplaincy, there is more opportunity to get to know more people and build some level of relationship, even if they will eventually move on to some new assignment. As a result, I think that with military chaplaincy, there is more opportunity for discipleship ministry through chapel services, Bible studies, one on one or group counseling, etc. On a deployment, soldiers are far away from their local church and really need that spiritual stimulation to grow in the Lord, even while far from their local church and their home.

In terms of challenges, again that depends on which type of chaplaincy. In the military there are the challenges of high physical fitness standards, the possibilities of deployment and combat and the experience of trauma.

Hospice and hospital chaplaincies can have heavy caseloads and restrictions on opportunities for evangelism. A Christian hospice chaplain I know has a majority Jewish caseload and is not allowed to read from the New Testament or mention Jesus.

All chaplaincies can bring high levels of stress, tension and emotional turmoil, including forms of trauma. There is the need to be on call 24/7 and long periods of time away from family are a reality. A chapel service is not the same as a local church, so there are no elders, deacons or church governance authority to administer church discipline. People come and go which can hinder the raising up of solid leaders for chapel.

Chaplaincy ministry, whether it be in the military, hospice care, hospitals or other settings is truly a one of a kind, unique ministry that requires a special calling, anointing, gifting, preparation, discipline, mindset, etc. But for those called by God, I believe it is worth the challenges and risks to reach people who would not otherwise be reached by the average local church.

Bibliography

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