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Education & Research

Chaplain David B. Plummer **The Challenges of Endorsers and Endorsements**

As an ecclesiastical endorsing agent for over eighteen years, I regularly receive calls from prospective chaplains who ask for "credentials" so that they can become "full-fledged chaplains." They often call with a number of mistaken notions. Some have never heard of the term "endorsement." Some think that an ecclesiastical endorsement is the same as ordination or perhaps is like a letter of recommendation. Many also think that the process of endorsement is a simple, overnight process. In truth, few chaplains and even fewer pastors understand just what an ecclesiastical endorsement is and means.

What an Endorsement Is Not

An ecclesiastical endorsement is not a letter of recommendation. Anyone or any congregation can write a recommendation. Only recognized ecclesiastical endorsing agencies can legally endorse. An ecclesiastical endorsement is not ordination or licensing or "setting-apart" for ministry. Only a denomination, faith group, or church, mosque, synagogue, or congregation has the God-given authority to ordain. And only federally-vetted religious bodies/faith communities are legally able to endorse for the military and VA chaplaincies.

What an Endorsement Is

An ecclesiastical endorsement is a legal document that states that an ordained minister is spiritually, doctrinally, educationally, and professionally qualified to represent his/her congregation or faith community in a specialized setting (beyond the local congregation or even the minister's denomination) ministering to all in a religiously diverse context. Simply stated, an endorsement is the document that makes a "general" minister a very specialized one — a "chaplain."

When the primary federal vetter of Religious Endorsing Bodies (the Armed Forces Chaplains Board) considers a faith group for vetting, they look to see — among other things — that the endorsing body has: 1) a valid IRS 501(c)(3) tax determination letter as a non-profit religious organization; 2) is organized to serve a lay constituency (vs. being organized to ordain clergy or be a ministers' fellowship or ministers' convention); and 3) its congregations hold worship services on a regular and customary basis for their lay memberships — not for their clergy to get together). [To see the actual Department of Defense Regulation, please visit <http://www.dtic.mil/whs/directives/corres/pdf/130428p.pdf> Enclosure 3, page 12, paragraph 1.3.1.]

Such a bona fide faith group's structure is in contrast to the "ordination" and other credentialing "mills" one may find in the back of ministry magazines and advertising on the internet. (Just Google "becoming a minister" or "becoming a chaplain" and see how many sponsored links of organizations with very interesting polities and structures or unrealistic claims come up!)

Some Common Practices of Endorsing Bodies

Typically Religious Endorsing Bodies (REBs) have their prospective chaplains document their basic background information, spiritual journey and motivation for chaplaincy, education, training, and professional experience. Some REBs expect their professional chaplains to have some form of clinical education in their educational process. Some REBs conduct a criminal background check with a licensed private investigator as well as a spiritual background check with the minister's pastor, ministerial colleagues, and ordaining/ adjudicatory authorities. Professional chaplaincy applicants often are then interviewed in-person by a clergy member of the faith group or perhaps one of the REB's experienced chaplains. In addition to all of the above requirements, the prospective chaplain is often asked by their REB to articulate (and perhaps demonstrate) a clear, unequivocal willingness to minister without bias or favoritism to all people regardless of their ethnic and religious backgrounds, lifestyles, and moral values.

If a REB's prospective chaplain cannot genuinely and with authenticity make such a commitment, the minister is often counseled [or should be!] to choose another ministry other than chaplaincy. On the other hand, to make such a commitment and then ignore it is a serious integrity issue — one that is sadly not uncommon in the pastoral care community today. REBs which knowingly endorse such clergy are also guilty of this professional dishonesty and breaching professional ethics. And worse, there are a few religious endorsing bodies that practice "divine deception" (they find lying and deceiving perfectly acceptable in order to manipulate people towards God) and actually encourage their chaplains to lie about being pluralistic for the purposes of "winning" them for the Lord. Such organizations should not be allowed to endorse; and such chaplains, when discovered, should be discredited as professionals and removed from their office.

The Significance of an Endorsement

For most responsible REBs, an endorsement is only good for a specific period of time, for a specific institution. Endorsement means that a minister is on temporary "loan" from their congregation or faith community to an institution/organization. At almost any time, for a variety of reasons, a chaplain can have his/her endorsement withdrawn and the minister quickly becomes a "non-chaplain." Further, if the chaplain does not perform to the high standards of chaplaincy or is guilty of ethical breach or felonious activity, he/she is likely to find their endorsement non-renewed, if not "pulled" (prematurely terminated) for cause. Ultimately, endorsement links all chaplains to their ordaining congregations and faith communities in matters of accountability and spiritual oversight. Thus, chaplains are continuously accountable to their sponsoring congregation, their ordaining authority, the REB, and to the institution of which they are a part.

Since an endorsement is a very serious legal document, REBs are charged by the government, and various professional organizations [and I believe, God] to credential only their very finest clergy as chaplains. To date, there are over 150 federally-recognized REBs, representing all major religions, denominations, and faith groups.

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