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Professional Practice

David Plummer *Separating Church, State and Chaplaincy*

Chaplaincy is For All and By All – or Ultimately, It Will Serve None!

Military chaplains are ["To perform or provide for the free exercise of religion."](#)

The struggles of “the church,” the government, and the general public when dealing with issues of:

- fairness in equal access,
- respect of other worldviews,
- open faith in the public square, and
- the expectations and proper roles of chaplains

have been in the news a lot lately. Most recent is the following incident:

In a public school in North Carolina, Gideons were allowed to give pocket bibles to those students interested in receiving one. A Wiccan parent noted that her son received such a bible and requested a similar accommodation to distribute literature of her faith. She was promptly refused such access. My guess is that these school officials unknowingly have set themselves up to be named in a very successful lawsuit – if, in my opinion, the court is honest and fair. If our country’s federal, state, and local governments are serious about religious rights – “religious pluralism” – then society is going to have to start practicing such tolerance and inclusivity.

This sad situation reminds me of an old Soviet-block-era political joke: “We pretend to work and they pretend to pay us!” It appears that some chaplains and endorsers pretend and claim to adhere to religious pluralism, but their spontaneous daily words and actions suggest otherwise – and the State has been accepting this pseudo-pluralism as legitimate.

I, as a follower (albeit a very flawed one!) of Jesus Christ, would hope that my fellow endorsers and chaplains would be consistently honest and candid truth-tellers and truth-doers. When as chaplains and pastoral counselors, we say that we are serving all people from all belief systems, worldviews, political spectrums, cultures, sexual orientations, and socio-economic classes. I would hope that we really are whether or not we personally agree! I would hope that we would not resort to semantic wrangling, or to attempts to proselytize, lay on guilt, or covertly change our counselees to perceive the world and adopt the values, customs, and practices of the chaplain. I would hope that we chaplains and endorsers of chaplains would allow the suffering and bewildered to talk about anything and everything they want to or need to discuss without our judging or criticizing them. As chaplains, let’s leave disciplinary actions for faith groups’ senior executives and congregational leaders to implement – according to their faith group’s codified guidelines, bylaws, and other rulebooks.

On this mid-winter March day in 2012, a couple of things regarding the future of our profession are really on my mind. One concerns the recently-introduced bill aimed at changing the very nature of military chaplaincy. Another concern is the attempts of several distinct communities to be accepted as military chaplaincy endorsing bodies.

Concern Number 1: The Military Religious Freedom Protection Act.

This bill's officially stated purpose is "to require that implementation of the repeal of the former Department of Defense policy concerning homosexual behavior in the Armed Forces not infringe upon the free exercise of religion by and the rights of conscience of members of the Armed Forces, including chaplains"

This bill is a legal attempt to permanently insure that military chaplains do not have to do weddings that they do not feel comfortable doing. Despite the fact that the policy of chaplains being able to refuse to conduct any and all weddings has been unwaveringly and actively in place – without exception -- for all military chaplains since 1775, a number of chaplains and their endorsers anxiously encouraged a US senator to sponsor an amendment and have it attached in December 2011 to the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2012. It passed and is now a done deal. The concurrent House bill, H.R. 3828 is – right now -- working its way through committees.

Quoting from the bill's analysis by an attorney acquaintance, Jeff Hersh:

The part of the bill that concerns me is Sec. 2(b)(2), which provides that 'A military chaplain shall not be directed, ordered or required to perform any duty, rite, ritual, ceremony, service or function that is contrary to the conscience, moral principles, or religious beliefs of the chaplain'

Moreover, the bill would protect chaplains from any disciplinary action or adverse career consequence for refusing to perform any such 'duty' or 'function.'

If enacted, this bill would supersede conflicting regulations and give carte blanche to chaplains to refuse to do anything they don't want to do. Chaplains could refuse to perform any assignment or task, and could freely discriminate against service members by religion, sex, sexual orientation, race or any other basis by denying service members access to their religious faith and spiritual counseling. [*italics mine*]

To be sure, military chaplains – employees of the US Government – are in the power position and are paid to provide a service to the nation's troops or refer to another chaplain if they cannot do so in good conscience. But when a conflict of conscience occurs, say for a chaplain who neither wants to provide service to the personnel, nor refer to another more-open and accommodating chaplain, then the personnel **MUST** be protected as the vulnerable party! A chaplain does not have to serve as a

chaplain; they can resign and become a congregational leader. The military personnel do not have that opportunity.

I am certainly not a legal professional, but it seems to me that if we start dismantling the very purposes and functions of military chaplaincy, namely, "To perform or provide for the free exercise of religion," we are beginning to dismantle the chaplaincy itself, and we give ammunition to our anti-chaplaincy foes.

Concern Number 2

There are several non-Abrahamic faith communities that are organizing to offer chaplain prospects for consideration by the military. My concern is that historically, they have a very steep up-hill struggle to make this happen.

These groups include a Wiccan endorsing body or two, a consolidated Hindu endorsing body, and a secular humanist/ atheist endorsing body.

Wiccan groups have been trying for well over a decade to meet requirements that the Armed Forces Chaplains Board set for faith groups to qualify for backing military chaplain candidates. Whenever they get close to fulfilling the requirements, the Department of Defense somehow manages to change the standards or process just enough to make acceptance a tad out-of-reach for them. I pray that such gaming stops.

At least one small Hindu denomination has done better, albeit almost by accident. Last year, an active duty Pentecostal Army chaplain – who started life in India as a Hindu born to a practicing Hindu family was able to immigrate to the US, attend a Christian seminary here, convert to Pentecostal Christianity, become a Pentecostal cleric – and then convert back to Hinduism – to be endorsed by her new/ old Hindu faith group. I suspect that being an Active Duty Army chaplain in good standing with her Christian denomination at the time of her re-identification as Hindu made it awkward for the Department of Defense to deny her religious affiliation changeover.

Stop the presses! It looks like the Department of Defense (DoD) has now stopped that particular pathway for future chaplains and faith groups. As of January 19 (and just published to their website) the DoD will no longer allow currently serving chaplains to affiliate with a yet-to-be-approved endorsing-agency in order to become that endorsing agency's chaplain prospect. [Please take a look](#) at page 13, paragraph E3.1.2, change in red. How sad! The DoD has yet again changed the standards and process for potential new faith groups, making it more difficult for those groups to become endorsing bodies for military chaplains.

Lastly, secular humanists/ free-thinkers/ atheists ventured into the endorsing community in January of this year, attending for the first-time-ever the annual meetings of the Association of Religious Endorsing Bodies and the COMISS Network Forum as observers. Already a few of my fellow endorsers are seeking to exclude them, as "atheists, by definition, are not religious" – despite the fact that these groups have a distinct belief system (they "simply" do not believe in a supreme being) and have organized themselves at various military installations for lectures, social events, mutual support, encouragement, service projects, and legal advice about dealing with persecution and harassment. While none of these groups reflect my personal belief system (which is not the issue) they seem very sincere and authentic – plus refreshingly candid and honest. They seem eager to meet educational and other professional requirements to serve their own constituencies and to provide for the free exercise of religion for others.

So, to my federal chaplaincy, endorsing, and hiring colleagues I sincerely ask, "Of what are you afraid?" I know my concerns. I fear that if the federal chaplaincy is not truly open to all, and not willing to serve all, that one day it may not be there for any. I fear that if state and federal governments are not consistent in genuine pluralism – allowing religious speech and equal access to all faith groups – that

religious speech and access will disappear for all. That would be a real shame and loss – for everyone. We publicly say we believe in and practice pluralism. Let's begin doing so!

And to my colleagues who are non-federal chaplains, I suggest that this issue is vitally important for you as well. If the federal government is able to manipulate regulations to exclude folks from chaplaincy and thereby avoiding authentic pluralism, where does it stop? Surely, if the federal government can game our religious society, why not states' governments and then local communities and their school boards. When and how does it end? And if it is allowed to continue, there is the risk that things may end badly, for all governments and chaplains and the people they and we serve.

How can we make a difference? Perhaps the answer is to be active truth-tellers and truth-doers. And, we can let our elected officials know what we think about H.R. 3828 and any similar proposed legislation.



David Plummer is an operational clinical chaplain and the religious endorsing body representative for The Coalition of Spirit-filled Churches. An endorser for 20 years, he is the current Chair of both the COMISS Network and the Endorsers' Conference for Veterans Affairs Chaplaincy. He is known to monitor chaplaincy issues and national affairs that might impact the discipline.

http://www.combatindex.com/store/field_man/Sample/FM_1-05.pdf , page1-1
http://latimesblogs.latimes.com/nationnow/2012/02/north_carolina_prayer.html; see also
<http://www.foxnews.com/us/2012/01/18/pagan-mom-challenges-bibles-in-north-carolina-school/>.

"H. 3828: Military Religious Freedom Protection Act,"
<http://www.govtrack.us/congress/bill.xpd?bill=h112-3828>
<http://tinyurl.com/wickerchaplainamend>
http://www.pastoralreport.com/the_archives/2011/10/hindus_taking_a.html
<http://www.militaryatheists.org>
<http://www.sacredwell.org/> and <http://www.circlesanctuary.org>

http://www.huffingtonpost.com/chris-weigant/army-boots-wiccan-chaplain_b_41781.html

User Comments

Edward Williamson 3/7/2012 9:42:30 AM

I served the Army as a Chaplain and retired on 1 March 2011. H.R. 3828 attempts to prevent Chaplains from being sandbagged into performing actions that are against their religious group's faith and practice. As a Chaplain I used to have the right to decline to perform weddings or other rites. When I declined to do a wedding it was usually because I knew the Soldier and s/he wasn't ready for marriage, the Soldier refused to attend premarital counseling, or the Soldier wanted me to perform his/her wedding on a national holiday and I already had plans with my family. This changed with the repeal of "Don't Ask, Don't Tell". Now in states that allow homosexual marriages and the military has a base in that state Soldiers are demanding that their Unit Ministry Team Chaplains perform their non-traditional weddings. This supposes that military Chaplains are similar to the wedding chapels in Las Vegas. We most definitely are not!!! We know our people, we serve among them and when we decline to do a religious service it is not an action we take lightly. (As far as resigning our commissions...we were offered that option when the initial "training" to desensitize Chaplains started months before the DADT repeal was to take place. Apparently too many Chaplains indicated a desire to resign so that option was removed. We were told that if we resigned and still had time left on our contracts we would be retrained into Finance or some other branch to serve out the remainder of our time until discharge.) Now when a Soldier approaches a Chaplain and demands that we perform a marriage ceremony, that Chaplain has to balance the needs of the Soldier, the requirements of the Chaplain's faith group, the political climate of the unit the Chaplain serves, the opinions of the Chaplain's Rater and Senior Rater (because faint praise on an evaluation report kills our careers!), and the second and third order effects of such an action. I respectfully submit that this article is somewhat one sided and does not

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tell the whole story! Military Chaplaincy is a hard career these days and H.R. 3828 is an attempt to inject sanity back into the lives of our serving military ministers. They deserve our trust and respect and do not need outside pressure. By the way just responding to this article could have potentially ended my career if I was still on active duty!

David Plummer 3/7/2012 2:40:14 PM

Dear Chaplain Williamson,

Do you know -- first hand -- of even a single, solitary case where an Army Chaplain was coerced or was attempted to be coerced or intimidated into doing a wedding where s/he did not feel comfortable? If so, details please! I am headed to the Army's Chief of Chaplains Strategic Leadership Development Training next week in Atlanta. If you will give me details (Chaplaincy@Spirit-filled.org), I will take it up with Chaplain (Major General) Rutherford personally. I will also report any such credible information to the Executive Committee of the National Conference on Ministry to the Armed Forces, which meets this Monday. I know of no such threats that you reference [i.e., (As far as resigning our commissions...we were offered that option when the initial "training" to desensitize Chaplains started months before the DADT repeal was to take place. Apparently too many Chaplains indicated a desire to resign so that option was removed. We were told that if we resigned and still had time left on our contracts we would be retrained into Finance or some other branch to serve out the remainder of our time until discharge.), and, in fact, this sounds like internet myth to me. In contrast, when I discussed the issue of Army Chaplains resigning over the repeal of DADT, the Chief of Chaplains told me in December 2011 that while he had heard a number of threats of resignation, that zero had actually resigned.

The other point that I would like to make in response to your posting is that as mentioned in the article the language of the proposed legislation is so broad that any chaplain can refuse to do virtually anything s/he does not want to do for any reason. So, for example, if an Evangelical chaplain would prefer to not refer Roman Catholics to a priest for his sacerdotal functions, and instead prefer to proselytize them, that would certainly be the chaplains prerogative by federal law! And at that point, we have certainly dismantled the office of chaplain for all intents and purposes.