

Chaplains: Special forces of the United Methodist Church

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A UMNS Feature
By Linda Green*

NASHVILLE, Tenn. (UMNS) - United Methodist chaplains in the military and other settings are "the Green Berets" of the denomination's Board of Higher Education and Ministry, but more are needed to serve.

That is the Rev. Richmond Stoglin's assessment of the men and women who are providing religious leadership in the armed forces, medical and health facilities, and prisons. Stoglin is a prison chaplain at the Federal Medical Center in Fort Worth, Texas.

"We go where others dare not tread," Stoglin said. "Chaplains deal with life issues, death issues, potential combat and sometimes dangerous people. We are on the frontlines of accountability every day."

Those who choose to work in a correctional setting see their ministry as an "intentional spiritual referee," as they stand between the potential violence among inmate populations and the need to teach each prisoner the constructive power of hope, he said. "It is imperative for the United Methodist Church to embrace hope before we end up facing more ground zero-like situations."

Stoglin and fellow military chaplains and related ministry constituents met with the Section of Chaplains and Related Ministries during the Oct. 4-7 session of the United Methodist Board of Higher Education and Ministry.

The Section on Chaplains and Related Ministries is the official endorsing agency of the United Methodist Church and approves ordained ministers to serve as chaplains and pastoral counselors. As of Oct. 1, the section had 1,200 endorsed or approved chaplains and pastoral counselors on its rolls.

"Chaplains and pastoral counselors are always in the places where people are broken or away," said the Rev. Patricia Barrett, a staff executive in the section.

Chaplain officials from the armed services and pastoral counselors described their experiences in the aftermath of Sept. 11 and the impact the tragedy has had on their constituents. Chaplains are also with the soldiers as the crisis in Afghanistan escalates, the officials noted.

Since the attacks, pastoral counselors have been using their skills to help many people deal with grief, trauma and ongoing anxiety, said the Rev. Anne Ross Stewart, the section's pastoral counseling representative from Gaithersburg, Md. Since all citizens across the country were impacted in some way, "pastoral counselors are a part of the ministry team bringing healing and hope," she said.

Oct. 11 was National Depression Screening Day, and Stewart said many counselors donated time to give people free screenings. As the director of InterFaith Counseling Services, she said many counselors also would provide a free screening for depression and or anxiety throughout the year "to educate and encourage the general public to seek help for these very common mental health problems."

"United Methodist clergy in ministry to the Navy, Marine Corps and Coast Guard are serving quite literally around the world," said the Rev. Robert Phillips, command chaplain at the Naval Postgraduate School in Monterey, Calif.

Fifty-three United Methodist naval chaplains wear the active-duty uniform, representing almost every annual conference, he said. However, that number pales next to the 130 Southern Baptists. United Methodist Navy chaplains serve the Marines, Coast Guard as well as the Navy, he said.

"United Methodist Navy chaplains in this situation minister to everyone from sailors and Marines who are on their way to trouble spots up to the United Methodist chaplain who is the president's pastor at Camp David. From the lowliest enlisted person to the commander in chief and points in between, we are where our people are," Phillips said.

An equal number of church-related chaplains are active in the Air Force and "are great team players," said the Rev. Everett C. Schrum, chaplain at Randolph Air Force Base in Texas. United Methodist chaplains are valued across faith traditions because of their willingness to work cooperatively in the free exercise of religion, he said. He said others are within the Reserves and Air National Guard.

The federal prison system has only 12 United Methodist chaplains out of 225, and only 42 endorsed chaplains are serving jails, prisons, juvenile facilities and halfway houses, Stoglin said. More are needed to "embrace" the 1.7 million-plus inmates in correctional institutions, he said.

"United Methodist chaplains are becoming an endangered species among the ever-growing juvenile facilities across the country," he said. Today, there are less than five, he said.

Many of the military and prison chaplains attending the section meeting equated their work to being in youth ministry. "We minister to young adults, a population that local churches are not seeing," Phillips said.

The average age of the 5,500 sailors on an aircraft carrier is 19, he said. "They need pastors," he said. "Even before this crisis, the military stood in great need of more chaplains. Pastors who have a calling to youth and young adult ministry are encouraged to discern God's possible leading in this direction."

Schrum said recruiting new chaplains near the age of 30 is a priority for the Air Force, which is looking at ways to fund seminary training for chaplain candidates. The U.S. Army has two United Methodists in the officers' training division out of 51 students, and the average age of Army chaplains is 50, said Col. Greg Hill, director of the chaplains training center in Columbia, S.C.

The Division of Ordained Ministry passed a resolution on Oct. 6 calling on annual conference boards of ordained ministry to change their restrictive policies and rules toward candidates for extension ministries and to make an effort to identify, recruit and encourage elder candidates for those areas.

The resolution notes that many boards of ordained ministry are guided by restrictive policies for the elders who want to work in extension ministries of teaching and chaplaincy. It encourages the division to find appropriate ways to interpret and promote the intention and spirit of the paragraph 317.3 of the Book of Discipline throughout the connection.

"There is one ministry of Jesus Christ, and it is expressed in a lot of ways," Barrett said. Ministries of pastoral care in specialized settings are one such expression and are most expressive when collaborative, she said. "When all people are working in ministry in harmony, the world can be transformed and healed. Chaplains are one of the faces of that ministry."

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