

Features

Military chaplaincy – a ministry of presence

Sonya VanderVeen Feddema

Rev. Gerald Van Smeerdijk is an ordained minister of the Christian Reformed Church who has served in the Emo CRC (1995-2001) and the Dunnville CRC (2001-2008). On Feb. 11, 2008, he was commissioned as an officer in the Canadian Forces (CF), and moved to Ottawa where he began serving as a military chaplain. In the summer of 2010, he moved yet again to his current posting in Edmonton, Alberta.

How did God lead you to your present role as a military chaplain?

As a civilian minister, I had always encouraged the church to take responsibility for the community it lived in. The Emo CRC participated in the foundation and development of the Door of Hope, a Christian counselling centre. The Dunnville CRC advocated for women with crisis pregnancies. While there, I represented our congregation as chair of the Joint Chaplains committee which provided on-call chaplains from the local ministerial to the local hospitals and retirement homes. We also endeavoured to influence our local member of parliament concerning policies that affected religious freedom and the rights of unborn children.

Working so closely with my congregations in community service, I observed that the church has a large amount of wealth compared to the communities we live in. We have no shortage of faith, hope and love to face our struggles while many others outside of church communities struggle alone. Fortunately, the churches that I served had a deep love of sharing the resources God had given them.

Nearing the end of my service to the Dunnville CRC, my desire to bring faith, hope, and love where it was needed most drew my attention more and more to the struggles faced by the members of the Canadian Forces who were serving in Afghanistan. I discovered that the CF had a great need for chaplains and were eager to receive my application. The application process culminated with a three-month Chaplain Basic Officer Training Course in Borden, Ont. It was there that I learned a new thing: the CF puts an impossible demand upon individuals. In order to accomplish any mission efficiently, effectively, and safely, the basic military unit is a team.

Can you share something of your experience in Ottawa?

I served there as military chaplain to the Military Police Headquarters and the Ottawa Military Chapel as lead pastor. Twice, I was sent to the far north to provide chaplaincy support to the troops in our most remote station. The only way to get there involves many hours of travel within the belly of a Hercules aircraft, a craft designed for transporting cargo rather than providing comfort for human passengers. The noise

is deafening and the discomfort is appalling, but the gratitude of the troops in the far north showered upon visiting chaplains more than makes up for the trouble of getting there. Stationed there for six month rotations, the troops long for anything that reminds them of home and the loved ones they have left behind. The disconnection between military members and their civilian families can be the most difficult part of their service. Military chaplains have their feet in both worlds and function as an important link between deployed members and their families.

The first time I travelled there in 2008 to celebrate Christmas, I discovered to my delight that chaplains can do just about anything. As commissioned officers, we have rank and authority, while as chaplains we stand outside the chain of command and have virtually unrestricted access and availability. Needing a large enough space to hold a chapel service on Christmas Day, I closed the bar and offered something other than beer and pretzels – the body and blood of our Lord. Talk about redeeming creation!

After leaving Ottawa, you went to Edmonton. What was the nature of your work there?

When I first arrived in Edmonton, I was assigned to the Lord Strathcona Horse (Royal Canadian) Battalion. This is an armoured regiment (tanks and light armoured vehicles). Its troops have been in constant rotation to Afghanistan from 2006 until the time we brought all the combat troops home in 2011. To maintain combat readiness, this battalion also goes out on exercise for weeks at a time, placing a large burden upon every member and their families. You cannot imagine the privilege it feels to bring the ministry of presence to our members under these circumstances.

A year later, I was deploying with the troops to Afghanistan. Halfway around the world, separated from their families and country, performing the incredible task of removing all our material and equipment in extremely hot weather in a war zone, our troops had their hands full. Under these darkened conditions, the light of God's presence through the chaplain glows brightly. Compassion, kindness, an encouraging word, chapel services, providing advice on the welfare of the troops and their families to the Commanding Officer, providing pastoral care to the troops, referring troops to other care-giving professionals like doctors, nurses and social workers – these things improve the difficult life of a soldier.

What's your role in the military now?

Today, I am serving the Joint Personnel Support Unit (JPSU) as Regional Chaplain for Alberta and Northern Canada. I provide chaplaincy support to the Integrated Per-

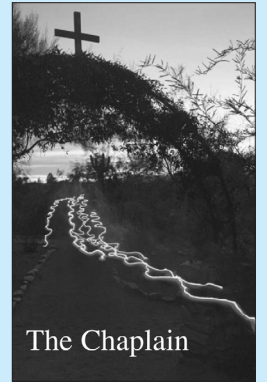
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CHAPLAIN SUNDAY

PRAYER FOR CHAPLAINS

Father, we all have a calling and we all need your grace in special and particular ways, but today we pray especially for Chaplains. We thank you for their willingness to be with the vulnerable, the isolated, the institutionalized, the “at risk” and the dying. May you continue to raise up men and women who are willing to leave the confines of the established church, or developing church, to be the church to the un-churched. May your light continue to shine in the dark places of our society through the presence of Chaplains. And may those who serve in such capacities receive a rich reward through the response of those to whom they minister, as well as through the crown that you have promised in eternity. In the name of your Son, who also went into the highways and byways of life to touch the lost, AMEN.

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sonnel Support Centre (IPSC) Edmonton, and oversee chaplaincy support for IPSC Calgary, Wainwright, Cold Lake and Yellowknife.

As the Regional Chaplain, I support the work of the Regional Commander and his staff to provide the best possible care to our ill and injured members in Alberta and Northern Canada. When they cannot continue serving in the military, we help them transition back to the civilian world with job training and placement. Otherwise, we help them return to work in their original unit, or transfer to another trade. Our mission is to help all our members get better. To do so we engage every means of help available including medical, psycho-social and spiritual. As chaplain, I have the privilege of introducing or re-introducing our members to the eternal values that God has placed in all our hearts.

What aspects of your job are particularly challenging? What's rewarding?

Being present is 99 percent of the job. We call it “walking the line.” We also call it “the ministry of presence.” We go wherever the soldiers go. We are wherever the soldiers are. They see us on a daily basis, and, when they get in trouble, they may see us any time of the day or night. We are faithful and loyal. We care. We don't harvest much, but we plant a lot of seed. We win over the hearts and minds of our members so that they can draw closer and recognize that all this goodness has come to them from God. And that's when we see faith, hope and love bring healing and strength to those who need it.

The aspect of my work that I find par-

ticularly challenging is working with members who avoid chaplains because they want nothing to do with religion. At the same time, this can be the most rewarding work of all. There was a member who often ended the work day by telling me, “Hey, padre [the CF term for chaplain], you must be slipping. You still haven't saved my soul!” Then he would chuckle and walk away. He didn't take me seriously and that made it very difficult for me to help him with some of his troubles. One day, his wife was to return from her tour to Afghanistan. I knew he was quite worried about her because she had had a hard time of it. So, without telling him, I arranged to be there when her flight arrived. I was there when she came out of the gate and they embraced. He turned around and saw me standing there. I was there to shake her hand, to thank her for her service, and to welcome her home. That day I finally became his padre, too.

Any closing thoughts?

I know that the churches would help the members of the CF if they could. The need is there. But the members of our forces, because of their schedules, high operating tempos, deployments and constant movement to different locations are often outside of a church's normal reach. That's why the CF are glad to receive your assistance through military chaplains. ➤

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