

CHAPTER III

PROJECT PHASE I: REFLECTIONS FROM THE COMMUNITY OF FAITH

*“The citizens of the United States of America have a right to applaud themselves for...
All possess alike liberty of conscience and immunities of citizenship.”*

President George Washington¹

The engine that drove the train of this project was the collection of faith reflections from the members of the community that comprises the Sea Services. Initially, it was the collection of these stories, memories, and reflections from the community about their faith walk that was the sole purpose of the project. It was felt that if people were given the opportunity to share their stories with those charged with caring for the spiritual needs of the community, everyone would benefit. Of course, this was far too limited to be of lasting use to the Chaplain Corps, and so the project was expanded, as will be seen in the next two chapters. Phase I of the project was comprised chiefly of two steps: the building of a website (and the subsequent promotion of that site), and the recruiting of reflection writers. Both of these steps played a crucial role in how the project was executed and in how it was presented to and received by the chaplains in Phase II. This chapter is divided loosely along these lines: development of the Phase I website, the recruitment of the writers and the reflections themselves.

Phase I Website

In December 2003, construction was begun on a simple website, and following the approval of the project prospectus by the Drew faculty, the site was formally launched and made available to the

¹ George Washington, *1790 manuscript*, Library of Congress Manuscript Division, <http://www.loc.gov/exhibits/religion> (23 March 2005).

public on 22 December 2003. My transfer from the Naval Hospital at Camp Lejeune, North Carolina, to the Joint Maritime Facility, St Mawgan, Cornwall, United Kingdom, necessitated the launch of the site in December, rather than the normal beginning of the project phase in January. This three-page site, no longer active, was elementary in its scope and purpose—namely, to use the Internet to reach a community that was literally spread across the globe. If I wanted to be able to show that the Sea Service community was comprised of a diverse assortment of people, I had to be able to provide those people the chance to be a part of the story when it was told to the chaplains. The site's three pages were designed, in part, to reduce the intimidation factor that some people experience when engaging in talk about faith-related matters. It presented the topic in a personable fashion, the same manner that I used when I asked people face-to-face to take part in the project. I used the cover page to introduce myself, the scope of the project, and the reason why I was gathering the reflections.

When this project was envisioned, I thought that the members of the community would leap at the chance to share their stories. Time after time during my chaplaincy, I had heard from individuals within the Chaplain Corps and from within the Sea Service community that there was ignorance in regards to the change that had occurred in the military in regards to the spiritual needs of the community. It became apparent to me that what was needed was a vehicle by which individuals could share their faith stories, and in doing so, they could convey to the Chaplain Corps the dynamics of this change. It was not simply the changing nature of the demographics that I sought to illustrate with these reflections. Rather, it was believed that the community of faith, rather than books, articles, white papers or another dreaded power point presentation, would be in the best position to show that what had changed was not the label on the congregation, but the congregation's story.

Since most Navy chaplains had been parish pastors² at one point, one might safely assume that these chaplains would be well versed in discovering and understanding the stories of the community they were serving. The experience of being a parish pastor enables chaplains to learn the skills

² Here the term "parish pastor" refers to any clergy person serving in a local worshipping community.

necessary to reach people where they are, the ministry of presence as it is frequently referred to in the jargon of the Chaplain Corps. And yet, this parish background also serves as a barrier to the very communication that is needed in the Chaplain Corps today. Parish pastors are expected to work closely, possibly even exclusively with their congregation. The intimacy of this bond is forged through a regular and hopefully frequent contact. It is also forged through a common bond; in some cases, this bond is the label of the faith group that both congregant and pastor share. Any contact with members of other faith groups or clergy from other faith traditions or other religions is not expected other than through groups formed for that explicit purpose. It is from this isolated context of the parish that some Navy chaplains have emerged into the diverse and confusing faith community that is the Sea Services.

Phase I begins with the premise that everyone has a story, even those who feel unable to tell it or those who feel that no one would be interested even if it were told to another person. The decision to use stories to explore this topic was made because of what I had learned through my experience in both parish and hospital ministry. I found that when I took the time to listen to what people said (and did not say) about their lives, I could better understand how I might better serve them as their pastor and fellow pilgrim on the journey of faith. I was able to discern what it was that they needed from me. This is equally true in the Sea Services, where the chaplain is the one member of the command who moves equally through the officer and enlisted communities, as well as from military to civilian communities. By listening to what people are saying about their lives, including their faith lives, the chaplain is able to respond with the ministry that is needed. The key for the chaplain is to listen. Phase I is based on the belief that those who come to a website devoted to gathering faith reflections do so because they have a story to tell and care about others' stories.

Having set the tone for a conversation on diversity using myself and the Chaplain Corps as an example, I shifted the conversation from the chaplain to the community that the chaplain serves. Instead of the chaplain explaining about his or her own tradition, beliefs or story and expecting the

community to adjust, I offered the community that opportunity to share with their chaplains their own story. By doing this, it was hoped that two things would happen. First, the members of the community of faith would be better able to claim their story, and their faith journey would be the stronger for it. Secondly, chaplains would come to realize that they were not ministering to members of their own tribe any longer, but were actually in ministry to an incredibly diverse and complex community.

The Response

Eventually, sixty persons responded to the Phase I website. That is far short of the initial goal of one hundred reflections that I had thought would be simple enough to achieve. While this fact can be attributed to a number of factors, it is no small thing to note that the very people who said that the stories of the community needed to be told were the very ones that when opportunity knocked, chose not to answer the door. As the project was begun in mid-December, I knew that the initial response would be sluggish due to the holiday activities. What I could never have envisioned was that by the middle of March, I had received only three responses, and none of them was from an active-duty military member or a military family member.

To give a clearer picture of who these writers were, everyone who wrote a reflection was asked to complete a demographic survey, which was included in the website. The results were not what I had anticipated, nor were they anything approaching an accurate portrayal of the Sea Service community. That the results were not what I had anticipated refers to the skewed results, namely, that there were more civilians who responded than military, that as nearly as many family members responded as did active-duty persons, that hardly any African-American or Asian-Americans responded, and that no Hispanics took part. This is in stark contrast to the actual population served by Navy chaplains.

Two things stand out in this first part of the demographics. First, chaplains serve not only those in uniform, but also their families and the civilian population that has contact with the local military base. Just as in the civilian parish, the chaplain who takes the view that the “world is my parish” can

find himself/herself engaged in ministry in every conceivable place and with people outside of the group the chaplain thought he/she was sent to serve. Chaplains who likewise are more at ease staying “at home,” that is, staying within their comfort zone, should, in fact, stay at home.

Secondly, the fact that so few minorities took part in the project should in no way imply that these populations are missing or not found in numbers of any significance within the Sea Service community or within the communities that chaplains live and work. While it is certainly possible to live in communities throughout the world and in the United States that are devoid of minority members, however that term may be defined, these places do not represent the world that is the Sea Services. The chaplain who is uncomfortable working with people of differing hues, accents, political beliefs, and so on, should be prepared for a difficult ministry setting.

In regards to the use of the Internet to promote and engage the community in this project, I do not accept the notion that the understanding, access or use of web-based technologies in any way contributed to the lack of minority participation. It is inconceivable to me that in the Sea Service community, there is anyone who is unable to access a computer as a regular part of their duties or community life. Workspaces, Internet Cafés, command libraries, and homes are just a few of the places where the community has access to the Internet. While not everyone is equally comfortable with today’s rapidly evolving technologies, it is my belief that any discomfort or lack of understanding would cut across ethnic and gender lines.

The military status category illustrated that Navy chaplains are involved with a very diverse community that is not limited to the military unit or community to which the chaplain is assigned. The first observation about the responses is that while the project was launched on a Marine Corps base, no active-duty Marines participated. Each chaplain at Camp Lejeune was asked to share this project with the chapels and the units to which they were assigned. The variety of chapel communities at Camp Lejeune is a good cross sample of today’s military faith community. There are three chapels attached to training commands, two in the enlisted housing areas, four in the main base

area including a Roman Catholic chapel, and a Jewish chapel. The worship styles vary greatly with the chaplain offering the service but, at a minimum, include a blended style at the main base chapel, a Pentecostal worship service, a lay-led Muslim community, and a liturgical Protestant service. Given this diverse community, comprising of more than nearly 40,000 Marines, it is surprising then that not one responded from the Marine or “green side” of the house. The only persons from Camp Lejeune area who did respond were a handful of chaplain spouses, some retired military members, and a number of civilians who have contact with the Navy chaplains on a consistent basis. While it would have been preferable to have more active-duty participants than civilians, this result demonstrates that our “congregation” exists beyond the bounds of our commands and into the community surrounding our bases and chapels. While I served in the Camp Lejeune area for nearly three years and was known in both the military and civilian communities, I was unable to persuade people to participate in the sharing of their faith journeys in the numbers I had hoped.

The second category, gender, was interesting only in that as many males responded as they did. In the religious culture that is USAmerica, an oft-repeated refrain is “Where are the men?” In this project, it was the men who were just as willing as the women to participate. An additional note about the relative equality in the gender section is that it was the women who were more willing to recruit others to participate than the men. Some men would take part if asked, but did little else once their part was done. It was the women, and in particular the female chaplain spouses, who were the most helpful in getting the word out and in sharing the benefits of writing about their faith with others.

One glance at the ethnic group category reveals a glaring disparity between the groups that took part in the project. While every attempt was made to seek out and recruit as wide an assortment of writers as possible, few “minority” members of the community responded. This is surprising on several accounts. First, the attendance at military chapels is very diverse, and those who come are typically the “true believers.” The African-American and Hispanic attendance at chapels, both

Protestant and Roman Catholic at Camp Lejeune, is extensive, as well as at chapels throughout the Fleet. An appeal was made specifically to African-American chaplains for assistance in this project to recruit writers, but the only minority writers who came forward were those that I was able to gather myself. Before leaving Camp Lejeune in February 2004, I approached one dozen African-American church pastors via a letter asking them to seek members of their congregations to speak about their faith. Not a single response was received from a group that one would have suspected would be keen on sharing the Good News.

The faith group category reflected the reality of the make-up of both the chaplains and the Sea Service community. The majority of the groups are from the traditional “mainline” Protestant denominations, with Roman Catholic and Jewish included, completing the religious ministry “trinity” of a by-gone era. The inclusion of Buddhists, Hindus, Muslims, Wiccans, etc., reflects the reality that the nature of religious diversity extends beyond the walls of the Judeo-Christian compound and into the surrounding territory. Some participants who identified themselves as “other” or “none,” i.e., they did not claim a religious affiliation, present a significant challenge to chaplains, perhaps more so than those who claim a religious affiliation. This is because chaplains are trained to be religious leaders, missionaries who convert the lost, and teachers of doctrine and polity. How to respond to those who have turned their back on “the Way” or feel no need for such a thing is another matter entirely. It should be noted that although I am a United Methodist, there was no intent to have that group be the largest one represented in the collection. It was a shock to me to find that there were so few Roman Catholics, Evangelicals and Pentecostals, no Muslims or LDS, and only one Jew (a member of the Advisory Group) who responded. The four Wiccans who responded are reflective of this rapidly growing and oft-misunderstood segment of the community. This particular group is made up of all Caucasians³, mid-level enlisted (E-4 to E-5) Sailors, of both genders, and all have at least some

³ I use the term “Caucasians” to describe those persons from the Eurasian community of people. This is a personal choice, one that reflects my rejection of the term “white” to describe skin tone, as some have rejected

college education. A factor to be considered in dealing with this or any other “minority” faith is that the chaplain must be educated to the needs of the group and not simply from the perspective of the chaplain. Indeed, to many a chaplain, a request from a Wiccan for support in fulfilling his/her faith requirements would not receive much in the way of a positive response.

Eight people claimed the label of “none.” This group of people is comprised of those who have turned their back on what they perceive to be the abuses, the hypocrisy, and the empty promises of organized religion. It also contains persons who are firmly on a pilgrimage of faith, but have not found a guide who is able to speak to their hearts of a path that is truer than the others that clamor for the pilgrims’ attention.

The final category is the age of the writers. This area was surprising only in the respect that each of the fields had at least two responses. The analysis of this category revealed that older persons are not more “religious” than their juniors, but those who are older are more willing to share their beliefs than those who are younger.

The members of the military community are younger than the wider USAmerica community at large. In the military community, I am considered a bit of an oddity in that I am already forty-seven, an age at which many Sea Service members have already retired. I wholly expected that the younger members of the community would not respond in numbers consistent with their majority status. In fact, it was a bit of a surprise that a full one-quarter of the responses were from those under twenty-five. While having persons eighteen to twenty-five was a pleasant surprise, to see two persons under the age of seventeen respond was a treat. The two persons under seventeen who responded are active members of the community chapel at JMF St. Mawgan. I believe that these two young people responded to my invitation, as did so many others, simply because someone took the interest in what

the use of other colors, namely “black,” “red” and “yellow” to describe certain ethnic communities. Likewise, I do not use the term “Euro-American” to describe people whose ancestors may have included people from the European continent. This term implies a particular affinity and relationship to a geographic area that cannot be compelled merely by accident of birth.

they had to say. That children have a story to tell should not be surprising. What is surprising is that the church has not taken more of an interest in why the young people, their parents, and their grandparents have stopped showing an active interest in the life of the church. Perhaps if the church took more interest in what people were saying, there would not be the decline in participation that so many churches and faith groups are seeing. In the chapel at St. Mawgan, a full one-third of the weekly attendance is comprised of those under the age of ten. These families are asked repeatedly, in various ways, what do they require to assist them in their faith walk. This is one way to reach people.

The respondents aged twenty-six to forty were comprised solely of enlisted members, and several family members of those under the age of forty. The bulk of the forty-one to fifty-five grouping was made up of officers who tend to be older than the rest of the community members. A large part of this group were the spouses of these officers, who like their partners, are older than the average family member in the Fleet. Those over fifty-six were retired military members. They had served in the military for any length of time, but had not actually reached retirement or, in two cases, persons who had never been in uniform but had a close connection to a Navy chaplain or to a Navy chapel community near to them.

A Review of the Faith Reflections

The instructions given to reflection writers were intended only as a guideline and a starting point for writers. It was designed to avoid providing more than a general design or guidance for the reflections. What I was looking for were the personal faith experiences, the beginnings, struggles, influences, and impact of faith on an individual's life. The project looked to understand the role Navy chaplains have played in real people's lives, what people liked, and did not like. In order to help get the writers started, I included some questions that they might want to consider. It was made clear to potential writers that what I wanted was not a laundry list of answers to the guideline questions but honest accounts of what was important to each person. The reflection was meant to share one's journey. The instructions were to write about their journey, like they would write a letter or tell a

story to a friend. The suggested length of the reflections was two-three pages, which was thought to be long enough to provide details of the journey but not so long as to overwhelm the recreational writer.

The resulting reflections⁴ were a wonderful assortment of submissions that was exactly what was needed to show that the community was comprised of individuals. The length of the reflections ranged from one paragraph to nearly five pages. The details that were included in the reflections ranged from casual asides and superficial observations to personal pain and profound honesty. Presented in Appendix A, in the order they were received, these reflections provide a keen insight into the community to which Navy chaplains minister. While each of the reflections contains much that is worthy of comment, three reflections will serve to illustrate the breadth and depth of the sixty reflections. These three were chosen to reflect some of the diversity available in the gathered reflections. For example, one is from an active-duty military member; another is from a civilian employee of the U.S. Navy; and the third is from a reservist. One is a woman; two are men. One is a Wiccan; one is a Christian; and one is still searching for his path. What these three represent is that there is no one path, no one-way to describe the people with whom the Navy chaplains may expect to come into contact. Rather than describing all sixty reflections, I believed that by offering this glimpse into these three reflections, I would show that they and the rest of the reflections come from real people whose stories need to be heard.

A forty-year-old child of a retired Navy Senior Chief wrote faith reflection #3⁵. A civilian employee of the U.S. Navy at JMF St. Mawgan, this person was raised in the United Methodist Church. Despite his connection with the current chaplain at JMF St. Mawgan, who is also a United Methodist, the writer will not attend chapel services. The path that led from the childhood United

⁴ Appendix A, Faith Reflections, page 117.

⁵ Appendix A, Faith Reflections, #3, page 120.

Methodist church in Washington State to despising first conservative Christianity and then rejecting most spiritual practices that are associated with organized religion includes a tale of disillusionment and pain. Onto this path come chaplains who are called upon by the Navy to facilitate this person's needs. What expectation does this person have of me and other chaplains? What are chaplains, the majority of whom are Christians, to make of a believer in God who does not accept the teachings of the church, as it has been experienced in this person's life?

The result of reading this person's reflection is that for me, his chaplain, I must realize that, despite all, he is still willing to share his faith story, and my job changes from missionary of a particular faith tradition to a missionary of God's peace, as I understand that peace. It is not my job to convince this person that his pain or disillusionment is unfounded or was not all that bad. It does no one any good to argue about perceptions and experiences. My Christian faith teaches me that the same peace that was present all those years ago for this man, and had been obscured by the people around him, is still there. The role I assume in this man's life is to simply be there without judgment or argument and to offer what he desires from his chaplain. In order to understand his needs, I have to ask and then listen to what he has to say.

Faith Reflection #10⁶ is an example of a person who Navy chaplains may well encounter, a person who walks a path unlike anything the chaplain may have encountered before. This individual is an active-duty Navy enlisted woman who speaks of growing up in one Christian tribe, but now walks a completely different path. As a Wiccan, this woman has a faith group that is not represented in the Chaplain Corps, but is certainly present throughout the Fleet. Some chaplains might see this sort of person as a fallen or wayward Christian at best or a representative of Satan at worst. And yet, as a Navy chaplain, I am expected to facilitate her freedom to observe her faith as she chooses to experience it. The observation that I have made here from reading this reflection and from interacting

⁶ Appendix A, Faith Reflections, #10, page 132.

with her and others in this community of her faith group, is that the best this person seems to hope for is that her chaplain will not hinder her faith journey.

Faith Reflection # 39⁷ is from a Navy Reservist who has been recalled to active-duty status. There are, of course, pressures on this sort of person that a chaplain would need to be aware of, aside from those normally associated with the military lifestyle. This person wrote his reflection from his temporary billet at Camp Lejeune, while his wife and family remained in Michigan. Providing a home away from home, help with deployments and, as always, an assurance of God's presence are but a few of the ministries that chaplains need to be able to provide to the men and women in the Reserve and National Guard. A Christian who has switched from being a Roman Catholic to a member of the Church of God (Indiana) due to the influence of his new wife, this Sailor is a devout Christian. He sees his role in life as living his faith in every day life. Not content with merely collecting a paycheck, he sees his calling and his work as serving God while serving his country. The two are co-joined, and he offers the belief that a chaplain would do well to remember that for some members of the Sea Services, God and country are one and the same. Of course, for many in the Fleet, the opposite is true, and appeals to patriotism and the new phase of the civil religion currently in vogue will not sit well with those for whom the Navy is just a job, and God is seen as just a figment of the chaplain's imagination.

There are fifty-seven other reflections in Appendix A. If there had been thousands more or even if I had reached the initial goal of one hundred, I could not have been provided with a clearer demonstration that the community I serve is as diverse as I believed it to be. Each of the sixty reflections is a witness to the needs and experiences of real people. Some speak words that would be welcomed in any Christian church. Some would be welcomed by some groups and not by others.

All of these reflections were written so that chaplains would be able to respond to them. Chaplains were given this opportunity in Phase II. As will be seen in chapter four, not many

⁷ Appendix A, Faith Reflections, #39, page 170.

chaplains took advantage of that opportunity, but the words of the community are still there for all to see and hear. Whether or not chaplains accept this diversity or understand the need to rethink the nature of ministry in a community that is unlike the one from which the chaplain originated is not the point. The key factor that emerges from these reflections is that there are people who have stories to tell. All that is required is that someone takes the time to ask for the story and then take the time to listen to it. If that person is their chaplain, imagine the surprise and the impact that chaplain can have.