

CHAPTER VII

ONE APPROACH TO SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY IN THE SEA SERVICES

“...the minister of God, remembering the golden cross upon his sleeve,
was there to serve.”¹

The Reverend Haines H. Lippincott

In trying to describe a systematic theology that is at work in the context of my ministry in the Sea Services, I would begin by referring to “*The Alkula Quadrilateral*” or *The Four Pillars of My Military Ministry*. The four areas are symbolized as follows:



The United Methodist Church



The United States Navy



The Naval Chaplain Corps



The Bible

Each of these areas has a direct bearing on how I go about providing ministry, and each must be given the proper respect lest, I become unable to function in the demanding settings that we Navy chaplains

¹ Haines H. Lippincott, “*The Navy as a Parish*,” *Methodist Review*, Vol. 107, July 1924, page 579.

find ourselves in on a daily basis. Each of these four areas may be summed up in the following quotes:

Elders in effective relationship may be appointed to serve in ministry settings beyond the local United Methodist church in the witness and service of Christ's love and justice. Persons in these appointments remain within the itinerancy and shall be accountable to the annual conference. They shall be given the same moral and spiritual support by it, as are persons in appointments to pastoral charges. Their effectiveness shall be evaluated in the context of the specific setting in which their ministry is performed.

**The United Methodist Book of Discipline 2000, Paragraph 334, subsection 1:
"Appointments Extending the Ministry of the United Methodist Church"**²

I (full name) do solemnly swear that I will support and defend the Constitution of the United States against all enemies, foreign and domestic; that I will bear true faith and allegiance to the same, and that I take this obligation freely, without any mental reservation or purpose of evasion; and that I will well and faithfully discharge the duties of the office on which I am about to enter. So help me God."

U. S. Military Officer's Oath of Office³

"Devoted to God and Country, we unite to deliver innovative, life-transforming service *throughout and beyond* the Sea Services."

U.S. Navy Chaplain Corps Vision Statement⁴

"Show me the coin used for the tax. And they brought Him a denarius. Then He said to them, 'Whose head is this, and whose title?' They answered, 'The emperor's.' Then He said to them, 'Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's.'"

Matthew 22:19-21

I conduct the ministry to which I have been called within the parameters of this quadrilateral or four "pillars." The first "pillar" is that I am an ordained Elder of the United Methodist Church and

² *The United Methodist Book of Discipline 2000*, Nashville, TN: The United Methodist Publishing House, 2000, page 221.

³ James Toner, *True Faith and Allegiance: The Burden of Military Ethics*, Lexington, KY: The University of Kentucky Press, 1995, page iii.

⁴ United States Navy Chaplain Corps' website, <http://www.chaplain.navy.mil/> (25 Mar 05).

am appointed by my bishop to serve in the capacity of a Navy Chaplain. I understand that I am answerable to the bishop. In my annual report to the Conference, I include items that reflect my commitment to fulfilling my ordination vows to word, order, and table. The second “pillar” is that I am a commissioned officer of the United States Navy and am bound to uphold the oath of office I took when I accepted this ministry setting. The third “pillar” is that I am a United States Navy Chaplain. As such, I see myself as a part of a community of chaplains who are charged with ensuring that religious freedom is more than just a cliché. The Chaplain Corps vision statement springs from the belief that wherever the chaplain calls his or her spiritual home, we are all charged with providing the members of the Sea Services the most comprehensive ministry possible. Finally, the fourth “pillar” is the Scriptures, i.e., the Bible. I am a Christian, and as such, I must serve the Lord who called me into ministry.

There is a tension for military chaplains, because we are expected to serve two masters. The juggling act that chaplains are expected to manage is demonstrated by using myself as an example. I am a United Methodist Elder, a Liturgical Protestant chaplain, a Protestant chaplain, a Christian chaplain, and a chaplain to all personnel and a naval officer. A further illustration of this tension involves the Navy chaplains wearing rank and service community devices on their uniforms, like other members of the Navy, thereby signifying their place in the Navy as an institution.⁵

Initially, chaplains were not given rank in the Navy. They functioned as schoolmasters and were responsible for, among other things, rationing grog aboard ship. Their selection as chaplains was solely the responsibility and prerogative of the ship’s captain. Over time, the chaplains became accepted as full-fledged Naval officers, albeit with a limited scope of duties and functions. While in the beginning, chaplains were there because everyone was thought to be a Christian, and the crew

⁵ The place where the rank and service community, that is, the area the service member specializes in, is shown varies by the uniform. For example, on the khaki or work uniform, the rank device is worn on the right collar and the service community device is worn on the left collar. On summer whites, the rank and service community are worn together on shoulder boards. On the dress blue and mess dress uniform jackets, the rank as well as the service community indicator is found on the jacket sleeve cuff.

needed some moral guidance⁶, now the chaplains have become the guardians of religious liberty. They ensure that those who wish to worship, regardless of religious orientation, are allowed to do so, and those who do not wish to worship are not required to do so. Chaplains are expected to be representatives of the faith group that sent them, but must also be approachable to those persons of other faith groups (or no faith group).

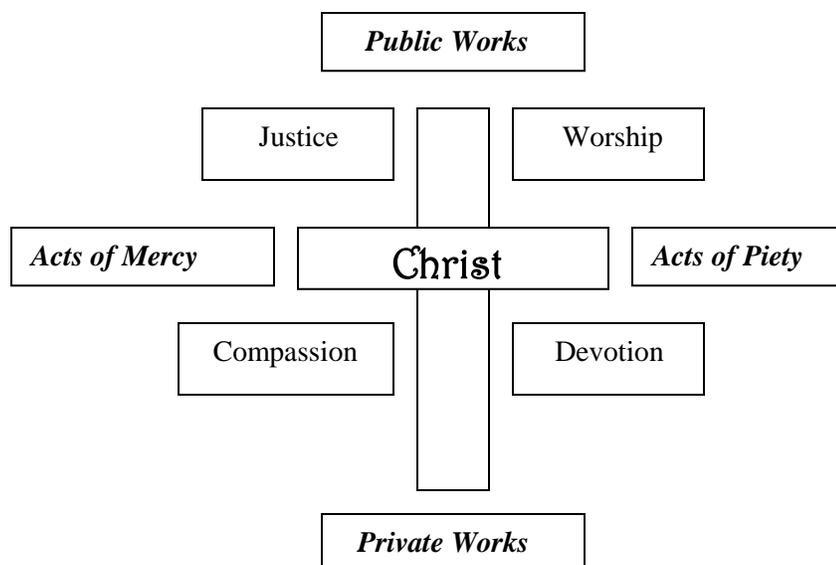
Managing these roles may seem easy, but it is not. The competing claims that each of these communities make upon the chaplain is very real. How well the chaplain maintains this balance goes far in determining the relative success he/she has in the “canoe club,” otherwise known as the United States Navy. On the one hand, I serve as a Navy chaplain who is an ordained minister of the United Methodist Church. On the other hand, that faith group is irrelevant to those outside of that group, currently serving in the Navy and to the Navy as a whole. I believe that I am being faithful to my calling and my ordination in that as a preacher and a teacher, I know that I am needed in this setting. This allows me the freedom to give of myself, while knowing that the success of my ministry does not depend upon the approval of the Navy, but rather my faithfulness to God who first called me into the ministry.

Using a model of church that I first learned from Dr. David Lowes Watson of Wesley Theological Seminary⁷ and mentioned again in Brian Bauknight’s book, *Body Building*,⁸ I have approached my ministry in each Navy command to which I have been assigned as I did in the parish. The model may be illustrated as follows.

⁶ Walter Wink, *The Powers That Be: Theology for a New Millennium*, New York: Galilee Books, 1998, page 60.

⁷ Dr. David Lowes Watson, *Lectures on Wesley Covenant Groups*, Fall Semester 1992, Wesley Theological Seminary, Washington, DC.

⁸ Brian Kelley Bauknight, *Body Building: Creating a Ministry Team Through Spiritual Gifts*, Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1996, pages 62-63.



There are aspects of the faith that are done in public, and some that are done privately. There are those aspects that take on a mercy focus and those that are focused on the pious nature of the faith. The key is keeping Christ at the center; too much focus in any one area affects the balance of life and of faith.⁹ This is in keeping with the idea of spiritual toning that Leonard Sweet spoke about in *A Cup of Coffee at the Soul Café*.¹⁰ In this model of ministry, Christians are called to actually live their faith 24/7/365! This is the essence of what being a military chaplain is all about: finding the means and the method, reaching beyond the typical “church” to be the embodied gospel, even to those who would not accept the gospel were it presented to them plainly.

A way to show one means of sharing the gospel with a diverse community present in the Sea Services is by describing the development of a Lenten devotional that was offered to the Camp Lejeune Naval Hospital community during my assignment there. It is important to keep in mind that the primary purpose for hospital chaplains, in general, and in that ministry setting, in particular, is to respond to crisis: Physical, emotional, professional and, occasionally, spiritual. So long as this fact is

⁹ Bishop John Shelby Spong, *A New Christianity for a New World: Why Traditional Faith is Dying & How a New Faith is Being Born*, San Francisco, CA: HarperSanFrancisco, 2001, page 227.

¹⁰ Leonard Sweet, *A Cup of Coffee at the Soul Café*, Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman, 1998, page 49.

kept in mind, the ministry is very rewarding. Lose sight of this essential fact, and the frustration of not being allowed to openly “win souls for Jesus” can make even the strongest prayer warrior weep.

The Journey of a Devotional

In the fall of 1991, Dr. Tom Brunkow, the senior pastor of University United Methodist Church (UMC) in College Park, Maryland, asked his congregation to contribute to the writing of a Lenten devotional that would be distributed to the entire congregation as a means of sharing the Lenten journey. I was one of the congregants who responded. The fruit of that effort was a great blessing, not only to those who wrote the reflections, but also to those who read them. The idea behind the devotional booklet was that every Christian has a story to tell and that we Christians are meant to share our stories, not only with our fellow pilgrims but with the whole world too. When we engage in this type of effort, we go from being hermits to sojourners to evangelists.

Fast forward to December 1996, where I had been appointed as a parish pastor in rural northeast Nebraska. I asked my congregations to take part in a similar effort, to share something about their faith that was important to them. The reaction was much the same as it had been at University UMC. At first, I heard things like “I can’t write.” “I don’t have anything worth saying.” “My faith is a private thing.” Many of the congregants in this rural parish were unaware that they had stories worth telling, and others could learn from those stories. They were unaware that they were already in ministry as storytellers and teachers. The only thing missing was a dynamic forum for this sharing and teaching. When these folks were encouraged to take an active voice in the proclaiming of their faith, they did so with a vigor that had not been seen for many years in those parts. No longer passive recipients of religion, they became vocal proponents of faith. Their faith transformed two typical churches into two potentially EPIC ones.

Fast-forward again to December 2001, this time to the Naval Hospital, Camp Lejeune (NHCL), North Carolina, where I was serving as a Naval Chaplain. Having been assigned to a place where the focus of ministry is on responding to crises of various sorts, I began to seek opportunities for expanding what chaplains were seen to offer the community. Naval Chaplains are charged with the

facilitating of religious expression and cannot be seen as promoting a particular religious agenda. That being said, I am, in fact, a Christian; my faith is part and parcel of the work I am doing. I knew, though, that in the military health-care environment, faith could not come across as being the primary focus of my work. I also knew that there were others like me throughout the command that understood their faith as being an important part of their lives and their work and sought the means to understand that faith in the context of a setting that at best is faith-neutral.

And so, when I began to think of how to address the spiritual needs of the community, I remembered the Lenten devotionals and proposed the idea to the Command Chaplain. In December 2001, with his approval, I set out to recruit the forty-six persons needed. It was important that the project not be seen as something that the Chaplains alone were doing, but was something that came from and was being given to the members of the command. In order to understand the challenge of recruiting from a faith community of this sort, it would be helpful to understand the nature of the community in question.

The first factor in addressing ministry in this context is that there are no regularly scheduled worship services in the hospital chapel, although there is a large assortment of worship opportunities available both on- an off-base, for those so inclined. In that setting, the opportunities for gathering as a community of faith, for teaching or for any activity for that matter which could be construed as contributing to the building of a faith community are rather limited. While the majority of the personnel would likely consider themselves Christian, the setting is a professional/medical one and coupled with the military aspects of life, the setting did not lend itself to communal expressions of a spiritual nature. The second factor to be addressed is that the hospital community at Camp Lejeune is a diverse one, comprised of 861 active-duty personnel, 395 civil service employees, 245 civilian contract employees, and 130 volunteers. The racial and ethnic composition of the command is complex and far exceeds that of the typical USAmerican neighborhood. And then there is the third factor, which is the location of the command. While the bulk of the personnel are assigned to the Naval Hospital aboard Camp Lejeune (NHCL), the command also has members at twelve satellite

clinics (spread over a large area, including Camp Lejeune and the surrounding county). In addition to those serving in North Carolina, there are some personnel at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, Kuwait, Iraq, Afghanistan, the Horn of Africa, and on ships headed to the points unknown.

It is important to note that the community with which I came into contact during the course of my ministry while at NHCL is perhaps even more diverse than the description shown in the preceding paragraph. The NHCL services more than 42,000 Marine Corps and Naval personnel affiliated with the Marine Corps Base at Camp Lejeune (MCBCL), the Marine Corps Air Station (MCAS)–New River, the families of these military members, as well as retirees in the surrounding communities and other civilians who are brought to the hospital through the Emergency Room at the NHCL. All in all, this is a community that is changing on a day-by-day basis. One never knows from one day to the next who will be encountered within the course of that day. This is to say that creating a community of faith is not as simple as starting an *EPIC* worship service or *Never Underestimating the Spirit* (NUTS). In the Navy, NUTS is normal.

I saw the hospital's Lenten devotional as an attempt at demonstrating the reality and vitality of that unusual faith community. It is not a church, even though there is a chapel. There is not a pastor, even though there are chaplains. There are no regularly scheduled services, even though services are held to meet the special and occasional needs of the people. For example, throughout the year, there are services in observance of special holidays, e.g., Ash Wednesday, the National Day of Prayer, All Saints' Day and Thanksgiving; there are funerals and weddings; there are retirement ceremonies. The hospital never closes. The opportunities to pray in the chapel or to meet with a chaplain and or other community members are an ongoing and ever-changing reality. I cannot stress the fact enough that this is a diverse religious community. While I am a Christian, I am also the chaplain for the Muslims, the Jews, the Wicca's, and others. My ministry to my denomination cannot be seen as exclusive or proprietary. This is truly "a Church for others."¹¹

¹¹ Walt Kallestad, *Turn Your Church Inside Out: Building a Community for Others*, Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 2001, page 9.

The recruiting of contributors had the same resistance as it had in the local church, with the added reluctance of personnel being of different ranks, occupations, and faith groups. The recruiting took place using email, the hospital's internal communications network, and the most reliable of all: face-to-face contact. Each year, I became a relentless pursuer of people who, at first, were reluctant to share their faith. Only after showing them examples of other devotionals and offering assurances of their ability to share their faith, was I able to gather the requisite forty-six contributors.

The Lenten devotional for 2003 expanded the impact of the previous year's devotional by reaching the community through the **EPIC**¹² model that had been introduced during the previous year. First, the faith community was able to continue to **E**xperience the empowerment of their faith by the sharing of that faith. In the military hospital system, there is not a "pastor" to direct the faith community, so much as there are chaplains who facilitate that community's faith journey. This devotional once again provided the means for a diverse group of people to share the depth of their Christian experience through the poems, prayers, and reflections in the devotional. The experience of faith sharing is critical to the prevention of atrophy or stagnation in the life of faith.

Second, the faith community **P**articipated in the creation of a living document, a devotional that changes with and through the community. By this, I mean that everything about the devotional changes from year to year: the people who write it, those who read it, the size of the community, and how the devotional is received. This is a transient community, one that is constantly being reformed. This devotional brings people together to participate in the sharing of the gospel message in a new form, different from any faith community formed previously. When a group of people takes an active role in telling their story, they are liberated. When the people see their story as coming from and being a part of the living work of the Living God, they are participants in the on-going creation of The Way.

¹² Leonard Sweet, McLaren, Brian, and Haselmayer, Jerry, *A is for Abductive: The Language of the Emerging Church*, Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman, 1998, page 111.

The faith community uses words to create an Image of God that comes from the life experiences of the community. The using of words, formed through time, and the using of pictures to accent these words creates a new image of God through the interaction of both the author and the reader. These images are the result of a new understanding brought about when the reader encounters a writer previously known in only one dimension. By bringing author and reader together in this fashion, the Word is transmitted in a new way; and, in turn, it becomes new again and again with each new sharing.

The Connective nature of this project is found in the creation of a faith community that was not aware of the fact that it was and is a faith community. Since the community did not come into being for the express purpose of worshipping God, any encounter with God is not worship as the world understands it, but as the church experiences it. By taking the project to the people, getting them to take ownership of its creation, and to realize that despite the fact that there are none of the trappings normally associated with organized religion, the community of persons that comprise the NHCL community is, in fact, a faith community. They were connected through the faith that does not recognize rank, position, ethnicity, gender or length of residence. This is a faith that is shared one on one, through any means possible and by any means necessary.

In 2003, the NHCL Lenten Devotional once again was written by an amazing collection of people. Once again, it was printed and distributed, although this time it went to a much wider audience. That year, we added the devotional to the web, increasing its potential to reach an exponentially wider audience. By using this means of sharing the faith, the Directorate of Pastoral Care was able to reach not only those persons associated with the hospital and constituent communities, but also personnel assigned throughout the world. Suddenly, people who had no relation to that particular community of faith became a part of this extended family of believers.

The project was a bit NUTS. After all, why ask people to risk exposing themselves and their faith outside of the NHCL “church?” Because that is where the mission field is! To take on such a task, which if it were not done would not reflect badly upon my Naval fitness reports, is NUTS! And yet,

it is because the people of God are out there, doing the work of taking care of people every day that I have to be out there too. To share this means of conveying the gospel twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, is to realize that while I was not preaching in a traditional sense, i.e., from a pulpit on a Sunday morning, I was proclaiming the Good News by taking the power of NUTS to people, empowering them to tell the story of what God has done and is doing in their lives with the world. Experiencing this living faith, Participating in the sharing of the Good News, creating a new Image for the faith and for God, and Connecting with this dynamic community is a crazy way to do ministry, but it sure is fun! While I do wear a uniform and am not seen by most in the command as a representative of only one church, I am a representative of the One God whose people need the assurance of God's presence, both in their personal space and in cyber space.

So, is it possible to do EPIC ministry while serving as a Navy chaplain? Just what does happen when church is done outside of and beyond the box? Each spring, I send to my bishop a report that provides the details of what I am doing as an ordained pastor and as a Navy chaplain, in support of my being re-appointed to this extension ministry. It details how I am being faithful to my ordination vows as a United Methodist Elder and to my oath of office as a Naval officer. I am functioning as a pastor, as a Naval officer, a chaplain, and as a Christian, 24/7/365.

The question may be fairly asked, "could what I am doing be considered 'doing church?'" This is a fair question, since there are no new members being assimilated; no evangelism is permitted; certainly, no overt missionary activity is allowed. However, there are sacraments being offered; worship is being conducted; and there is a keen emphasis on ecumenical activity and pluralism.¹³ Church is being done beyond the box, because in this setting, at least, church is what the people make it. It is being made anew every day.

Reports such as the one I send to my bishop are more than a listing of events and raw numbers. They represent the lives that are transformed because the church cared enough to engage them where

¹³ Lecture notes. Theological School of Drew University, LOGON 902, Spring 2003, Week one.

they were. The report details the efforts of one pastor/chaplain to meet the needs of people in ways that were meaningful to the people. This meaningful ministry is not just in the comfort zone of this chaplain, but also in the lives of the people with whom I am in ministry: the denomination that ordained me, the institution that commissioned me, the Corps that assigns me, and the God that loves me... “church beyond the box” and engaged in the lives of people—24/7/365.

Issues of theology, worship styles, politics, and the ever-changing dynamics of working with the diverse collection of people that makes up the Sea Service community will continue to challenge Navy chaplains in the years to come. I believe that it is imperative that the experience I had during my first tour as a Navy chaplain not be endured by others in the Corps, if the Corps is to have a future that exemplifies not only the Navy’s core values, but that of our common calling to serve God’s people.¹⁴ What sort of Navy Chaplain Corps will emerge to lead the Sea Services community in the years to come? The Religious Requirements Oversight Council (RROC) set out to offer to all Navy chaplains a viable understanding of what it will mean to be in ministry.

“The RROC engaged in a dynamic discussion of transformational ministry, the state of the Chaplain Corps and the most effective means of meeting the ministerial needs of the People of God in the Sea Services.”¹⁵ The RROC offers four initiatives that focus upon changing ministry to an operational focus:

- Facilitate operational readiness by transforming all Sea Service ministry.
- Enhance operational readiness through spiritual and moral/ethical advisement and training.
- Enhance operational readiness of combatants through holistic renewal and transformational ministry.
- Transformational alignment of all religious ministry to an operational emphasis.¹⁶

Regardless of the faith perspective of the individual chaplain, these guidelines offer a viable roadmap for engaging the Sea Services with what we do best, serve people while serving God. From my

¹⁴ See Appendix C, “One Navy Chaplain’s Experience,” page 224.

¹⁵ United States Navy Chaplain Corps’ Strategic Initiatives September 03 to September 07, 18 September 2003.

¹⁶ Ibid.

perspective, as a Christian, it is exciting for me to imagine a Chaplain Corps, which might personify the message of this amazing paraphrase of the Sermon on the Mount.

When you enter into an Intra-religious dialogue,
do not think beforehand what you have to believe.

When you witness to your faith, do not defend yourself or your vested interests,
sacred as they may appear to you. Do like the birds in the skies:
They sing and fly and do not defend their music or their beauty.

When you dialogue with somebody, look at your partner as a revelatory experience,
as you would – and should – look at the lilies in the fields.

When you engage in Intra-religious dialogue, try to first remove the beam that is your own eye
before removing the speck in the eye of your neighbor.

Blessed are you when you do not feel self-sufficient while being in dialogue.

Blessed are you when you trust the other because you trust in Me.

Blessed are you when you face misunderstandings from your own community or others
for the sake of your fidelity to Truth.

Blessed are you when you do not give up your convictions,
and yet you do not set them up as absolute norms.

Woe unto you, you theologians and academicians, when you dismiss what others say
because you find it embarrassing or not sufficiently learned.

Woe unto you, you practitioners of religions, when you do not listen to the cries of the little ones.
Woe unto you, you religious authorities, because you prevent change and (re)conversion.

Woe unto you, religious people, because you monopolize religion and stifle the Spirit,
which blows where and how she wills.”¹⁷

¹⁷ Raimon Panikkar, *The Intra-religious Dialogue*, New York: Paulist Press, 1999, page 1.