

APPENDIX C

ONE NAVY CHAPLAIN'S EXPERIENCE

“Vocati ad Servitium” (Called to Serve)

From the Navy Chaplain Corps seal

My first tour as a Navy chaplain has been a wild ride.¹ I first encountered some of the “tension” within the Chaplain Corps at the Chaplains’ school. I found at the Chaplains’ school everything I had been looking for in terms of diversity that was lacking in my parish setting. The chance to work with people from different traditions, to be part of an ecumenical team, to experience ministry in a new and dynamic way, all this was present at the school in Newport, Rhode Island. And yet, there was present an element that didn’t like women in ministry or who had never worked with anyone outside of their faith group let alone other faith. Still, I thought that I had chosen wisely and would find a welcoming group of colleagues at my first duty station, MCAS – Iwakuni.²

When I arrived there in September 1999, I immediately encountered the rift that exists between some chaplains. In Iwakuni, it was a chasm. My first command chaplain at Marine Aircraft Group-12 (MAG-12)³, Chaplain R., told me that my involvement in the station chapel should be as active as I felt welcomed to share. At first, I found the style of Protestant worship refreshingly different, a welcome change from where I had lived in Nebraska. Then I began to notice two issues that would become major problems for me. First was the “Liturgical Protestant” service that was conducted by a Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod chaplain who refused to allow non-Missouri Lutherans to receive communion. I understood the chaplain’s denominational requirements while struggling to understand the withholding of spiritual nourishment from some of God’s children. Second was the “General Protestant” service that was an abbreviated version of the Gospel Service, both conducted by the senior Protestant chaplain, from the Pentecostal Holiness tradition. This chaplain was an outstanding musician and led a vibrant and joyous Gospel service. That his attention to the other Protestants was not as energetic would be an understatement.

By November 1999, I had already been told several times that what happened at the chapel was not my business and if I wanted to “help” I could, but that it would be done only in keeping with the comfort level of the station chaplains. Initially, this was a minor issue that would become a serious one on All Saints Sunday 1999. I was asked to preach that week and was excited about being able to share with the community something from the liturgical traditions. I’m a member of the Order of St. Luke, the liturgical renewal society with The United Methodist Church and

¹ In March 2001, a senior Navy chaplain asked for my understanding of my first tour as a Navy chaplain. What follows is the letter I sent in response. I have edited out the names of the other people involved.

² Marine Corps Air Station – Iwakuni (Japan)

³ Marine Aircraft Group 12

love the worship experience in all its dynamic complexity. I had been approached many times in the short time I had been in Iwakuni by service members and their families about “doing something” about the lack of diversity in the main Protestant worship service. I submitted a service that was rejected by the station chaplain because among other reasons that it included communion by intinction and the Great Thanksgiving. Deciding that the needs of the people came first, I participated in the service and when the time came for communion, the station chaplain had one of the gospel service “ministers” (a lay person) stand up, read a passage from the New Testament, and then the gospel service deacons distributed the elements. I was stunned that he would be so callous in his disregard for the needs of so many members of the community for whom All Saints and communion are major events. I began to pull back from the chapel, attending, but not taking part in the conducting of services that I felt were poorly planned and geared toward a “vanilla” style of Christianity. Trying to avoid becoming the “issue,” I chose to focus on the needs of the unit to which I had been assigned.

When the new command chaplain for MAG-12 arrived in December 1999, I was told to “lay low” and he would deal with the chapel. When the issue came to a head in February 2000, it was some reluctance that the station chaplains allowed me to offer a liturgical style of worship. I tried to offer something new, a Saturday evening service, which I called “Saturday Night ‘Live.’” The idea was to break away from the baggage, the negative image that the station chapel community had come to associate with the term “liturgical” and with the Sunday morning chapel program. This service began on Ash Wednesday despite no announcement or advertising by the chapel. I was told when I tried to advertise that this was the chapel’s business, and I was to stay out of the promotional area. While initially optimistic, the service was unable to establish itself and the service was discontinued following Pentecost after consulting with the MAG-12 chaplain. It seemed that what the community wanted was not something new, but something familiar at a familiar day and time. This was not to be permitted by the station chaplains. Chaplain T. encouraged me to wait until the current station chaplains had left before resuming my efforts in this area.

From the beginning of my time there, I had been encouraged to work within the unit to which I was assigned and to leave the chapel affairs to the chapel staff. My first two Fitness Reports (FITREP) were marked “early promote.” The previous CO and XO were supportive and complimentary of my efforts in support of their people. Despite their support and the support of other commanders, the new XO of MAG-12 (as of June 2000) told me that I was not a good chaplain because I was not attending the worship service he did. He explained that it was important to him to “see his chaplain.” When I said I didn’t go to church just to be seen, he replied, “That is exactly what I expect you to do.” The MAG-12 XO also indicated that I was out of line for attending Catholic Mass instead of being with the people he felt that I was sent to be with, the Protestants.

In July 2000, a new CO arrived at MAG-12 and a change occurred when after attending two services at the chapel, he announced that he was unhappy with the chapel program and wanted me to “fix it.” I explained that I didn’t have that kind of influence, he replied, “Well, I do.” One month later, the MAG-12 command chaplain and the MAG-12 XO got into a heated argument,

which was followed three days later by the MAG-12 command chaplain forcing another meeting with the station command chaplain which in turn led to a supposed “break-through” between the station and the operational chaplains. Despite this meeting, nothing changed. No meetings between chaplains, no cooperative RMT⁴ training, and no change in the manner in which the liturgical Protestants were being care for.

One month after the sudden change in tactics in September 2000, I was summoned into the CO’s office and told that he had lost confidence in my ability to function as his chaplain and relieved me of my duties. I was told to report to the chapel the next morning. When I explained that the chapel had been the source of spiritual abuse to myself, my wife, and many others in the community, I was told by the CO that my statement indicated that I had not done a good enough job in communicating my needs. There was never any indication from the MAG-12 CO, XO, or command chaplain that I was deficient in any respect and no attempt was ever made to work with me in finding a solution to the issues in the community or to address my alleged shortcomings. I reported to the chapel. My office at MAG-12 was cleared out, my email account deleted, and I was TAD⁵ orders, “until something permanent can be worked out.”

For three months, beginning with my reporting to the chapel on September 27th, I was confined to an empty classroom and allowed no pastoral responsibilities save for an occasional counseling session. Eventually the two Protestant chaplains that had been here at the station chapel left, one to another duty station and the other has left the Navy, and I was allowed to have a real office. I have not been permitted any worship opportunities in the chapel at any time since my arrival at the chapel. I have enjoyed working with the two chaplains who took the place of the previous chaplain and only wish they had been here sooner. I have continued to offer an active ministry presence in this community, to present the morning AFN⁶ radio devotionals, providing counseling, and suicide awareness briefings.

What all this will mean in just a few short months when I have an extension for active duty is still to be determined. I have always felt that I have something to offer the Sea Services, but it does not appear that at the present time, at any rate, that the Sea Services feels the same way. I don’t know if I will be given an assignment in order to re-set the clock or one to make time until my initial 3-year commitment concludes in June 2002. I know that my leaving will not help any Marine, Sailor, or family member.

I am prepared to stay and serve for many years or to leave and return to the parish. If I stay, I hope that I will be allowed to demonstrate that creative ministry is possible, that integrity counts for something, that the Sea Services are prepared to give more than lip service to the notion that “We take care of our own,” and that pluralism is more than just a nice way of saying, “It’s my turn to run the show and if you’re not being fed, tough.” If I leave the Navy after this tour, it will be with the firm conviction that I have acted with integrity and honor and in keeping with the lofty goals of the Chaplains Corps.

⁴ Religious Ministry Team

⁵ Temporary Active Duty

⁶ Armed Forces Network

I have gotten so much out of this experience. Even with all the pain and anguish that my wife and I have endured for much of this tour, there are highlights and positives. So too however, are the examples of hostility, indifference, and arrogance that have made this time so painful. Is there a Navy out there where living one's faith will not cost one's soul? Is there a system that nurtures the ones taking care of the people instead of their careers? Is there a chance that anything good can come of this experience?

I am an ordained elder, a member in full connection in the Nebraska Conference of The United Methodist Church. I have two units of Clinical Pastoral Education, a Master of Education, and a Master of Divinity. I have the credentials and the experience that could have made a greater difference here or elsewhere in the Navy. I believe in my calling and in the ministry that is needed here and elsewhere in the Sea Services. When I think of the time, sleep, and emotional energy that I have lost dealing with this situation, I weep. I care deeply for the people I am serving; I only wish I had been allowed to serve them with my whole self.

I must apologize if I have gone into too much detail. There has been precious little opportunity to discuss what has happened this last year. I am grateful to Chaplain ___ at III MEF⁷ who told my wife and I that what happened to me should never have happened and that this wasn't my fault. I am also grateful to Chaplain ____ at the NPS⁸ in Monterey, who has been an invaluable mentor and guide through this difficult period. I am also appreciative of the support given to my wife and I from my denomination. This has been a challenging time in my ministry, and I know that I will take much from this experience, which includes the good as well as the bad, and will continue to apply those lessons wherever I might serve next.

Charles J. Alkula
LT, CHC, USNR
9 March 2001
Iwakuni, Japan⁹

⁷ Third Marine Expeditionary Force (Okinawa)

⁸ Naval Professional School

⁹ One month later, on April 11, 2001, during Holy Week, my wife and I left Iwakuni, Japan for the last time. Due to the intervention and counsel of some senior chaplains, I chose to remain in the Navy and see if indeed the clock could be reset. I was assigned to Naval Hospital at Camp Lejeune, NC and enjoyed a very successful and rewarding tour in that setting. I am now assigned to a chapel in Europe, some three and one-half years removed from the events described above. I am still in the Navy, still providing ministry, and with confidence in God's amazing grace am looking forward to the next chapter in my ministry in the Sea Services.