



Canadian Armed Forces' Chaplains as a Primary Source of Spiritual Resiliency

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Introduction

In light of the presumption that Canadian Armed Forces' (CAF) chaplains are primarily responsible for offering religious services to members of the Canadian Defence Team, their role as key agents of support for resiliency resulting in more psychologically equipped and ethically conscious members, is often overlooked. There is no question that maintaining a resilient military is crucial to the success of any military task or mission.¹ In peacetime or during an operation, chaplains are instrumental in assuring spiritual resiliency is maintained, not only through crisis interventions, but also through a proactive and deliberate ministry of presence. This capability is reflected in the Chaplain Branch's strategic plan, which emphasizes the necessity and obligation of unit chaplains

to foster the spiritual needs of all CAF members, regardless of any formal religious affiliations.

It is no secret that the religious associations of Canadians are changing. In light of this phenomenon, and coupled with the new financial realities that require rethinking the economic feasibility of some trades in the CAF, some have called into question the necessity of maintaining the CAF chaplaincy at its current capacity. After all, the argument goes, if chaplains are primarily focused upon delivering religious services to CAF members, would it not be more economically wise to simply contract out these tasks to civilian clergy? This question is rooted in a misunderstanding of the *raison d'être* of chaplains.

Despite an obvious increase of secularism in Canadian society, resulting in a lessened influence of traditional religious communities,² *interest in* and *desire for* spirituality has not dissipated.

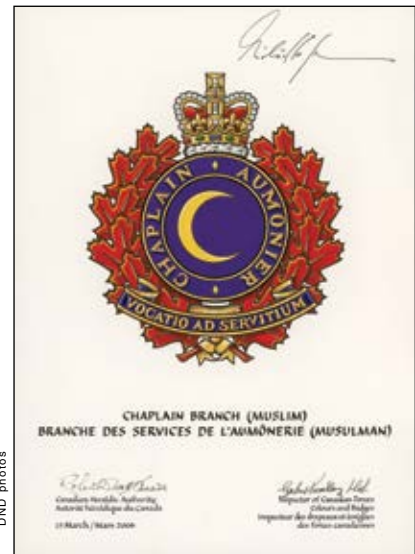
Although the growing number of Canadians who claim no religious affiliation may be seen by some as an indicator that religion itself is waning in significance to Canadians, religious and demographic research has found that spirituality and religion remain important.³

The CAF chaplaincy offers a "special support capability,"⁴ including spiritual care, pastoral counselling, spiritual direction, and support, which is indispensable to the operability of members of the three elements of the Canadian military and their civilian Defence Team members.



reference to the notion by references such as, "...if something were to happen..." they refused to name the word 'death' in their presentations, believing it to be detrimental to the coping mechanisms of military personnel and their families. To their surprise, several spouses voiced their sincere appreciation for the chaplain's blatant honesty. He recalls one military spouse saying: "Padre, you say what all of us are already thinking... I felt a load come off of my shoulders the instant you spoke about death." She continued by expressing how the hesitancy by other military representatives to speak openly about death appeared to betray their own fears about the notion, resulting in a lack of credibility and decreased confidence in the system by CAF spouses. In short, openly speaking about the issue had the opposite effect than what was expected by some. The chaplain talking freely about matters of God, life, and death, resulted in spouses feeling stronger, not weaker. Incidentally, for this same reason, chaplains are mandated to be present at Next of Kin (NOK) notifications, while informing a family member of the death or injury of their loved ones.

In moments like these, chaplains realize the profound importance of their ministry to the operation of the CAF. Often, people, including chaplains, believe that the Chaplain mandate is to protect the religious freedoms and rights of CAF members, or to assure that their religious expectations are being accommodated. In a time of budget restrictions, it would appear that a chaplain trade that simply existed in order to provide religious services would be difficult to justify. However, my argument is that this role is secondary to a chaplain's mandate. Chaplains are hired primarily



Chaplains' Role in Fostering Resiliency

While serving as a rear party chaplain at Canadian Armed Forces Base Valcartier, Québec, during Operation Athena, one chaplain participated in various briefings to spouses of CAF members who were deploying. The intention was to strengthen their ability to manage the psychological and practical stresses during the lengthy period of absence of their partners. During the chaplain's briefings, he addressed the question of the reality of death and injury during a mission. Many of his non-chaplain colleagues believed that opening up a dialogue on the subject matter was unwise and dangerous. Although they made

to spiritually support a member's resiliency, since, where spiritual resiliency is maintained, military personnel are more effective, stable, secure, and ethical in carrying out their tasks, whether in times of war or peace.⁵ When people are spiritually resilient, they reflect more hope, optimism, meaning, and purpose in their lives, and are better equipped to practice their vocations.⁶ Moreover, recent studies have shown that addressing a person's spiritual concerns is often central to the process of healing from Operational Stress.⁷ In addition, individual spiritual resiliency is a contributing factor to healthy group/unit morale.



Reuters RTF3YY4

A Canadian pastor welcomes wounded soldiers to Ramstein AFB, Germany.

Although chaplains are not the only significant agents in affecting spiritual resiliency, they are, according to their trade, the most appropriate facilitators of it. Due to their accessibility by and to all levels of the Chain of Command (CoC), their specialized abilities through chaplain-specific counselling and intervention techniques, and, in many cases, their ministry of presence uniquely on the ‘front-line’ as helping professionals, chaplains are indispensable to the Canadian Armed Forces’ operability. For this reason, they are a force multiplier. No other trade can duplicate their capabilities or reproduce the results of their efforts. For instance, other helping professionals, such as Mental Health representatives, are obliged to record interviews with clients in great detail. Although a required procedure in effectively achieving the goals of their trade, this process often dissuades members from seeking mental and emotional support or direction, due to concerns with respect to career implications. Unique to the chaplain trade is the

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The usefulness of chaplains in the aftermath of a crisis intervention, and their role in the healing process remains undisputed. However, they also play a key role in equipping members for those critical events, making them more effective in all their tasks and duties. Establishing resiliency is as relevant in a post-war setting with no foreseeable major deployments in sight, as it is during a major high-stress operation.

A Definition of Spiritual Resiliency

What is resilience? It has been described as an individual’s ability to withstand the effects of trauma or disaster, whether by having the capacity (a) to remain unaffected, (b) to readily bounce back from whatever effects there are, and/or (c) to bounce back to a new way of being that is shaped positively more so than negatively.¹³

chaplain’s ability to gain the trust of members, due to the development of personal relationships, *proximity to*, and *presence amongst*, the troops in a unit. Moreover, the most effective interventions often occur in an informal setting. Because of the stigma often associated with mental health,

...a chaplain offers military personnel virtually the only confidential and non-judgemental resource for emotional and spiritual help outside the normal chain of command.⁸

Accordingly, there is no stigma attached to talking to the padre. Padres are simply neutral brothers- or sisters-in-arms—other soldiers by appearance and behaviour, but separate from the operations-oriented aspects of the military culture. There is no need ‘to go to’ the padre. He or she is already there with the personnel...⁹

Visiting a chaplain is often considered to be a ‘safer’ first option when a member is unsure of the best course of action to follow. The chaplain then functions as a filter in the subsequent referral process. In other words, the chaplain is often the first step in a member seeking help. One soldier states: “You have a problem and you talk to a social worker.... There is more of a sense that (chaplains are) a normal part of your life.”¹⁰ Part of this can be attributed to:

...closeness to and support of personnel (which) suggest they may be an important resource for helping some people overcome the sense of alienation one can experience as a member of a large impersonal institution...¹¹

This alleviates a member’s feelings of a lack of normalcy and isolation in their struggles. The Chaplain Branch’s strategic plan highlights the reason underlying Chaplain support and care for CAF members and their families: to reinforce their spiritual aptitudes,¹² i.e., to make them more resilient.



DND photo AR2007-T01-1-17 by Master Corporal Bruno Turcotte

Chaplains gather at a repatriation ceremony.

Although all people have the capacity to be resilient, it needs to be developed as it involves behaviours, thoughts and actions that can be learned over time... Building resilience — the ability to adapt well to unexpected changes and events — can help us manage stress and feelings of anxiety and uncertainty related to war... We all can develop resilience.¹⁴

In its most general terms, one could call it ‘strength’ or ‘inner strength,’ which derives its source of energy, momentum, and power from the human spirit, soul, and psyche. Often, the influence of one trusted and faithful helping professional is the catalyst to a member fully harnessing this inner capacity rooted in spirituality.

We cope with crisis and adversity by making meaning of our experience: linking it to our social world, to our cultural and spiritual beliefs, to our multigenerational past, and to our hopes and dreams for the future.¹⁵

Naturally, resiliency is a difficult variable to measure. Quantifying spiritual resiliency is an even greater challenge as it touches on questions of a very personal and subjective nature. However, its non-empirical nature does not preclude its importance. In one study, it was determined that over 75 percent of Americans surveyed wanted to be able to express spiritual concerns to their physicians and helping professionals.¹⁶ The Canadian context may indicate a lower, but equally significant statistic.¹⁷ What is spiritual resiliency? Some have summarized it as “positive emotions [that] make life worth living.”¹⁸ If quality of life is defined as a person’s overall level of functioning, including “psychological

well-being, social relationships and an ability to independently care for physical needs,”¹⁹ then spiritual resiliency is a key agent in achieving that goal. After all, “belief systems [are] the heart and soul of resilience,”²⁰ since [b]eliefs are the lenses through which we view the world as we move through life, influencing what we do or do not see and what we make of our perceptions.²¹ “Beliefs come to define our reality,”²² and they set the parameters of how we interpret, manage, and react to the most difficult and stressful parts of our lives. Although a belief system may be ‘part and parcel’ with a religious system, they are not the same thing.

Belief systems broadly encompass values, convictions, attitudes, biases, and assumptions, which coalesce to form a set of basic premises that trigger emotional responses, inform decisions, and guide actions.²³

Beliefs, then, are the foundation for spiritual resiliency, and are not a specific possession of people who practice organized religion. For instance, active church goers or members of CAF chapels are not the only ones seeking chaplain services. Chaplains provide service, ministry, and support to all members of the CAF. “Spirituality involves an active investment in internalized beliefs that bring a sense of meaning, wholeness, and connection with others.”²⁴ Personal faith offers people the ability to endure hardships, and to move forward in light of adversity and difficulties. Spirituality *may* or *may not* be experienced within formal religious structures. For this reason, prioritizing a ministry in chapels can potentially have an alienating affect upon those who do not attend. In fact, even the Chaplain Branch’s strategic plan demonstrates a noticeable shift away from chapel life to a ministry of presence

in light of the emphasis upon the “serving all” part of its motto. A ministry of presence expressed at the unit level connects the chaplain to both those who do practice formal religion and to those that do not. Ministry in chapels and multi-faith centres is still a valid and important source of spiritual resilience to many CAF members, and, for that reason, ought not to be neglected. However, the chaplain has a greater impact upon overall resiliency in his or her units through counselling and a ministry of presence, due his or her access to a greater pool of personnel of various religious and spiritual convictions. For instance, during training, chaplains are encouraged to engage in faith questions, in order to assist members, regardless of their particular belief system, to draw strength and support from it, utilizing it as a resource in countering fear and as a motivator in behaving ethically. “One cannot replace faith by courage, but neither can one describe faith without courage.”²⁵ Consequently, by teaching and example, chaplains are instrumental in strengthening a member’s overall performance, and assuring that they are well equipped to overcome the inevitable crisis and dangers in their military life:

...[since] affirming beliefs—that we are valued and have potential to succeed—can help us to rally in times of crisis....Some beliefs are more useful than others, depending on our situation.²⁶

I have begun to explore the idea that the hardship and privations of war (among other human existential trials) often precipitate a spiritual experience.....In light of this reality and the fact that those in theatre are especially sensitive and receptive to such such spiritual movements and existential meetings with God it seems altogether crucial that padres continue to circulate among our troops and to offer their comfort and guidance to those who find themselves overwhelmed with the trauma of war... One wouldn’t want to go too long without the comfort and communion of the Lord’s ministers in this sort of scenario.²⁷

There has been hesitancy among some to recognize and encourage an increase in the role of chaplain service due to contemporary doubts regarding the societal and personal benefits of religion. Most of these criticisms are rooted in misunderstandings on the goals and role of religion. For instance:

...[t]he secularist paradigm sees religion as a major factor in causing and intensifying conflicts around the world because religious ‘absolutizes’ and sacralises differences over issues, leaving little room for compromise.²⁸

Accordingly, the CAF may be uncomfortable with the specific term “spiritual resilience,” as opposed to resilience in general. Yet,

although religion may appear to play a part in some international conflicts, there is a tendency to isolate religion from the cultural picture. For example, ethnicity has proven to be a greater threat to political stability than religion. If one controls for the variable of religion in any number of current global conflicts, war still presides. Therefore, religion cannot be the main cause. Admittedly, theocracies, such as those in the Middle East, complicate one’s ability to make such determinations. Yet, again, the sweeping claim that spiritual beliefs are the cause for most wars is unfounded. Over the last decade, the CAF has demonstrated a new appreciation for the positive contribution of religious and spiritual beliefs in efforts at

establishing peace at the strategic, operational, and tactical levels. This is most concretely displayed in recent developments in policy regarding the engagement of chaplains in religious dialoguing.²⁹

Certainly, just as any gift is susceptible to abuse, religion is no exception: “[r]eligious beliefs may become harmful if they are held too narrowly, rigidly, or punitively.”³⁰ And yet, even in the case of religious extremism or abuse, a chaplain is the most appropriate person to engage in these issues. Through personal relationships of trust with members, a chaplain is often the only member in the unit who can address these challenges, acting as an agent of change in transforming those beliefs for the good of the team. This is particularly evident when discussing ethical behaviour and conduct as part of the CAF effort at fostering healthy leadership in all military environments.



DND photo AR2008-K108-66 by Master Corporal Karl McKay

Chaplains are key players in facilitating their client’s ability to maximize the utilization of their most ‘useful’ beliefs to their trade and vocation as military personnel. When chaplains counsel, they affirm beliefs and help people access and harness that inner strength for the sake of their individual and common good. Whether their faith is in God as traditionally defined, or simply to a higher source of power, is irrelevant to the process. Through the technique of coaching, our chaplains are instructed to help others utilize their own sources of hope, instead of implicitly encouraging them to embrace those of the chaplain. The development of this capacity to find strength in one’s own belief system is particularly crucial for the mental well-being of those who work in stressful and dangerous environments. A former social worker for the Canadian Armed Forces, Lieutenant-Commander (ret’d) R.J. Nurnberger, presently conducting doctoral research at the University of Ottawa, observes:

A Positive Correlation between Spiritual Resiliency and Ethical Behaviour

Spiritual resiliency (in contrast with resilience in general) not only enables military members to be ‘stronger,’ it also results in a more ethically-inclined individual. Many of our foundational beliefs are rooted in religion and spirituality. These beliefs inform our ethical world views. Although religions are organized belief systems that are expressed in various moralities, all of them hold virtually identical ethical norms. Those with strong religious and spiritual beliefs are more inclined to act ethically and in accordance with the principles of the military ethos. Gratefulness, forgiveness, and altruism are only some of the ethical consequences of a spiritual resiliency.³¹ In short, spirituality provides meaning to vocation, resulting in a more ethical person.³²

Operationally, where spiritual resiliency has been fostered, there has been a direct impact and indirect influence upon the military system and mission, due to the positive correlation between leadership qualities and ethical principles.³³ Through the support of chaplain ministry strengthening a member’s ethical inclinations, the leadership qualities and principles of efficiency, trustworthiness, good judgement, putting forth a good example,³⁴ perseverance, self-discipline, and sacrifice are further developed, resulting in



The Chaplain-General, Brigadier-General Éric Doiron, holds one of the Haitian girls that was relocated to a local orphanage during Operation Hestia, 10 February 2010.

all for which the CAF strives: higher mission success, external adaptability, member well-being, and commitment.³⁵

The Operational Importance of Chaplains ‘on the front line’

One need not look far to discover a plethora of examples regarding the key role of chaplains in maintaining a high level of spiritual resiliency among members through their presence with them ‘in the field.’ They have been referred to as “agents of trust” by both foreigners and CAF members, primarily due to their non-combatant status in the case of the former, and their ability to subside ‘outside’ the CoC, in the case of the latter. That is, unit chaplains have direct access to any level in their CoC. The success of operational chaplains in building trusting relationships³⁶ has resulted in new efforts of utilizing their skills in Religious Leader Engagement opportunities during an operation, as well as a heightened role in training and educating during the pre- and post-deployment phases (i.e., through Chaplain Hours, seminars, and advising the CoC in matters of culture and religion). Furthermore, there are innumerable examples in history of the mere presence of a chaplain being an indisputable source of inspiration to individual and group morale, as “...the goal of most Great War chaplains was the front.”³⁷ The modern context has not changed this emphasis. Even as recently as Afghanistan, chaplain presence ‘outside the wire’ was not simply highly appreciated, but considered essential to operational success and stability, and not only by believers.³⁸ Even soldiers who were agnostic found the symbolic presence of the Divine a necessary motivating element in undertaking and justifying their stressful and difficult jobs. Spiritual beliefs transformed their perception of the facts in a positive way, with a noticeable impact on morale.³⁹ The simple presence of chaplains was a source of support to a member’s level of resiliency, and a visible call to act ethically.⁴⁰

Conclusion

The impression that the chaplain’s primary goal is to provide religious services to CAF members, public prayers, chapel services, and so on, is difficult to justify when surveying the daily and weekly tasks of any unit chaplain. In addition, in light of the decline of interest in organized religious services, other, equally important duties of chaplains have become more apparent. A future scenario in which the majority of military personnel practice a form of spirituality which is less connected to traditional faith groups, does not imply that the chaplain role is less essential to the military system. Their role in supporting and developing spiritual resiliency within members has always been primary, although, until the Chaplain Branch’s strategic plan was tabled, it was often understated. Spiritual resiliency has a direct bearing upon the value that CAF members place on their vocations, their ability to stay strong under pressure, their capacity to effectively prepare for and cope with stresses, and their desire to behave ethically, whether in peace time or during a major operation. An effective, strong and resilient CAF and leadership cannot underestimate the role of military chaplaincy in its support, not only as a Special Material Expert in matters of religion and spirituality, but also as an equally respected member of the team, engaging with fellow military personnel ‘on the front line.’



Chaplain Nigel Tully and Commander Jason Boyd, the Commanding Officer of HMCS *Regina*, prepare to lay a wreath at the onboard Remembrance Day ceremony during Operation *Artemis* while deployed in the Arabian Sea, 11 November 2012.

NOTES

1. See US study on the relationship and correlation between trauma exposure and OSI and resiliency in Kimberly T. Green, Patrick S. Calhoun, Michelle F. Dennis, the Mid-Atlantic Mental Illness Research, Education and Clinical Center Workgroup, and Jean C. Beckham (2010) "Exploration of the resilience construct in posttraumatic stress disorder severity and functional correlates in military combat veterans who have served since September 11, 2001" in *Journal of Clinical Psychiatry*, Vol.71, Issue 7, (2010), pp. 823-830.
2. *Called to Serve: A Strategy for the Canadian Forces Chaplaincy*, 2008, p. 1.
3. *Ibid.*
4. *Ibid.*, p. 2.
5. See also Joanne Benham Rennick's, *Religions in the Ranks*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2011), pp. 168-169, for further discussion on the preoccupation of religious and spiritual questions among military members who claim not to be religious.
6. Harold G. Koenig, *Faith & Mental Health: Religious Resources for Healing*, (West Conshohocken, Toronto: Templeton Foundation Press, 2005), pp. 54-58.
7. Joanne Benham Rennick, "Caring for all in a New Context: A Response to 'The Chaplaincy in War and Peace,'" in Michael L. Hadley and Leslie A. Kenny (Eds.) *Chaplaincy in War and Peace: Ethical Dilemmas of Conscience and Conflicting Professional Roles in Military Chaplaincy in Canada*, (Victoria, BC: Centre for Studies in Religion and Society, 2006), p.123.
8. *Ibid.*
9. *Ibid.*, p.124.
10. Rennick, *Religion in the Ranks*, p. 78.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 77.
12. *Called to Serve*, p. 7.
13. Grant H. Brenner, Daniel H. Bush, Joshua Moses (Eds.), *Creating Spiritual and Psychological Resilience: Integrating Care in Disaster Relief Work* (New York: Routledge, ND), p. 190.
14. "Resilience in a time of war." *APA Help Center*, American Psychological Association. ND, Web 3 July, 2013.
15. Froma Walsh, *Strengthening Family Resilience*, (New York: The Guilford Press, 2006), p. 49.
16. *Ibid.*, p. 76.
17. Rennick, *Religion in the Ranks*, p. 168.
18. Koenig, p. 50.
19. *Ibid.*, p. 58.
20. Walsh, p. 49.
21. See L. Wright, W.L. Watson, & J.M. Bell, *Beliefs: The heart of healing in families and illness*, (New York: Basic Books, 1996).
22. Walsh, p. 49.
23. See Wright *et al.*
24. Walsh, p. 73.
25. Paul Tillich, *Dynamics of Faith*, (New York: Harper and Brothers Publishers, 1957), p.103.
26. Walsh, p. 50.
27. Lieutenant-Commander (ret'd) R.J. Nurnberger, personal communication, 6 May 2013.
28. Gerard F Powers, "Religion and Peacebuilding," in Daniel Philpott & Gerard F. Powers (Eds.) *Strategies of Peace: Transforming Conflict in a Violent World*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), p. 319.
29. See S.K. Moore, *Military Chaplains as Agents of Peace: Religious Leader Engagement in Conflict and Post-conflict Environments*, (Lanham, MD: Lexington books, 2013).
30. Walsh, p. 74.
31. Koenig, pp. 60-64.
32. Richard A. Gabriel, *The Warrior's Way: A Treatise on Military Ethics* (Kingston, ON: Canadian Defence Academy Press, 2007), p. 152.
33. Daniel Legacé-Roy, "Ethics" in Colonel Bernd Horn and Dr. Robert W. Walker (Eds.), *The Military Leadership Handbook* (Toronto: Dundurn Press and Canadian Defence Academy Press, 2008), p. 271.
34. *Leadership in the Canadian Forces: Doctrine*, (Canadian Defence Academy – Canadian Forces Leadership Institute, 2005), p. 19.
35. *Ibid.*, p. 4.
36. S.K. Moore, "Operational Chaplains: Establishing Trust with the Religious Other through the Building of Relation," in Lieutenant-Colonel Jeff Stouffer and Craig Leslie Mantle (Eds.), *Leveraging Trust: A Force Multiplier for Today*, (Kingston, ON: Canadian Defence Academy Press, 2008), pp. 79-80.
37. Duff Crerar, *Padres in No Man's Land* (Montréal and Kingston, ON: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1995), p. 137.
38. Alex Bouzane, "Leadership Lessons Learned," in Dr. Emily Spencer (Ed.), *Grass Roots: Perspectives of Senior Non-Commissioned Officers on Operations*, (Kingston, ON: Canadian Defence Academy Press, 2008), p. 46.
39. See Harold Ristau, *At Peace with War: A Chaplain's Meditations from Afghanistan* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2012), as well as Barry D. Rowland, *The Padre* (Scarborough, ON: Consolidated Amethyst Communications Inc., 1982).
40. See Albert Fowler, *Peacetime Padres: Canadian Protestant Military Chaplains 1945-1995*, (St. Catharines, ON: Vanwell Publishing Ltd., 1996), pp. 177-224.