



# Faith in a Foxhole

**Mervyn Wynne Jones**  
considers the demanding  
role of the army chaplain  
and how they combat  
emotional fatigue

In the far distance, gunfire and mortar crackles in the latest round of violence and death. Across the harsh and dusty landscape that makes up this little corner of Helmand province in Afghanistan, the only unarmed man in the patrol breaks formation for just a second, gestures to the commandos on the horizon and says: "Welcome to my parish – these are my parishioners".<sup>1</sup>

British army chaplains – often called 'padre' by their military colleagues – face extraordinary challenges when offering a pastoral ministry to soldiers. The stark reality of chaplaincy with the infantry in a combat zone is captured in the above newspaper report.

Chaplains are a source of care and reassurance to all around them, often at times of extreme hazard and stress. They frequently embrace the role – in all but name and often at point of crisis – of counsellor. Whether flying by helicopter to an exposed patrol base harassed by the Taliban so as to be alongside the comrades of a gravely injured soldier, or lending an ear to a battalion commander for whom leadership can be a lonely and weighty responsibility, or taking a soldier to one side to break the news of the death of a relative back home, or listening to the Regimental Sergeant Major whose marriage is faltering and who cannot reveal his turmoil and vulnerability, the chaplain deployed in an operational theatre knows that each and every day can present unforeseen challenges.

The former Archbishop of Canterbury Dr Rowan Williams, in a 2003 pastoral letter to British military chaplains serving in the Gulf, noted: 'Few join the armed forces without having thought deeply about the personal cost of service or the possibility of being put in harm's way, and the Church has never shrunk from sending its clergy to serve as chaplains wherever military people find themselves. You stand in a long and honourable tradition of Christians bearing witness to the love of Christ in hard and dangerous places.'<sup>2</sup>

The 151 full-time chaplains (there are part-time Territorial Army chaplains too) of The Royal Army Chaplains' Department are ordained Christian ministers drawn from several denominations who provide care for all faith groups in their charge. Most of them are men.

### The chaplain's role

The chaplain's role – pastoral, spiritual and moral, and unique in a military environment because the post-holder is accessible to and alongside all soldiers, regardless of rank or status – is described by chaplains as one of a 'ministry of presence': of being where soldiers are so as to listen to them. They must show active concern for the personal needs of all troops assigned to them, regardless of religious background, and for those who profess no religious faith at all.

Soldiers and officers share feelings with and unburden concerns to the padre, knowing they can reveal vulnerability, anxiety and anger without risk of blight on reputation or career, and that what they say will remain confidential.

A significant element of the chaplain's job is a counselling role, although hardly stereotypical. One-to-one contact with soldiers is a routine part of the chaplain's day. To the extent that the Rogerian person-centred principles of trust, empathy, being heard, understood and not being judged are experienced in that encounter by the perhaps troubled soldier, there is a relational aspect to the interaction and a strong link with therapy, its purpose and its practice.

Crucial to a full appreciation of the effectiveness of an army chaplain as a provider of – among other key aspects to pastoral ministry – psychological support to those in their charge is an understanding of the uniqueness of their status and role. The chaplain is a commissioned officer in the army but actively sets aside his or her rank when interacting with personnel of any rank, be they private soldier or commanding officer.

This is recognised by personnel of all ranks, as is the fact that the padre – in not carrying a weapon and in being a religious and not a fighting man – is someone who is among and alongside but not necessarily entirely of them. This distinction, with the potential for personal challenge, accords the chaplain an ability and, indeed, obligation to act both as moral compass and prophetic voice. Situated within but also subtly alongside a military unit and its chain of command, the chaplain is regarded as accessible, understanding, empathic and caring and, importantly, as exemplifying 'goodness'. The chaplain is highly valued as someone to whom a soldier – regardless of rank – can talk confidentially, openly and, often, with an emotion that is concealed from his or her peers.

Chaplains work tirelessly and selflessly to be available to anyone seeking care, reassurance and understanding. Soldiers want to be heard and often it is only the chaplain to whom they can turn. In the absence of a counsellor, the soldier will seek out the chaplain to fulfill that need and, given the choice, will often choose the chaplain anyway.

A 2010 Church of Scotland report notes the 'uniquely challenging vocation' of the military chaplaincy, whereby chaplains 'visit the sick, absolve the penitent and offer counsel to the anxious, the bewildered and the bereaved'.<sup>3</sup>

Not surprisingly, there are considerable personal challenges inherent in the role of army chaplain, particularly when deployed to operational theatres such as Iraq and Afghanistan and, in previous decades, Northern Ireland and the Falkland Islands.

## Pastoral ministry

For my MA research I used the Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) qualitative model to explore the lived experience of five army chaplains. My interest was not in the purely functional aspect of their role but in the less easily defined pastoral nature of their ministry and, specifically, that element whereby they become or come to be regarded as a provider – explicit or implicit – of psychological support to those with whom, and whom, they serve.

The research revealed four main elements to these padres' experience of their role: 'offering a presence' (embodying Christ and goodness), 'feeling useful and necessary' (worth and purpose), 'giving of oneself' (selflessness), and 'managing vulnerability' (functioning optimally).

In 'offering a presence' – that is, embracing all that constitutes an unselfish and considerate interaction with others that is recognised within the Church as a 'ministry of presence' – the chaplain experiences a faith-driven sense of duty, obligation and care for all in his charge, underpinned by a profound Christian love and respect. This manifests itself in being alongside and empathising with them, in sharing all their hardships, in listening to them and hearing them, in permitting them to feel vulnerable when necessary, in holding them, loving them and affirming them as individuals, in supporting them and caring for them, in letting them know that they are understood, and in sharing the same bomb- and bullet-strewn highway. If the job is to be done well, then it has to be done wholeheartedly and with commitment and conviction.

In 'feeling useful and necessary' there is a sense that, by offering so much of themselves so willingly and in being constantly present among those in their charge, chaplains value – and to a considerable extent need – validation of their role, and are motivated by feelings of worth, focus and purpose. In the unique hardship and danger of their chaplaincy role, knowing that others need them, accord

“

My research revealed a profound – and entirely willing – obligation felt by chaplains for those around them that tapped into the very foundation of their calling and from which there is no stepping back, regardless of adversity

”

them esteem and value what they are doing helps affirm them in their ministry.

Such feelings can be engendered by the value placed on their presence as a listening ear, a source of comfort, a moral component, a prophetic voice, and a source of professional expertise in the grim business of sudden death and bereavement. However, such feelings can sometimes be frustrated by a misunderstanding among military colleagues as to the pastoral role of a chaplain. Some padres find themselves regarded simply as 'welfare workers' and are boxed off in that specific area of activity. There can be concern too when chaplains find themselves regarded, perhaps cynically (some might argue necessarily), as a 'force multiplier' whose role is to help a soldier regain or maintain emotional equilibrium in order to be able to continue to fight the enemy.

Commentators have noted that diplomacy and care are sometimes needed to serve both God and country, and that a collision between the two is at times inevitable. Chaplains deployed to a combat zone must have a well-developed view of the religious, moral and ethical issues that arise from the potential conflict between serving both God and the military.







My research revealed a profound – and entirely willing – obligation felt by chaplains for those around them that tapped into the very foundation of their calling and from which there is no stepping back, regardless of adversity. So, third, in ‘giving of oneself’, a chaplain is constantly considering how best to be there for everyone else. The chaplain rejoices with those around him and revels in their buoyancy and, in times of crisis, also holds, revives and strengthens them, and absorbs their shock, distress and tears. Yet all the while he may be experiencing his own fear, discomfort and loneliness, and the sense that he must carry on regardless, for the sake of those around him.

Strength and personal resilience featured prominently in the research findings, but stress, exhaustion and emotional toll also emerged as possible outcomes of a pastoral ministry in an operational theatre (and sometimes while serving in a UK garrison). While a chaplain is generally expected to be there for everyone else – indeed, he may place that obligation on himself anyway – he himself often has no one to whom to turn. The evidence from other clinical and caring professions – not least counsellors – reveals the risk of compassion fatigue and burnout from constant exposure to stress and the distress of others. Clinical supervision is routine and sometimes mandatory in many professions, and the potential requirement for formalised peer support and supervision among clergy is now a subject of active discussion.

The experience, to a greater or lesser extent, of emotional and physical fatigue on operational deployment emerged from the research as the norm, not the exception. Thus, finally, the chaplain has to ‘manage vulnerability’ – his own. A sense of self-awareness emerged in the research, and an evident acknowledgement of strengths forged and weaknesses uncovered on operational deployment. Chaplains can be amazed by what they manage to do and what they encounter in a combat zone. These padres recognised the necessity of considerable personal and practical resilience on which to draw in order to cope with periods of high tempo activity, stress or danger.

## Faith and support

Faith is critical to the chaplain’s ability to do his job and, with it, the priestly disciplines of prayer and renewal of calling. However, solitary adherence to faith, while the foundation of all they do and are, needs to be augmented by the company of others, most notably fellow chaplains or, at the very least, fellow Christian soldiers. In other words, the ability to share and to offload is essential to their wellbeing; human warmth and interaction with peers who understand them in the same way that they offer understanding to others are critical to their ability to continue in times of adversity.

Pre-deployment training, ongoing support from the Army Chaplaincy chain of command while in an operational theatre and a post-deployment decompression package involving, at the very least, a contemplative retreat shared with their fellows are all regarded as important. The concept and role of a religious director – which equates directly to a

clinical supervisor in counselling – emerged from the research as a valuable resource: someone with whom the chaplain can share, offload and revive.

The concept of burnout and compassion fatigue among army chaplains and, indeed, clergy more generally is not new. The Canadian military have been especially proactive in researching ways to pre-empt or mitigate the physical and emotional toll experienced by a chaplain on deployment. Faith and resilience shine through, but faith must be buttressed by the support of colleagues around him and in the chain of command to enable the chaplain to give of himself effectively and continuously to those around him, and to selflessly offer the ‘ministry of presence’ required – whether they fully understand it or not – by military commanders in the field.

## Biography

Mervyn Wynne Jones qualified as a counsellor in 2011, having previously had a peripatetic 25-year career as a civilian UK armed forces press officer. Using the experience of some 20 years’ service in the Territorial Army too, he intends to specialise in trauma counselling for military veterans and is currently establishing a peer mentoring and support service called Change Step for veterans accessing the services of Wales drug and alcohol charity CAIS. He is a trustee of the Churches Counselling Service in Wales (CCSW), and a member of the executive committee of the BACP Private Practice division. This article is based on his MA Clinical Counselling (University of Chester) research dissertation titled ‘Faith in a foxhole: the army chaplain as a provider of psychological support to soldiers’, submitted in December 2011. Mervyn can be contacted at [mervynwynnejones@hotmail.com](mailto:mervynwynnejones@hotmail.com)



## References

1. McIver B. Heaven and Helmand. *The Daily Record*; 10 July, 2009.
2. Williams R. Archbishop: pastoral letter to Forces chaplains. *The Archbishop of Canterbury*; 23 March, 2003. [www.archbishopofcanterbury.org/articles.php/1253/archbishop-pastoral-letter-to-forces-chaplains](http://www.archbishopofcanterbury.org/articles.php/1253/archbishop-pastoral-letter-to-forces-chaplains)
3. Gibson JM, Murray AVM, Hunter DM. Report of the Committee on Chaplains to HM Forces. *Proceedings of the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland*. Edinburgh: Church of Scotland; 2010. [http://www.churchofscotland.org.uk/about\\_us/general\\_assembly/general\\_assembly\\_2010](http://www.churchofscotland.org.uk/about_us/general_assembly/general_assembly_2010)