

Moving with your mission field

By Viki Rife with Mark Penfold

“We were in the Balkans with a peace enforcement mission, and the guys in my unit were doing some road construction. A little boy came out to watch and was accidentally run over by one of the vehicles.” Chaplain Mark Penfold is discussing why he sees military chaplaincy as a mission field. Mark retired after 23 years of service from active duty in the Army in spring 2017. He now serves as the Chaplain Endorser for the Eagle Commission, the official liaison between the military chaplains and the Charis Fellowship.



While many do not include military chaplaincy when they think “missions,” Mark explains that many factors make it a place where missionary work is needed. In the first place, he says, the “assigned” congregation is predominantly unbelievers. For the average evangelical pastor, most of the congregation are already believers. Chaplains minister in conditions where 40% of military personnel self-identify as nones, meaning they have no religious preference. They are young adults who may or may not be searching. They do not yet have a fixed religious identity. Consider also the fact that last year, according to the Department of Defense, there were 1.1 million active members of the military, with about 900,000 in reserve components. Mark notes, “That doesn’t count ministry to spouses, children and other family members!”

“Chaplains do so much with the unit, they become a part of them. No matter what they’re going through, you easily can build connections,” Mark comments. *In the case of the accident with the child, Mark says, “The guys all stopped what they were doing and tried to help. There were no civilian medical care systems available, so our unit medic did what was possible.”*

Despite their united efforts, the child died. “I remember sitting with the soldiers afterwards as they wrestled with their questions,” Mark shares. “We had come to bring peace to the region, to keep fighting factions apart. Why would God allow this to happen to a little boy we came to protect? I had a great opportunity in the midst of it all to bring God’s Word to bear as I helped them process their grief.”

Contrary to what some assume about the chaplaincy, most of the time is not spent at a desk. The reality is that chaplains have to do physically whatever the other military personnel are doing. It’s easy to build connections with people on a long foot march. Except for the fact that they don’t carry a weapon, chaplains wear the same equipment as everyone else in the unit.

During early morning physical training with the rest of the unit, someone might suddenly ask for an appointment, and the chaplain might come away with several appointments—just by exercising with them. “The chaplain hears about their marriage problems, learns about their lives. We get to share how Scripture has affected us and our families.”

When the unit is deployed, the chaplain goes with them. When in harm’s way, the fact that the chaplain is there and available can make a big difference. Whether it involves things the military

personnel can't directly address, such as situations at home, or whether things from deployment and combat, they see the fallenness of the world in ways many people never do. "While chaplains do not typically go out on combat patrols, they provide regular visits to Combat Outposts (COPs) and Forward Operating Bases (FOBs) to provide religious services, provide counseling and check on morale. Usually chaplains stay close to the aid stations to talk with those needing a word of prayer while getting medical care. When members of the company are killed on the battlefield, a lot of grief counseling opportunities present themselves. Chaplains help deliver Red Cross messages of medical situations or death of family members back home, pray for them and help them get back home for an emergency leave when needed."

Mark's wife Robin adds that the beauty of the role of the chaplain is that it's pretty much understood within the military context that they are there to provide religious support. If they're from a different faith group, the chaplain has an obligation to find someone who can meet their needs. Often, because you're the bridge for that, they'll come back to you with their needs. She points out that in Mark's time in the Army, they were able to present marriage retreats from a religious basis, no matter what the beliefs might be.

In addition to being responsible for chapel programs, chaplains also may oversee Protestant Women of the Chapel, a non-denominational women's ministry with a strong gospel emphasis. They also help oversee ministries like AWANA or youth ministries such as "Club Beyond" and other ministries that might be helpful, just as you would in a local church ministry.

Every year Women of Grace USA features four missionaries, and one of them is a chaplain's wife. When asked how women can best encourage the chaplains' wives, Mark and Robin gave these tips:

1. It's always nice to get a card on special occasions. You can request information on birthdays or anniversaries at the link below.
2. If you or your church adopt a chaplain, send them a card to let them know you're praying for them. Robin shares that when they came back from Germany and went to National Conference in 2002 in Philadelphia, a woman came up to her and said, "I enjoy hearing about the chaplaincy and would like to send you a note now and then. Don't feel responsible to answer." From that time on she sent an e-mail every week, they exchanged prayer requests, and have been in contact ever since, even visiting each other. Robin points out that it was especially a blessing for her when going through her cancer treatments to have that kind of support. "Talk about a warrior!" she exclaims. Many may remember that last year Chaplain Jim Murray and his wife Ashley had twins born at 26 weeks. One son, Benjamin, died at birth. The other twin, Ethan, was a micro-premie and required extensive hospital care for months. While this was happening, one of their young sons was having seizures that required brain surgery to remove a tumor. They are thankful for the prayers and support of people in Charis churches around the country. "An email, Facebook message or postcard is welcome any time," points out Robin. She adds, "And the occasional Starbucks card goes a long way!"
3. Realize how isolated they are from others from the Fellowship, as most duty stations are not near a Charis Fellowship church. When you can build good friendships, you don't feel so isolated from the Fellowship. The Penfolds emphasize that they desire for all chaplains to have strong prayer support from their member/ordaining church, but to also have connections with other

individuals and churches. Encourage your church leaders to open doors for the chaplains to present their ministry. You can also ask veterans in your congregations to share their stories.

A video titled Partners in the Call...Chaplains' Wives has recently been produced sharing the stories of some of the chaplains' wives. You can view it here.

(<https://drive.google.com/file/d/1dfcrowclioMy44bl0gs2vTp4QE6HxbZB/view?usp=sharing>) For more information on the Eagle Commission or to sign up to receive their newsletter, go to www.eaglecommission.org.