

## **The Line Officer and the Chaplain**

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As a former line officer who is now a chaplain, I'm glad to share these heartfelt comments with Christians serving in our armed forces. I'm confident that it's God who has called each of us to our roles in ministry and that Jesus Christ expects us to be salt and light in the military commands to which He has assigned us.

### **Ministry of the Line Officer**

A Christian line officer serves with his or her personnel daily in all kinds of situations. On field maneuvers, in hangar bays and electrical repair shops, on adventure training trips, in professional development classes and counseling sessions, in front-line combat, or in the day-to-day routines of office work—non-believers and Christians work together with the common goal of contributing to the security of our nation. The close relationships that grow out of these situations may offer opportunities for Christians to share spiritual truth. Many times they have been used by the Holy Spirit to draw people to Christ.

Nonbelievers think of the chaplain as one who is “paid to talk about Christ.” They usually don't perceive the Christian line officer as a “professional” Christian. For this reason, your testimony about God's grace and purpose in your life can have a strong impact. They may really “hear”—for the first time—the reality of the Christian faith that they have “tuned out” in church or chapel for years.

As a line officer, you can understand the problems of your military comrades as one who participates equally with them in their military duties. Many chaplains try very hard to be involved in the activities of their troops. They jump with airborne units, join those standing mid-watches, participate in twenty-mile forced marches, go along on night patrols, and spend time on the flight line. The best chaplains have a deep empathy for the challenges, problems, and victories of their units. Even they, however, cannot enter fully into the decisions, dilemmas, and difficulties of those who lead and those who fight.

The Christian line officer, who does serve as a full participant in decisions and actions of his unit, has a superb opportunity to witness through professional excellence. In all his duties, his primary aim should be to lead in such a way that Jesus Christ will be glorified as Lord in all he says and does. The Lord will bless such a commitment to excellence, and military men and women will see good works that glorify God the Father.

Christian line officers are assigned to units and missions that can have no chaplain. How wonderful it is to have God's man or woman leading a Coast Guard rescue mission, serving in a top secret Air Force assignment, directing the actions of a Marine reconnaissance patrol,

contributing to a high-level meeting on Army personnel policy, commanding a Trident submarine, or flying the Space Shuttle! Backed by the prayers of fellow believers, such officers have unique opportunities to share the truth and love of Jesus Christ.

The line of decision and command responsibility runs through the line officer. As staff officers, chaplains recommend and advise. Even their spiritual ministry, however, is justified by the military as part of “The Command Religious Program.” On the other hand, as line officers you make decisions influencing the lives of everyone in your unit. I praise God for Christians like you who provide leadership both for mission accomplishment and to help the personnel in your unit. Our nation needs leaders like you to make command decisions—and so does that portion of Christ’s Church within the military!

### **Why God May Lead You to be Involved in Chapel Ministry**

I’ve served as a civilian church pastor for seven years. I deeply appreciate the ministry of Christian churches and their leaders. Both are appointed by God for His purposes.

I’ve also served on active duty in the Navy for five years (first as a line officer, then as a chaplain). Out of these experiences, I’ve learned some reasons why God may lead you to serve Him in your local chapel. I’d like to share them with you. I hope you’ll see them as exciting opportunities!

A chapel congregation can provide a living demonstration of our unit in Jesus Christ. Often nonbelievers are confused by the fact of many denominations and the competition that sometimes occurs between them. Believers working together in a chapel program can proclaim the essential teachings of the gospel.

John 17:21-23 tells us that all Christians are united in Christ. This includes Christians in all denominations, of all theological shades and spiritual persuasions. In the chapel the focus tends to be on the essential doctrines of Christian faith rather than on denominational distinctives.

We need each other for growth as well as fellowship. The Holy Spirit has sovereignly distributed spiritual gifts to a variety of believers. We need one another’s gifts in order to live properly as the Body of Christ. How wonderful and uplifting it is when Christians focus on their oneness in Christ and strive to get along with one another (Psalm 133:1).

When Christians are “eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit” (Ephesians 4:3), the chapel offers opportunities for exciting Christian ministries in growth and outreach. In such a congregation, few are concerned about the denominational background of the others. Their focus (praise God) is on the Lord Jesus Christ and on being His Church!

As you advance in your career, you will one day be a military commander. One or more chaplains will be on your unit’s staff. If you’ve served Christ in chapel programs before your

command assignment begins, you'll have a much deeper understanding of how they can help you and a better rapport with them as individuals (Romans 12:10). This will greatly enhance the spiritual ministry that takes place in your command.

Your prior experience with chaplains will enable you to reinforce one another rather than compete or conflict. Your guidance to chaplains, and your response to their advice, will be wiser and more effective. You'll have a quicker grasp of the chaplain's professional role, responsibilities, and constraints. Finally, since you'll have this background, you'll be able to focus more time on getting to know the chaplain personally. A chapel ministry offers a springboard for expansion for Christ's Kingdom within the military. In the two to three years you spend at a duty station, you can mature in your own Christian life and witness among military people so that you'll be more effective as a professional officer and as a spiritual leader.

What is your vision for the expansion of Christ's Church? Does it include people from all corners of America, from all cultures of mankind, and from all countries of the world? Imagine how excited a civilian church would be if it could spend two years preparing believers for missionary service, then send them out around the world as ambassadors for Jesus Christ, often placing them in secular environments where the gospel is not preached! Then imagine what would happen if this process were repeated over and over again in numerous congregations worldwide. This is the vision we should have for our chapels!

The words of Jesus call to us today. "The fields are white unto harvest" (John 4:35). "Pray that the Lord will send forth laborers" (Luke 10:12). A spiritually live, praying chapel congregation is just such a disciple-making and disciple-sending ministry for the Lord Jesus Christ to use in expanding His Church throughout the military and throughout the world.

The chapel offers you many opportunities to use your spiritual gifts and to express your commitment to Jesus Christ. All chaplains welcome volunteers to serve in their programs. The transient nature of military life insures a continual supply of places to serve in the chapel. The chaplain and the members of the congregation need your spiritual vision, commitment, experience, involvement, and prayers. Join them and contribute to the Christian ministry in your command. Together you will mature in Christ (Ephesians 4:16).

Chapel congregations contain military people who need to know more of a personal walk with the Lord Jesus. Some have never made a faith commitment to Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord. Others have never clarified and developed their faith so as to grow into mature disciples.

In combat many will be open to the chaplains' ministry who would otherwise be uninterested. In overseas duty stations a number of young men and women who are far from home will show up at chapel services. Military personnel are often referred to chaplains by the chain of command for counseling.

Because of these facts, chaplains need godly men and women to help them reach out to military people with the good news of God's love and holiness. Like those the Apostle Paul encountered in synagogues (Acts 9:20, 13:5) and in places of prayer (Acts 16:16), these people may be open to the loving witness you offer concerning the grace and truth that can be found only in Jesus Christ. That may be why God drew them to your chapel!

The chapel ministry offers you an open door to the personnel in your command. We sometimes overlook the potential for ministry of this rather obvious fact. Christian ministries authorized by the military allow a means for the gospel to be shared to the entire command on a regular basis. Outside groups and churches find it much more difficult to reach into a military installation.

You'll have many opportunities to invite friends and associates to chapel events where they can be exposed to others who will be genuinely interested in them. Through these activities, and through the sharing that occurs between new friends, they'll have opportunities to hear and understand the gospel. They'll be more likely to attend chapel service with friends than to go off-post to church.

The chaplain's involvement with troops and leaders gives him numerous opportunities to live, work, play, and deploy with members of the command. He needs your support, friendship, and prayer to be fully able to meet the many demands he faces and to represent Jesus Christ faithfully day-by-day. You'll be able to help him fulfill his responsibility to provide wise counsel to the command on the physical, emotional, and spiritual welfare of the military personnel at your place of duty.

These are some of the reasons I believe God may lead you to serve Him through your local chapel. As you are involved in this way, I know God will bless you and your family and that He will lead you in fruitful paths of service.

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