

U.S. Military Chaplains Support More than 100 Faiths

At home and abroad, troops see more opportunities to practice religion

As the demographics of the U.S. military have changed in recent years, the military has become more intent on facilitating religious practices of all of its members.

Chief Master Sergeant Aphrodite Kafka, an Orthodox Christian, who has served in the Air Force for decades, has seen changes during her time in uniform. Thirty years ago, at basic training, Kafka's commanders told her to go to the Protestant service. "It was a shock," she recalls.

More recently, while stationed at Osan Air Force Base in Korea, Kafka was given a van to drive to Seoul to attend a weekly Orthodox service. When deployed in Iraq during the Advent, she found dairy-free and meat-free food in the dining hall; and before going on a mission, she consulted with an Orthodox Christian military chaplain to get a special dispensation from her faith's dietary requirements. Recently, kosher and halal field rations became available for Jews and Muslims.

Some believe those changes in the military reflect changes in the population as a whole. There are more Muslims, Hindus and Sikhs in the United States today, and younger officers grew up in a multicultural society. At the U.S. Military Academy at West Point, New York, for instance, a new prayer hall for Muslims recently opened. (See [related article](#).)

Robert W. Tuttle, a law professor with expertise in military history at George Washington University, points to another factor - that the United States abolished the general draft in 1973. To maintain good morale in an all-volunteer force, he said, the Pentagon must pay more attention to the troops' religious needs.

In fact, the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution is interpreted as obliging the military to guarantee its members the freedom of religious practices. At the same time, the Department of Defense cannot favor or endorse any particular religion. U.S. active-duty soldiers have reported that they belong to a total of 109 religions - from Baptist to Buddhism to Baha'i.

The roughly 3,000 military chaplains on active-duty rolls and 2,000 in the reserves represent many denominations, and their numbers are not necessarily in proportion to the

numbers of soldiers of a particular religion. For instance, there are more imams per Muslim and rabbis per Jew than there are Catholic priests per Catholic in the military.

That is partly because the Defense Department wants to ensure that there is a chaplain even for a small group of believers. "In life and death situations," says **Diana Eck**, a professor of religion at Harvard University in Massachusetts, "it is important [troops] have access to a variety of chaplains." This month, the first Buddhist chaplain will join the U.S. Navy.

Military chaplains are trained in interdenominational services and typically carry Jewish and Christian versions of the Bible; the New Testament; the Book of Mormon; the Quran; prayer rugs; and a portable altar, among other items. Army Chaplain (Major) Carlos C. Huerta even carries sage in his medicine bag, which he has given a Lakota Sioux Indian to burn - a tribal ritual to cleanse a warrior before battle.

"We provide services in our own religion, but as chaplains, we provide for everyone," said Air Force Chaplain (Lieutenant Colonel) Brett Oxman. In Iraq, an Army chaplain who is a Catholic priest invites Australian troops who are Catholic to attend his mass. In a similar expression of hospitality, an Eastern Orthodox church in Kandahar, Afghanistan, has invited U.S. military personnel to attend services there. Even with language barriers, there is comfort in familiar religious services.

Chaplains travel to as many domestic or overseas bases as they can, especially on religious holidays. Earlier this year, Jewish soldiers serving in Iraq were flown to Tikrit to celebrate Yom Kippur with a rabbi who was stationed there.

In Iraq, chaplains also take care of people who are translators or Iraqi civilians, Huerta said. Though he himself is a rabbi, he has memorized Arabic verses from the Quran. When a young Iraqi boy was dying of wounds caused by a bomb in Mosul in October 2005, Huerta held the boy's hand at the hospital and chanted whatever Arabic verses he knew. "The boy was six or seven years old; I didn't want him to die hearing medical terms in English," Huerta explained.

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judythpiazza@gmail.com