

BEST PRACTICE ARTICLES

Sacred Speech Development: A Shared Responsibility

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Determining who is responsible for the development of chaplains' sacred speech is crucially important.¹ Two possibilities include endorsers and the Chaplain Corps. This matter highlights the tension around navigating the civil-military divide for chaplains. Yet the impulse to jump to one side of this debate or the other may be impacting the effectiveness of religious support in the Army. This article suggests that life-long sacred speech development is a shared responsibility between individual chaplains, their endorsers, and the Chaplain Corps. This article provides various tools to help in this shared effort, including the Sacred Message Feedback Form (SMFF) and various Training Support Packages (TSPs).

The Need for Sacred Speech Development

Chaplains are regularly called to address collective audiences of soldiers with a sacred word in times of need. Soldiers are required to train and fight in unique military contexts. This is why chaplains must have the skills to adapt their sacred speech specifically to military contexts. On a routine basis, chaplains are called to the motor pool, the flightline, the field, and the battlefield to offer "a word of the day," a devotional, or a religious service to foster a resilient unit and community. When trauma occurs on the battlefield or at home station, chaplains are called to address collective audiences in debriefings and memorial events to "say something" to those impacted. In these moments, soldiers have an inherent expectation for a chaplain, with a religious symbol on his or her chest, to offer a transcendent or sacred (i.e., set apart) word of comfort and hope. The question is whether chaplains can provide sacred speech with quality, substance, and depth that meets the needs of soldiers. The answer to this question is not a 'yes' or 'no' but a journey on a sliding scale of life-long learning and development. Most agree

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¹ 'Sacred Speech' refers to all forms of religious discourse to honor the various faith traditions represented in the Army Chaplain Corps. It refers to concepts such as scripture readings, derashas, d'var Torahs, dharma talks, khukbahs, homilies, sermons, etc. It is a narrower concept than sacred communications which involves other forms of communication in addition to speech.

that sacred speech is a perishable skill or, at the very least, a skill we can always further develop. Carefully considering who is responsible for this growth and development is important for understanding the particular ways the issue of sacred speech intersects with civ-mil relations.

The Civil-Military Divide

Some chaplains and endorsers might respond to this question by saying that sacred speech development is an endorser responsibility. If the Chaplain Corps, a government entity, dictates how chaplains provide sacred speech, the Corps risks violating its chaplains' free exercise of religion and perhaps even unintentionally running afoul of the establishment clause. Moreover, not all faith traditions prioritize sacred speech as a component of worship, such as some forms for Buddhism and Judaism. Thus, the ideal is for each endorser to take a comprehensive role in developing the sacred speech capacities of their chaplains.

This ideal is not fully possible because of the demands for sacred speech in a uniquely military context. Endorsers and theological institutions can produce fully qualified religious leaders, but not fully qualified chaplains. There are distinct demands and skills related to sacred speech that are unique to the military context. This uniqueness presents some problems regarding the establishment of religion. The government cannot create a standard for chaplaincy that all religious bodies must follow. Instead, the government relies on each endorser to produce religious leaders to their own standards, then train chaplains to adapt their religious leadership into a military context. This is why the development of sacred speech for chaplains must be a shared responsibility. Endorsers develop the religious leader. The Chaplain Corps develops the unique skills and adaptations necessary to bring quality sacred speech to soldiers and their families. So, how can endorsers and the Chaplain Corps work together to develop chaplains in their sacred speech?

Endorser's Responsibility

Sacred speech is a perishable skill. There is room for endorsers to take an active role or at least accountability for continued sacred speech development for their chaplains. As the United States Army Institute of Religious Leadership (USAIRL) Sacred Communications Instructor, I informally survey each class of chaplains to see if their endorsers play an active role in their sacred speech development. As a generous estimate, less than 10% of the class members raise their hands without fail. This informal poll suggests that chaplains receive the message that once they are assessed as a chaplain, they do not need to keep developing their sacred speech. If this message is internalized, the chaplain gets stuck on that sliding scale of sacred speech development mentioned above; or worse yet, they slide back in their development. The potential impact of this message on the Chaplain Corps, endorsing bodies, and, ultimately, the soldiers is far-reaching and

wide-ranging. Sacred speech development is a life-long endeavor and there is ample opportunity for more involvement of endorsers for their chaplains in this process. Obviously, I cannot tell each endorser how to further develop their chaplains in their sacred speech, but maybe transparency about what the Chaplain Corps is doing to develop chaplains in this area might help us all know how we can work together. Here is an overview of what we are doing.

Chaplain Corps' Responsibility

The greatest challenge and opportunity of sacred speech development in the Army is pluralism. The challenge is trying to train the requirements of sacred speech in a military context while also honoring the various faith traditions in the Chaplain Corps. The opportunity is presented by the different cultures represented in each faith tradition which provides a robust training environment. Diverse perspectives are the driving force behind adult learning and development. The Chaplain Corps develops these skills in a religiously diverse context.

We, in the Chaplain Corps, leverage the diversity by learning to discern between theological differences and cultural differences. Sometimes, we stymie sacred speech development in the name of theological differences that are cultural, personality, or learning style differences. This became overt to me when I learned a formula for transitions in sacred speech at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary where I was graded on my ability to use this formula. When I used that same formula at Harvard Divinity School, I lost points because my transitions were “too formulaic.” The irony is that both classes were based on the same sacred text. Yet, each class focused on communicating that sacred text into different cultural contexts.

This causes us to determine what is prescribed versus described in the sacred text or religious tradition regarding sacred speech. In other words, a sacred text/tradition may tell us this is what sacred speech is and how religious leaders must do it. On the other hand, a sacred text/tradition could merely describe a sacred speech as it occurred. For example, one of the most well-known sermons in the Christian tradition is Peter's address to the crowd in Acts 2. Is this text telling Christians how to preach or what a sermon looks like, or is it merely a description of a sermon that took place? If the text is prescribing sacred speech, then that approach becomes a theological conviction. If the text is merely describing sacred speech, then other forms and approaches to sacred speech remain available for consideration. When we carefully discern these distinctions within our respective sacred texts, we can truly honor our rich theological values while also remaining flexible and adaptable to grow into new contexts and skills. The sacred speech curriculum at the USAIRL operates on the notion that sacred speech development begins with a solid theological foundation of sacred speech that is established by theological institutions and endorsers who have the freedom to take on a

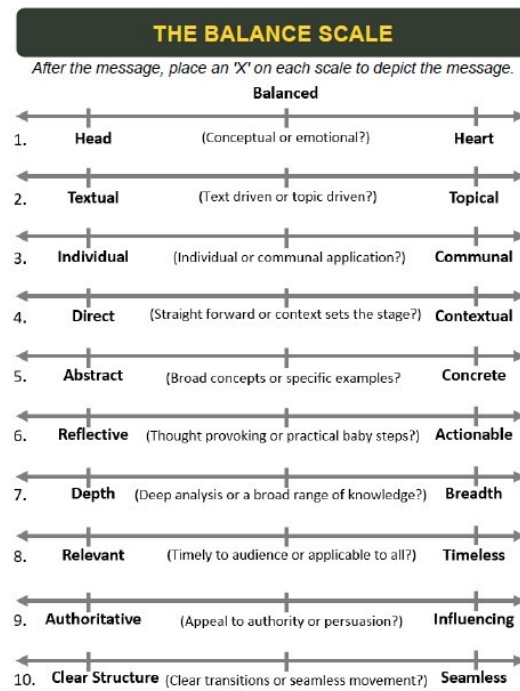


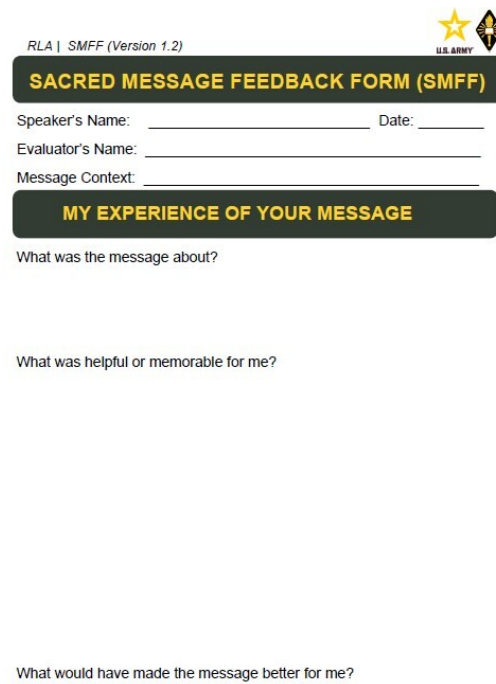
Figure 1.

prescriptive approach. Then, at the USA-IRL, sacred speech development reaches new levels as chaplains are stretched through descriptive approaches within a diverse learning environment.

Sacred Message Feedback Form

The Sacred Message Feedback Form (SMFF) is an observation form that takes sacred speech feedback away from the realm of theological prescription by focusing on cultural description. This form provides everyone, regardless of faith tradition, a common language to provide descriptive feedback on how the message was received. Instead of providing a prescriptive framework, the SMFF provides a descriptive framework that leverages cultural values such as head versus heart, direct versus contextual, and individual versus communal to name a few (see [Figure 1](#)). This descriptive framework provides a common vocabulary that can be theologically neutral. The SMFF also places the focus of sacred speech on what the audience needs by asking for the context up front. The context sets the tone for everything that follows (see [Figure 2](#)). This is especially helpful in the context of the Army, one of the most culturally diverse audiences in the world. The SMFF provides a common language and descriptive framework for developing sacred speech skills. This is why we recommend using this form in all three domains of Army development: institutional, operational, and self-development.²

² Department of the Army, *Developing Leaders (FM 6-22)* (Washington, DC: Department of the Army, 2022), 1-3.



RLA | SMFF (Version 1.2)

SACRED MESSAGE FEEDBACK FORM (SMFF)

Speaker's Name: _____ Date: _____

Evaluator's Name: _____

Message Context: _____

MY EXPERIENCE OF YOUR MESSAGE

What was the message about?

What was helpful or memorable for me?

What would have made the message better for me?

Figure 2.

Sacred Speech in the Institutional Domain

Sacred speech development in the institutional domain consists of Chaplain Basic Officer Leadership Course (for entry-level chaplains), Chaplain Captain Career Course (for captains), and Operational Religious Support Leader Course (for majors). These courses focus on laying the foundations for sacred speech in a military context. Chaplains are trained on providing “words of the day,” unit devotionals, field messages, memorial event reflections, military graveside service remarks, and addressing a collective audience in combat and trauma. Owing to class sizes and limited instructional hours, the focus in the institutional domain is providing chaplains with the tools and frameworks for further development and refinement in the operational and self-development domains. One-on-one or even small group refinement is extremely limited in the institutional domain due to instructor-to-student ratios. The most formative sacred speech development occurs in trusting relationships over time, so it is unfortunate that there is not greater opportunity for refinement in the institutional domain.

Sacred Speech in the Operational Domain

This is why sacred speech development in the operational domain is so critical. Chaplains are placed into small groups (i.e., battalion unit ministry teams within a brigade) and under technical supervisors to further develop and refine sacred speech skills. By regulation, sacred speech is within the

supervisory chaplain's responsibility.³ Although endorsers maintain some responsibility to develop and assess their chaplains' sacred speech, the supervisory chaplain maintains oversight of the chaplain within his or her military context. The supervisory chaplain can observe the chaplain in context and discuss the impact of the chaplain's sacred speech with his or her audience.

Pluralism offers one challenge to this method of sacred speech development in the operational domain. A rabbi needs to be able to facilitate the development of sacred speech for a priest, and this is difficult. I argue that this challenge is mitigated when supervisory chaplains are equipped with tools like the SMFF. I am currently developing Training Support Packages (TSPs) for use in the operational domain. TSPs are training packages or lesson plans that are downloaded and used for training. One TSP I am working on which I discuss further below is the SMFF TSP that supervisory chaplains can download and use to establish a common vocabulary and measurement tool for the unit. Another developmental tool for the supervisory chaplain in a pluralistic context is the Individual Development Plan (IDP). When supervisors have their subordinate chaplains produce IDPs with specific growth focuses like sacred speech, this gives the subordinate chaplain an opportunity to self-assess and set their own goals according to their faith tradition.

Sacred Speech in the Self-Development Domain

This is where the operational domain intersects with the self-development domain. Although supervisors can support and supervise sacred speech development in the military context, faith-specific sacred speech development ultimately remains the responsibility of each chaplain. The IDP is a great tool for chaplains to plan and pursue self-development in sacred speech. The Army provides an IDP Form that covers an individual's long-term goals, short-term goals, and immediate actions to obtain those goals.⁴ It explains that individuals should work through developing specific, measurable, achievable, relevant, and time bound (S.M.A.R.T.) goals to reach those long-term goals. A form like this is a good tool for laying out a plan for sacred speech self-development. It also makes a great tool for conversation and accountability with supervisors and endorsers.

Setting individual goals is critical because chaplains are always entering into new contexts that require different approaches to sacred speech. For example, new duty stations, new congregations, and new missions all require an assessment of sacred speech needs and a plan to develop corresponding

³ Department of the Army, *Evaluation Reporting System (AR 623-3)* (Washington, DC: Department of the Army, 2019), C-7. This regulation lists different areas upon which chaplains can be rated. The first area listed is "preaching and leading in worship."

⁴ Department of the Army Form 7906, November 2022.

skills. Based on individual growth goals, chaplains can develop a personalized plan to read specific books, attend certain conferences, interview certain communicators, or experiment with different approaches all to develop the skill sets required for that individual's new context. Chaplains can use the SMFF in conjunction with the IDP to conduct self-assessments of sacred speech and to target the development of sacred speech skills around specific cultural values. For example, if a chaplain is cognitively oriented, they might want to develop the capacity to engage an audience that is emotionally oriented. This type of self-assessment provides self-awareness and transparency in growing edges without making the chaplain feel weak or like a failure. We all have cultural biases. It is just a matter of identifying them and seeking to engage those on the other end of that cultural difference. Once these growing edges are identified, the chaplain, supervisory chaplain, and endorsers can search for resources to develop the chaplain in these specific areas.

Training Support Packages

To that end, I conclude this article by sharing several TSPs that are planned as resources for further sacred speech development throughout the Chaplain Corps. TSPs can be found in the Central Army Registry (CAR) at <https://rdl.train.army.mil/catalog/#/dashboard> with access through a Department of Defense (DoD) Common Access Card (CAC). Anyone with CAC access can conduct a search for "Sacred Communications" to download these lesson plans and train using them to further develop in sacred speech. Here are two TSPs that are planned for release by the end of CY 2024:

1. Sacred Message Feedback Form (SMFF) TSP (4 or 8 hours). This TSP is designed to create a common language and measurement system across your force to support sacred speech development. The TSP will give you access to the SMFF and a lesson plan that explains the theories behind the form and how to use it. It is helpful to start any sacred speech development process by establishing a shared language, especially in a pluralistic setting. Once this common language is established, messages can be measured both qualitatively and quantitatively to measure growth throughout a rating period. As mentioned above, this measurement system is descriptive which means it does not prescribe the right answer. Instead, it allows the group to decide what growth should look like, then allows the chaplain to measure growth to that standard. This lesson also includes an optional sacred speech workshop which is the practical exercise for this TSP. It can be useful for chapel teams and supervisory UMTs looking to improve the quality of sacred speech on their team

or to target a specific training outcome (e.g., addressing a suffering audience, sacred speech to prepare a community for deployment, sacred speech to build resilience, etc.).

2. Trauma-Responsive Sacred Speech TSP (4 or 8 hours). This lesson plan is primarily for clinical units or units preparing for combat. In the lesson, chaplains spend time developing their respective theologies of suffering, learning trauma-response theory, and how to apply this theory to sacred speech. By the conclusion, each chaplain will have a written trauma/combat-responsive approach to sacred speech. There is also an optional practicum in the lesson plan that gives trainees time to practice their trauma-responsive sacred speech and receive feedback from the group. The TSP also includes a trauma-specific feedback form that provides a descriptive framework for observing a trauma-responsive sacred speech. This field of study is relatively new, and this TSP is recommended for chaplains who have not received any trauma training.

The hope is that these TSPs will empower and equip chaplains and supervisory chaplains to work together in sacred speech development. Additionally, chaplains can use these training tools to partner with endorsers in a joint effort towards life-long sacred speech development. In their essence, these TSPs will create space for sacred speech development to occur within trusting relationships.

Conclusion

It is within the bonds of these trusting relationships that chaplains, their endorsers, and the Chaplain Corps can take on the shared responsibility of sacred speech development for chaplains. Developing quality and facilitating growth in sacred speech takes an intentional, collective, and life-long effort. It requires endorsers, chaplains, and their supervisors working together in all domains of Army development. The civil-military tension regarding sacred speech development in the Army presents us with some obstacles. The hope is that this article sheds light on these obstacles and enables open and respectful conversations to show us a path forward in working together as we care for the souls of our soldiers and their families.

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