

BEST PRACTICE ARTICLES

Chaplain Spiritual Survivability in Large-Scale Combat Operations

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Ancient wisdom literature records the counsel of a father to his son about navigating the travails of life: "Above all else, guard your heart" (Proverbs 4:28, *NIV*). "Guard" is a verb in this advice, a fact that could be easily missed. The word "guard," in this context, is active; it comes with an expectation that the one who is guarding is preparing to receive an offensive action. A person, based on this advice, should prepare to surge assets appropriately. Today, experts at the strategic levels of national security and military affairs postulate what the next significant "fight" looks like, the U.S. Army Chaplain Corps is working diligently to ensure that chaplains deliver superior Religious Support no matter what the conditions. Under these difficult conditions a crucially important issue is how to prepare chaplains for the realities foreseen by strategic level leaders. This preparation is possible when chaplains remember their calling, reflect regularly, and create a rhythm of rituals for their personal and professional spiritual care they will be better positioned to deliver effective relevant and impactful religious support in our next conflict.

By regulation, chaplains are "Professional Military Religious Leaders."¹ Chaplains are endorsed by a religious organization that is separate and distinct from their commitment to the United States military. Endorsing bodies vary widely in their levels of support to their chaplains. In a perfect world, endorsers would consistently follow up with their chaplains to ensure they are spiritually, emotionally, and relationally sound. The reality is some chaplains receive a lot more support than others. My own denomination set the expectation with me around levels of support during the application process. The level and forms of support were clearly communicated in my endorser interview: I would frequently operate independently and regularly be in environments where I would receive little to no support. At the time, I was an associate pastor in a large and thriving congregation, and I had no frame of reference to help me understand that comment. That comment is a good starting place for chaplains to manage expectations in a potential future fight.

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¹ Department of the Army, *Army Chaplain Corp Activities (AR 165-1)* (Washington, DC: Department of the Army, 2024), 3-2.

Chaplains at every level should have a part in “guarding the heart” of their subordinates. At the end of the day, it will fall on the individual chaplain to regularly do what is necessary to make sure this guarding occurs.

Survivability is a principle of the sustainment war fighting function. *Sustainment Operations* (ADP 4.0) defines survivability as “a quality or capability of military forces to avoid or withstand hostile actions or environmental conditions while retaining the ability to fulfill their primary mission.”² If a chaplain is unable to remain fully emotionally and spiritually engaged in the chaos and rigor of war, they will be a liability. Chaplains need to survive and sustain themselves spiritually as they minister under the horrific and chaotic conditions of Large-Scale Combat Operations (LSCO). To do this, chaplains can remember their calling, reflect regularly, and create a rhythm of ritual for their personal spiritual practices; these intentional actions will increase the capacity of their spiritual survivability in the delivery of religious support in our Nation’s future conflicts.

Chaplains have encountered some of these challenges in previous wars. G.A. Studdard Kennedy, an English Anglican Priest volunteered to serve the British Army during World War I. He wrote about his personal experience in the chaos of war and the intersection of faith while serving on the Western Front during the early part of the war. A large body of his writing is captured in the anthology, *The Hardest Part*.³ His writing is raw, genuine, and profound. He wrestles with what he and his fellow Soldiers experienced in real time while consistently looking to the God of the Bible to help him process that which no amount military or theological training could prepare him. I regularly refer to his writing throughout this paper. The principals I describe are present in his writing even if the phrase “spiritual survivability” does not appear in it.

Remember Your Calling

In a recent promotion ceremony Chaplain (Major General) William Green clearly and emphatically stated, “Nothing is more important than the call.” The call provides the foundation for what we do. Without a firm grasp of our calling, it will be nearly impossible for a chaplain to survive spiritually. Knowing and owning your calling is the primary means to spiritual survivability, as it provides the foundation which can adapt to ever changing conditions. In addition, it provides additional motivation to continually pursue and maintain growth, loyalty, and inspiration. Chaplains do hard things. Chaplains regularly encounter people who have experienced hard things. This reality is hard on the soul, especially given its frequency and intensity. Chaplains must be able to draw from their own sense purpose to buttress and sustain their own soul so that they may provide religious support

² Department of the Army, *Sustainment Operations (ADP 4-0)* (Washington, DC: Department of the Army, 2019), 1-12.

³ G.A. Studdert Kennedy, *The Hardest Part* (London: SCM, 2017).

in the most difficult of circumstances. Chaplains may lack courage and even hope when facing death and carnage, but they will press on if they are clear about the nature of their why.

The call comes from an entity/being outside of oneself that provides both vision and purpose to join in and be a part of something greater. Ruth Haley Barton writes, “Being called by God is one of the most essentially spiritual experiences of human existence, because it is a place where God’s presence intersects with a human life. Our calling emerges from who we really are in the rawness and sinfulness of it as well as in all the glory of God-giveness of it.”⁴ The call provides external and internal motivation because it is not contingent solely on the belief, faith, and will power of the individual.

An Army chaplain’s calling provides a distinct mission in the world, the way of living out our uniqueness within the more general call to become fully human and follow the teachings of our faith tradition. With this perspective, calling becomes much bigger than a job or career because it is based on our gifts and abilities and our engagement in some response to the needs of the world.⁵ Often looking at who we have been helps us discern who we are called to be. Fredrick Buechner adroitly summarizes calling, “where your deep gladness meets the world’s deep hunger.”⁶

The conservative commentator David Brooks notes that the Greeks had a concept called the Daemonic. The daemon was a calling, an obsession, a source of lasting sometimes manic energy. The Greeks believed that it often came from a wound or a yearning that created a deep irresolvable tension. Harnessing and focusing this energy from the tension enabled an individual to operate with maximum effectiveness regardless of the environment.⁷

In the most challenging of personal and professional life experiences, I reflect on and return regularly to my call. It is my center of gravity. It brings perspective, strength, and hope in every life context. For many their call leads them to a place where they are able to see much clearer their investment in the larger humanity. Which leads one to prioritize life differently. Consequently, when challenges come, they don’t seem nearly as difficult because they can be seen in light of a larger purpose.⁸ My father encouraged me, “Michael, do something you love doing and you will never work a day in your life.” I knew at early age I was placed on this earth to help people. In high school I clearly heard God’s voice telling me to serve him in full time Christian service but

⁴ Ruth Haley Barton, *Strengthening the Soul of Your Leadership: Seeking God in the Crucible of Ministry* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2018), 76.

⁵ David G. Benner, *The Gift of Being Yourself: The Sacred Call to Self-Discovery*. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2015), 88, 98.

⁶ As quoted in David Brooks, *The Second Mountain: The Quest for a Moral Life* (New York: Random House, 2019), 121.

⁷ Brooks, *The Second Mountain*, 111.

⁸ Janet Hagberg and Robert Guelich, *The Critical Journey: Stages in the Life of Faith* (Salem, WI: Sheffield, 2005), 139.

took nearly ten years to fully commit to that call. I haven't looked back since accepting it. In the book *The Call*, Oz Guinness writes, "Calling is not only a matter of being and doing what we are but also becoming what we are not yet but are called by God to be."⁹ The heavy demands of Army training and culture can quickly challenge a chaplain to forget their calling.

The writing of Chaplain Kennedy is helpful the issue of the unique role of the chaplains as a professional military religious leader. Surrounded by death, Chaplain Kennedy regularly ruminated in his writings on his place, purpose, and the call of God on his life. While acknowledging his inability to perfectly represent God, nonetheless, he made a choice to be physically present in the most challenging of circumstances. Day after day he ministered with a profound awareness that his Soldiers needed God. He was driven and inspired by his call to faithfully serve God. After burying one of his Soldiers Kennedy writes:

Peter, old chap, I am sorry. I m [sic] awful sorry, it was my fault. I should have told you more. We chaps who wer out [sic] collars wrong way round as queer kind of sign that we preach Christ, we should have reached you and wed [sic] didn't. We re [sic] sorry and it makes us sick. We re [sic] sorry, not only because we love you but because we love the Church. It s [sic] a bad thing when the Church fails to product great saints, but it is a worse thing when she fails to find the heart of the average man.¹⁰

Chaplain Kennedy regularly reflected on his calling to understand why he was in a place of such chaos and grief. He did this primarily through a journal. Reflecting on one's calling can take numerous forms. It could be meditating on a holy text, participating in a worship service, serving, reading an inspiring account of a faith leader, or praying out loud or silently. After spending several years in a German concentration camp, Victor Frankl noted those who died quickly of disease or other malady had nothing outside of the camp they were committed to. However, those who found ways to survive frequently had an external motivation, albeit a relationship or a goal that provided a fire within them which fueled their will to live.¹¹

Reflect Regularly

Chaplains should regularly reflect on their spiritual and emotional health. As a culture, we are distracted. Researchers have catalogued significant data which show a strong correlation between a dependency on cell phones and social media and the inability to be still and be with our own human

⁹ Oz Guinness, *The Call: Finding and Fulfilling the Central Purpose of Your Life* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2018), 30

¹⁰ G.A. Studdert Kennedy, *The Hardest Part* (London: SCM, 2017), 85.

¹¹ Brooks, *The Second Mountain*, 208.

thoughts and emotions. A phone-centric life makes it difficult to be fully present. It has become increasingly challenging for even adults to sit silently or to be comfortable being alone.¹² The connectivity which we all currently take for granted will be severely degraded on our next battlefield. Chaplains are reliant on technology but will have to manage this reality.

Taking the time to reflect, at some point in the day, to notice moods, reactions and the subtle changes in our inner experience within the movements of our circumstances of the day is foundational to a chaplain's spiritual survivability.¹³ As Ruth Haley Barton writes:

One of the most important rhythms for a person in ministry is to establish a constant back and forth motion between engagement and retreat—times when we are engaged in the battle, giving our best energy to taking the next hill, then step back in order to gain perspective, re-strategize and tend our wounds—an inevitability of life in ministry. If an army keeps slogging it out on the battlefield without taking time to regroup, it is doomed to defeat. And so it is with the Christian leader-warrior.¹⁴

Particularly in times of significant stress attention becomes degraded, making it more difficult to give attention to critical matters. However, brains do not get “tired” like an overworked muscle. Recent discoveries in cognitive neuroscience have shown that attention is a constant, it simply gets used differently when distracted.¹⁵ Journaling has been found to be a helpful exercise in promoting emotional and spiritual health for centuries and is one of several spiritual practices highlighted in *Army Field Manual 7-22*.¹⁶ Articulating how one is feeling and experiencing the world at a given moment in a curious, kind, non-judgmental way can set conditions for anyone to be present and responsive to others who are experiencing tragedy in the moment.

David Brenner suggests that people who are afraid to look deeply at themselves will be equally afraid to look deeply at God.¹⁷ The ability to be reflective in isolation will be critical for chaplains' spiritual survivability. Chaplain supervisors may find that conditions make it difficult to check on their subordinates for a whole host of reasons. Each chaplain will need to regularly check on themselves. I have personally found daily journaling

12 Jonathan Haidt, *The Anxious Generation: How the Great Rewiring of Childhood Is causing an Epidemic of Mental Illness* (New York: Penguin, 2024), 207.

13 Benner, *Gift of Being Yourself*, 103.

14 Barton, *Strengthening the Soul*, 123.

15 Amishi Jha, *Peak Mind: Find Your Focus, Own Your Attention, Invest 12 Minutes a Day* (London: Piatkus, 2021), 100.

16 Department of the Army, *Holistic Health and Fitness (FM-7-22)* (Washington, DC: Department of the Army, 2020), 10:2-4.

17 Benner, *The Gift of Being Yourself*, 27.

to be one of the most significant activities I do all day in relation to my emotional and spiritual health. Taking the time to consider the previous day and my responses has given me a tool to reflect upon particularly challenging circumstances for processing and potential adjustments. Self-reflection is a gateway to healthy leadership, “Leadership, even at its best, is terribly demanding, and it is crucial that we argue out our ambivalence about our calling to leadership openly with God so that it doesn’t leak out and create uncertainty to those we are serving.”¹⁸

Chaplains have the potential to influence their organizations. I suggest chaplains develop their own “gauges” to know which way they are trending. Writing might be impractical, depending on conditions, but some type of regular self-assessment has the potential to quickly get chaplains to a healthier state of mind so that they can continue to provide religious support during the chaos of war. I am reminded of the scene in the movie *Saving Private Ryan* when Captain Miller has a private moment away from his squad for a couple minutes to grieve the loss of one of his men. After doing so, he was renewed and able to lead in a healthy and morally sound way. James Bryan Smith, in his “two-minute morning,” asks himself and records his responses to three questions, every day, “What do I need to let go of? What am I grateful for? What do I need to focus on?”¹⁹ These three questions could be used in almost any context to set the conditions for healthy self-awareness. When we lack self-awareness and a way in which to regularly self-assess, we may project onto God and others the fear, anger, greed, and complaints that fester blindly beneath the surface of our lives.²⁰ To lead well as professional religious leaders we must be cognizant of our own emotions in the present. Those who do this consistently can plan, strategize, innovate, connect, and lead even under immensely difficult circumstances.²¹ Jesus, in one of his most seminal sermons, challenges his followers to observe and reflect upon the natural world and think about how the Father takes care of his creation. Jesus continues, “If the Father takes care of the least of these don’t you think he will also take care of you?” (Matthew 7:11, *NIV*). Jesus shows how surroundings are a starting point for reflection, which may help chaplains to reframe their understanding of their own circumstances.

¹⁸ Barton, *Strengthening the Soul*, 81.

¹⁹ 18 James Bryan Smith, “Glorious Morning and Evening Part One”, June 5, 2024, <https://www.thingsabove.org/233/glorious-morning-and-evening-part-one>.

²⁰ John Ortberg, *Eternity Is Now in Session: A Radical Rediscovery of What Jesus Really Taught about Salvation, Eternity, and Getting to the Good Place* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House, 2018), 80.

²¹ Jha, *Peak Mind*, 214.

Chaplain Kennedy is a preeminent example of what regularly reflection in combat. In the middle of the horrors of war, with few resources and little technology, he regularly wrote about what he was experiencing. I am confident that chaplains today can find time and that a rhythm of ritual provides a way to do that.

Rhythm of Ritual

A rhythm of ritual or spiritual practices plan is essential to chaplain spiritual survivability. As “professional military religious leaders,” chaplains must consistently practice what we preach.²² The conditions under which we will be ministering will tax chaplains to the breaking point. Chaplains must consider how to build up a reserve of rituals, rites, and ceremonies emanating from their holy texts that can be readily accessed. Chaplains who come from a liturgical tradition are already quite comfortable utilizing formalized prayers and ceremonies. Ritual frequently does what words alone could never do.

Ritual and ceremony can carry us beyond the explicit verbal and prepositional to enable us to see the circumstance from a different perspective with both depth and clarity.²³ Psychologist Rebecca J. Lester notes, “rituals help define beginnings and ends in our lives. From first birthdays to graduations to weddings, rituals move individuals through various states of social existence.” The result of not marking these events leaves an individual to feel unmoored.²⁴ Scholar of Ritual Studies Ronald Grimes writes: “Unattended, major life events can become a yawning abyss, draining off psychic energy, engendering social confusion, and twisting the course of the life that follows it. Unattended passages become spiritual sinkholes around which hungry ghosts, those greedy personifications of unfinished business, hover.”²⁵ In light of the conditions that our Service Members will be experiencing in LSCO the potential positive impact on religious support of rituals cannot be emphasized enough. James Bryan Smith writes:

We are to intentionally ‘clothe ourselves’ with love. So the love that attracts us to God is something that grows through practice and repetition, and if we want to pursue God in our vocations, we need to immerse ourselves in rituals, rhythms, practices and ceremony whereby the love of God seeps into our very character and is woven into not just how we think but who we are.²⁶

²² Army, *Chaplain Corp Activities (AR 165-1)*, 13.

²³ Thomas Howard, *Evangelical is Not Enough: Worship of God is Liturgy and Sacrament* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1984), 102.

²⁴ Lutheran Hour Ministries, “The Daily Ritual That Can Recharge Your Soul,” *Christianity Today*, December 2023.

²⁵ Michael Norton, *The Ritual Effect: From Habit to Ritual: Harness the Power of Everyday Interactions* (New York: Scribner, 2024), 106.

²⁶ James K.A. Smith, *You Are What You Love: The Spiritual Power of Habit*. (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2016), 186.

Rituals, with their structured patterned behaviors, often connect the people who practice them with one another by invoking a shared past and shared hopes for the future. While rituals don't always affect the outer world of the practitioners, they do affect their inner world.²⁷

Commanders more than ever see the connection between the Soldiers inner world and their "will to fight." Anyone who has served in the military has observed how war changes a person. Rituals provide a systematic opportunity to provide a period at the end of an experience. The "period" sets conditions to allow one to consider what you will bring forward or leave behind from a recent experience.²⁸ As an Anglican Priest, Chaplain Kennedy kept his *Book of Common Prayer* close as he ministered on and off the battlefield. He frequently found himself providing the simplest of ceremonies as he personally buried some of his Soldiers. He completed the task with a makeshift cross he created with debris.²⁹ The best ceremony may be the one grounded in faith tradition of the chaplain that unites meaning and action, and the one in which what occurs on the surface answers most fully to all that is meant.³⁰ Is it that difficult to imagine that chaplains serving in the next conflict could find themselves in a similar position? Chaplains are charged to lead religious communities in their faith tradition and to assist in the overall Army effort to fight and win our nation's wars. To survive spiritually chaplains must practice a rhythm of ritual within their faith tradition.

Conclusion

The principles articulated here are relevant and applicable in nearly any context. Chaplains have a unique opportunity based on their role and position in Army units to lead and must be ready when called upon. Lieutenant General Christopher Donahue, the 18th Airborne Corps Commanding General, has clearly messaged his expectations to his subordinate units. Units should expect to "fight for fourteen days of sustained combat and the preponderance of that will be at night."³¹ Chaplains can prepare themselves spiritually with this scenario in mind. LTG Donahue's charge ought to be a wakeup call for all chaplains. As I consider religious support within LSCO, I recognize even more my need to guard my heart and remain grounded to my faith tradition. Remembering my calling, reflecting regularly and establishing a personal and professional rhythm of ritual will greatly enhance my ability to do so. The principles articulated here are

²⁷ Norton, *The Ritual Effect*, 50.

²⁸ Emily Freeman, *How to Walk Into a Room: The Art of Knowing When to Stay and When to Walk Away* (New York: Harper Collins, 2024), 152.

²⁹ Kennedy, *The Hardest Part*, 81.

³⁰ Howard, *Evangelical is Not Enough*, 102.

³¹ Lieutenant General Christopher Donahue, "Be Unreasonable," *From the Green Notebook*, March 23, 2024, <https://www.fromthegreennotebook.org/123/be-unreasonable>.

relevant and applicable in nearly any context. However, chaplains particularly have a unique opportunity based on their role and position in Army units to lead and must be ready when called upon. The answer to the complex challenge of surviving spiritually in the next conflict is simple and as old as the sacred wisdom of our various religious traditions.

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