

Chaplains to Her Majesty's Forces Speech — General Assembly 2022

Rev Marjory MacLean

Moderator,

Two questions are sometimes asked within earshot of the members of this Committee: one is, What is the point of the Committee?, and the other is, What is the point of having military chaplains?

In my written Report I have explained the legal and structural reasons for having our Committee, this little piece of governance machinery, which is not needed in the same way for the other equally valuable forms of chaplaincy exercised by ministers and others. I won't add to that explanation here.

I'd like to share why I think military chaplaincy is one of the most profoundly important things our Church does. And I mean 'our Church'. Our chaplains don't leave this institution, go off and do the military thing, and then come back again. We don't 'lose' them for their years of service as Regulars or their weeks per year of service as Reservists. They are, throughout, as much ministers of the Kirk as I am.

I could talk of the reach of the Church to thousands of young active adults that are not otherwise reached by us. I could talk of the contribution of Christian wisdom to the moral component of the most difficult and dangerous elements of national life. I could talk of the wonderful wealth of experience, skill and understanding that chaplains bring into later civilian ministry.

But instead I'm just going to describe the single most emotionally difficult moment of my own ministry, as a Reservist chaplain.

A dozen miles off the coast of Libya, in the heat of an August morning in 2016, I was serving for a month as the chaplain of the Navy's survey vessel HMS ENTERPRISE, in the middle of her deployment of more than a year in the migrant rescue efforts of a European Union Task Force. At first light each day, the spotter plane of the nearby Italian aircraft carrier would find the horribly overcrowded rubber boats that had been pushed off from beaches in the Bay of Tripoli under cover of darkness, with only enough diesel to make it into international

waters. You see, our presence was part of the smugglers' business plan, and it was rescue by us or certain death.

But even in the boats we rescued not everyone survived. On that unforgettable day, with over 700 migrants eventually squeezed onto our quarterdeck, we discovered that two women had died – probably crushed – in the lower layer of humanity crammed onto one of the inadequate inflatable craft. And tragically, each of the two was travelling with family members who were distraught. The sister of one of these ladies was an East African woman, French-speaking and wearing a wooden cross round her neck. Space was found for her in the makeshift first aid station under the cover of a workshop near the deck, to allow her to grieve. I was called for to pray with her, and I brought with me a young officer whose recent degree happened to be in French, as I knew my French would not be up to it.

We must have looked ridiculous, he and I, wearing full white paper PPE long before we have all become used to it in more recent times, and kneeling on the uncomfortable, hot metal deck in front of the woman, as I held her hands in mine. I extemporised a prayer, with my young colleague at my shoulder translating as best he could. And then, suddenly, the sorrowing figure took a breath and began to pray; desolate, lamenting prayer, desperate, fast prayer, too fast for the young lieutenant beside me to keep up with translation. He looked at me in panic, and I waved him away. It didn't matter to me what she was saying; she was praying now her own sorrow and need, and I only needed to keep holding her hands.

That, Moderator, is what these ministers do.

I present the Report of the Committee and move its Deliverance.