

Committee on Chaplains to His Majesty's Forces

Convener's Speech, General Assembly 2024

Moderator, it is my privilege to present the report of the Committee on Chaplains to His Majesty's Forces.

Moderator, our Armed Forces, of all three Services, are being asked to do more and more. I've heard at first hand in the past year of the increased pressures on resources, on personnel and their families. As a nation, we continue to support NATO, and our people are deployed globally on so many different operational fronts – in the Baltic states, in the Red Sea and Arabian Gulf, in Cyprus and the Mediterranean. We all know the context of the last months and years, and we truly pray for the peace of the world, and we fully support our Armed Forces personnel who do their duty in our name.

Your predecessor Moderator, Mrs Foster-Fulton and I, had the opportunity to hear at first hand, during her visit to the Royal Air Force, of the Chaplain's role – the spiritual and pastoral care of military personnel and their families. We were humbled by those in command who gave great credit to the work done by their chaplaincy teams, of all faiths and beliefs, and the sacrifice they make in their daily ministries. Even if not able to fully articulate it, the command were fully aware of the added value that the chaplain brings to a warship, a regiment or a busy air station. The chaplain is fully a part of the military, but somehow outside it too, and the sailor, soldier or airmen and women sees a minister or priest or rabbi, someone who cares, who listens, and is the friend and advisor to all.

Every Chaplain sitting before you will have their own stories, of caring for the spiritual, pastoral and moral care of their people, or simply at times just being there, representing their own faith community, in our case being somehow the living embodiment of Christ in that place.

Wherever our military personnel are, it is the ministry of Christ's church, and in our name, that our Ministers take up the call, with the personal sacrifices that come with any ministry, for the Chaplain and their family.

And that is where I come to the heart of our report this year. Our ability to recruit Church of Scotland ministers to serve as military Chaplains is no longer just an identified risk, it is now a big issue.

Our numbers are at historic lows, in the regular force, 2 in the RAF, 3 in the Royal Navy and 13 in the Army, with up to 50% of the latter expected to retire in the next few years. We have gaps in our reserve forces too. Since the blue book went to print, we have endorsed one parish minister for reserve service in the Army. Hopefully, by this time next year, he will be here in uniform.

The issue, and we want to be clear with the church, is that the Church of Scotland could more or less disappear from the chaplaincies of the 3 Services. That would, in our view, be a disaster. We pray to God to increase vocations to this particular ministry, and would ask the whole church to pray with us and for us. But the problem is this, only 105 parish ministers are 49 or under, and only 24 are 39 or under. These figures clearly demonstrate the problem we have, but should alarm the whole church too.

I would invite any eligible Minister to get in touch with myself, or any member of the Committee, if you would like to begin to explore what ministry in the Forces could mean for you, either full-time as a Regular or as a Reservist. I cannot commend it more highly to you.

Moderator, today is an opportunity again to give our thanks to those who serve in this unique community, that in the highs and lows, they may know that they are held in the prayers of the church, and that we as a General Assembly values highly what they do.

Moderator, to close, a message of hope. Ukrainian Chaplains have been training at the Armed Forces Chaplaincy Centre, a part of the United Kingdom Defence Academy. Everyone has been moved by their strength, their resilience, and truly the love of their own land that they fight for every day. They gifted the Principal of the house, Rev Dr Mark Davidson, a Naval Chaplain who is with us today, an icon **SHOW ICON** depicting the destruction of Ukraine, the sorrow of the angels, and the intercession of Mary for those who are suffering. They left to return to Ukraine, for immediate deployment to the front line. They left grateful, uplifted, hopeful for a better tomorrow, trusting in God and their faith in Jesus Christ. Let us also pray for them today, and for their ministry among their people. **REMOVE ICON PHOTO**

Moderator, I am not a Commissioner and would invite the Principal Clerk to move the deliverance.

Moderator, one of the members of His Grace's party is Air Vice Marshal Tim Jones, Assistant Chief of the Air Staff. Moderator, should you choose to invite him, and if it be the will of the General Assembly, I am sure the Air Vice Marshal would be willing address us.