Ministry lessons from war

Bruce Manners

When rifleman Burton Eccles came under fire during World War I, he reported heavy casualties and a bombardment punctuated by "the cries of wounded men." According to Eccles, "Four men had their heads blown off. Then—thank the Lord—our artillery [answered]." Eccles survived.[1] Serving at the front line brought with it the constant threat of death and a sharpening of focus on life and the sometimes harsh and hard realities of faith.

Eccles's story is one account from Richard Schweitzer's recent study of Christian faith among English and United States soldiers during World War I, *The Cross and the Trenches*. It's a welcome addition to understanding human response to war. His work also brings lessons for ministry that are remarkably current and important for us, considering the role and influence of chaplains in the front lines today.



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A complex calling

Ministry is a complex calling; it often demands that practitioners take on a variety of roles that may appear to be outside ministry. During the war, chaplains were expected to provide religion *and* recreation, which created some confusion. Anglican chaplain Geoffrey Gordon explained: "Mr. God or M[onsieur] Cinema—for which does the chaplain stand? Does the soldier think of his Padre in the main as the representative of God, or chiefly as the provider of canteens, cinemas and creature comforts?"

Gordon admitted that if a chaplain maintained only a spiritual role, he would come into contact with a limited number of men. To know the battalion as a whole, he would have to "throw himself into a number of minor activities, and run the risk of getting but rarely on to a higher spiritual level."[2] A chaplain "has to be the comrade of all, friend of the weary, helper of the weak, and light-bringer in the dark hour," wrote Lauchlan MacLean Watt. Watt catalogued what other duties the chaplains were called on to perform: from running errands, censoring letters, and serving as stretcher bearers or hospital orderlies. They spoke to senior officers as equals on some matters, and often acted as mediators between officers and enlisted men. They also wrote letters to the families of those killed.[3]

But they also had to be careful that their spiritual role was not diminished. Roman Catholic chaplain G. L. Smith recognized that a "good chaplain" worked for the welfare of his men in whatever way he could, including their recreations and their comforts. "But this is not his principle duty, and if there is any conflict between the claims of these different interests he must attend first to the spiritual." Charles Doudney, an Anglican chaplain, agreed: "Certainly we do try to help in the writing of letters and in concerts and the games, but this is apart from our real work, which is to deliver the message of the other world."[4]

Developing priorities is essential for effective ministry.

Present truth

Christianity has always had a message for the times. The challenge of preaching is to make the Christian message attractive and meaningful to listeners in their time and place. When Edward Flottman heard the preaching of a "soldier priest," Lieutenant Blackman, who later became a chaplain, he wrote, "His sermons simply radiate with . . . Christian thought such as attracts the young man of today."[5] Blackman made the Christian message real.

E. S. Curr, however, had a different report of a service after his battalion's "first calamity in the Somme battle." Some 150 soldiers turned up to a hastily called voluntary religious service. The troops had been through a "shattering experience" and knew they'd go back for a "second dose."

Though not "habitual churchgoers," these soldiers wanted to be "assured that all was well with their mates, and reassured that all would be well with them in what lay ahead." Curr saw this

as "a chance in a million for a Clergyman" to give a simple service: "an attempt at a hymn, a brief straight talk, and all would have gone away glad." Instead, he witnessed a "strange Service" mainly memorable for the "ineptitude of the Chaplain," who "blathered" on for nearly 20 minutes about the various meanings of some Greek word or another. Curr and his mates "walked away feeling irritated and cheated." He said: "It was as if we had gone to a Church, opened the door, stepped inside, and found it bare and empty—there was nothing there."[6]

Community

Though ministers may perform a different role to others within our church(es) and our communities, we're fellow pilgrims. As such, only as we journey with others can we be better ministers for them. During World War I, any chaplain who stayed away from the front lines in relatively safe zones was perceived as "an inauthentic coward, an unworthy messenger of God."

G. A. Studdert Kennedy offered this advice to a newly arrived chaplain, Theodore Hardy: "The Devil tries to get at you by telling you that you could really do no good in the line, and that you were more use alive than dead. It was the Devil and a lie—the more Padres died in battle doing Christ-like deeds, the better for the Church." Hardy later won a Victoria Cross, Britain's highest honour for valor in the face of fire. He wrote that serving in the line was the "key to the whole thing. Work in the front line and [the soldiers] will listen to you. If you stay back, you are wasting your time. Men will forgive anything but a lack of courage."[7]

J. R. Skirth reported a different attitude shown while waiting for an "alfresco Holy Communion service." A German plane appeared overhead followed by the sound of incoming artillery rounds. "[During the shelling] those two priests, dressed in the cloth which advertised their faith, had fled at the first inklings of personal danger to themselves! They, God's agents on earth, of the church into which I . . . had been baptised and confirmed, had considered the safety of their skins more important than the spiritual health of my soul. . . . At the very approach of danger, their faith was so slender, their trust in God so feeble they scuffled away like rabbits into their burrows!"[8]

Chaplain Evers demonstrated an authentic approach to ministry when he spent an hour and a half before a battle encouraging the men to put their lives into God's keeping before "we [underscore "we"] went over the top at 3:10 a.m."[9] Effective ministry is preformed not only in preparing people for the battle but in being at their side while they fight their battle, whatever that may be.

Faith that works

As witnessed in the immediate aftermath of terrorist attacks on the United States and the temporary increase in church attendance, tragedy can cause a religious response, but it tends to be short lasting. A faith that lasts is based on more than emotional response. The strongest faith has the head and the heart working in tandem.

There was an expectation during World War I of a revival among the troops, particularly those serving in the front lines. Some chaplains attempted to take advantage of the situation and encouraged revivals—more negatively called "wind-up religion"—but they were unsuccessful. It's true there was often "a temporary emotional flight to religion that usually occurred on the eve of battle or during bombardments." John L. Golob wrote that under shell fire, soldiers "who had never thought of prayers, got to wondering why they had never before thought of God and said a sneaking sort of prayer to Him."[10]

Some soldiers did find religion while fighting at the front,[11] but it appears that, overall, those who had faith maintained it if they survived the war, while those who had no faith continued to lack it. The war increased fear but not lasting faith.

Change most often occurred among those who had a casual or lapsed faith, which intensified on the eve of battle or during periods of danger. Some of these soldiers carried their revived faith into the postwar world.[12]

Credibility was also lost when chaplains assumed too much. The belief that God is on "our side" is a case in point. This belief appears to be widespread. When Ernest Heckroth, an American enlisted man, came across a belt buckle engraved with *Gott mit uns* ("God with us" in German), he found the thought disorienting because he had assumed that God "was with us,"[13] ("us" being, of course, the Americans).

A. J. Abraham summed up well the problem with this belief, and the problem the chaplains faced: "[The chaplain] would ask God to look after us and biff the enemy, while only a few miles away an equally worthy, or unworthy, German priest was no doubt asking God to do for them all the things that our man was requesting for us. . . . Surely we were putting God in an impossible situation."[14]

That doesn't mean prayers from either side were wrong, but they must come out of an understanding that God is bigger than our personal desire and national aspirations. Leaps in logic lead to loss of credibility.

When emotions are raw and running high, promoting a credible faith is as important as it is in the everyday. And it proves to be more lasting.

We pastors—as chaplains to troops in the final World War—can learn from those who have gone before. I doubt we need convincing of the complexity of ministry or that we need a message that fits our times. But we do need to remember we are fellow pilgrims, and we must have the wisdom that appeals to both the heart and the head. Most importantly we need to help people understand a truth discovered by Harold Jones, a soldier at the front line. He wrote, "Am relying on God to bring me through. He is a [person's] only hope in this terrible business." M

1 Richard Schweitzer, *The Cross and the Trenches: Religious Faith and Doubt Among British and American Great War Soldiers* (Westport, Conn.: Praeger, 2003), 37.
2 Ibid., 72
3 Ibid., 65
4 Ibid., 72.
5 Ibid., 42
6 Ibid., 186.
7 Ibid., 167.
8 Ibid., 207.
9 Ibid., 131.
10 Ibid., 187.
11 Ibid., 262.
12 Ibid., 260.
13 Ibid., 203.
14 Ibid.