NATIONAL CONFERENCE ON MINISTRY TO THE ARMED FORCES

A WHITE PAPER
THE FUTURE OF CHAPLAINCY EDUCATION: TRENDS, COMPETENCIES, AND STAKEHOLDERS
Who is NCMAF?

We are Protestant and Roman Catholic, Jewish and Orthodox, Buddhist and Islamic, and we span the total theological spectrum of religious life in the United States. We are a uniquely American organization, sustained by the First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution, and found nowhere else in the world. Our members represent all major faith communities in America in a mutually supportive relationship.

Our members endorse chaplains for service in the Armed Forces on behalf of their respective religious organizations. They are the point of contact between the Department of Defense and over 150 religious denominations and faith groups. We recruit, endorse and provide oversight for clergy-persons who desire to serve as chaplains in any one of the branches of America’s Armed Forces. Our common vision is clergy-persons who are credible, committed to their faith, open to all persons, able to meet all military standards, and who represent the highest standards of their faith communities.

Mission Statement

NCMAF is the primary point of contact between faith-based groups and military chaplaincy; connecting endorsers and celebrating religious diversity.

Vision

NCMAF will advocate for the First Amendment and provide a unified voice on religious freedom and religious diversity.

“Celebrating the Blessing of Religious Diversity”

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January 2017
Executive Summary

The provision of educated and competent chaplains in the context of the military services is the product of joint cooperation between the sending faith traditions and the Department of Defense (DOD). Because of the theological breadth of the faith traditions in DOD, there is great diversity in the processes of selection and education of religious ministry professionals. This includes differences in the knowledge, skills, and attributes required to serve as fully qualified religious functionaries in their faith community. On the Department of Defense (DOD) side, each of the military departments have educational institutions for clergy selected to become chaplains that focus on the military specific training and education required for all newly commissioned officers; enculturation into the military community; and the contextualization of civilian clergy knowledge, skills and attributes. In the past these parallel and largely independent processes have served the faith traditions and DOD relatively well. However, given the increasing religious complexity and diversity of American society and trends in theological education, stakeholders increasingly recognize that chaplains in the 21st century and beyond will need a different set of civilian and military core competencies to meet the challenges of the new environment. In order to meet the future needs of the Department of Defense, these stakeholders (DOD, faith communities, educational institutions, and accrediting agencies) will need to forge a partnership focused on identifying, educating, and training these competencies.
Introduction

The provision of educated and competent chaplains in the context of the military services is the product of joint cooperation between the sending faith traditions and the Department of Defense. In addition to specific selection or ordination processes, many of these faith traditions have institutions that educate and train prospective clergy in the required knowledge, skills, and attributes required to serve as fully qualified religious functionaries in their community and play a significant role in their faith formation. Other faith traditions depend on independent educational institutions to provide the necessary theological training and use other avenues for faith formation. As one would expect, this creates a great deal of diversity both in the selection processes and educational standards among faith traditions. On the Department of Defense (DOD) side, each of the military departments have specific educational institutions for clergy selected to become chaplains. These institutions focus on military specific training and education required for all newly commissioned officers, enculturation into the military community, and contextualization of civilian clergy knowledge, skills and attributes. In the past these parallel and independent processes have served the faith traditions and the DOD relatively well. However, given the increasing religious complexity and diversity of American society, stakeholders have become aware that while there is great continuity with the past, the chaplain of the 21st century and beyond will need a different set of civilian and military skills to meet the challenges of the new environment.

This paper examines current trends in theological education and their impact on DOD, proposes a number of educational core competences that meet the challenges of the new cultural realities, and address the need for a wider partnership between the DOD, the faith communities, educational institutions and accrediting agencies in order to meet the future needs of the Department of Defense.

Understanding Distinct Institutional Roles

Before we continue to the heart of these issues we will briefly examine the distinct differences between the civilian theological education of clergy preparing for service as military chaplains and the responsibilities of the military departments. Clergy are expected to be fully qualified representatives of their faith tradition with at least two years of full-time paid ministry before they are endorsed as military chaplains in an active status. While clergy may take some military chaplain focused training while they are students through the services’ candidate programs, the chaplain schools by their nature and limitations do not teach distinctive theological content or faith specific pastoral skills. Their focus is on helping clergy understand unique service cultures and fulfill minimum commissioning requirements. All of the knowledge, skills and attributes expected of a fully functioning
faith leader must be obtained by an applicant for the chaplaincy prior to entry into service as a military chaplain.

In recognition of this requirement, the services maintain specific professional and educational qualifications that apply across the board to all traditions wishing to endorse chaplains into the military. These rules may be found in Department of Defense Instruction (DoDI) 1304.28, Guidance for the Appointment of Chaplains for the Military Departments. A “Religious Ministry Professional” (RMP), as defined by that document, must have a baccalaureate degree with no less than 120 semester hours (180 quarter hours) and a post-baccalaureate graduate degree in the field of theological or related studies from qualifying educational institutions. In order to qualify, the graduate degree program must require no fewer than 72 semester hours (108 quarter hours) of graduate-level work. The schools conferring the degree must be accredited or their credits must be certified as acceptable by the registrars of three different accredited educational institutions that maintain programs for the preparation of religious ministry professionals.

In terms of curriculum content, DoDI1304.28 only states that a program “may include graduate courses in pastoral counseling, social work, religious administration, and similar disciplines when one-half of the earned graduate credits include topics in general religion, world religions, the practice of religion, theology, religious philosophy, religious ethics, and/or the foundational writings from the applicant’s religious tradition” (p. 5). This is a very generic paradigm open to a range of interpretation. In light of the current challenges in the military environment it is time for all stakeholders to reexamine the critical core competencies required for service as a military chaplain.

Identifying Critical Core Competencies

Given the very different challenges of military service, the theological institutions of endorsing faith traditions need to focus on a few core competencies to better prepare students seeking to enter military chaplaincy and to ensure their competitiveness. While some institutions have separate chaplaincy focused tracks, educators at other schools will need to look for ways to offer these courses as electives or integrate these competencies into the already existing curriculum. The following are broad core competencies that require exploration for their importance in military ministries.

- **Counseling:** Counseling service men and women and their families dominates the time of chaplains at the initial ranks of service. Clergy seeking military chaplaincy will need to develop significant counseling skills that integrate their theology with practice and are consistent with professional standards of care. Since each branch of the Armed Forces have a comprehensive approach to
service member fitness, they will also need to think through how their approach will integrate with the entire fitness team. Unfortunately, unless an M.Div. program is designed with a counseling focus, most only require one or two pastorally focused counseling courses. Many of these do not include significant education and skills training on the issues of moral injury, post-traumatic stress, and suicide which are of concern to service members who have experienced war-time deployments. While these deployments are less frequent since the end of the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan, these issues will persist for some time among the middle grade and senior ranks of the military who served in these conflicts. In addition, since the preparation for and conduct of conflict is the primary mission of the military, chaplains must be prepared for the impact of future conflicts. Military service stresses marriages because of deployment and frequent relocation. Future chaplains must be able to articulate a model of pastoral counseling and care that is compatible with their theological tradition yet executable in a pluralistic environment committed to care for all.

**Communication:** Another core competency is communications. While this includes the historically significant and important skill of preaching or homiletics found in many faith traditions, it cannot be limited to this skill set. Programs should prepare students to effectively communicate their ideas in written and oral form in a variety of venues. This is a significant skill for their future advisory role to commanders. Faith-based skills and content must be taught at the theological educational institutions, however both civilian and the military schools should teach broader communication skills and practice them in the classroom setting. More assignments should involve oral presentations as evaluative assessments and writing standards must remain significantly high.

**Clergy Identity:** Sometimes referred to as pastoral identity, clergy identity deals with the religious ministry professional’s self-concept, a reflection on who they are and what they are called to do. This includes reflection on their core beliefs, calling, competence, character, construction (faith formation), and connectedness (Bush, 2016). Because clergy come to the military as fully functioning religious ministry professionals, their primary calling and identity is to their faith tradition. That calling is worked out in a narrower call to service in a military context, a temporary call even for those who serve until retirement. It is valuable to explore the unique aspects of a “chaplaincy identity.” However,

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**Critical Core Competencies**

- Counseling
- Communication
- Clergy Identity
- Faith Formation
- Theological Engagement/Integration
- Faith Specific Theology
- Religious Worldviews
- Principled Pluralism
theologically, ecclesiastically, and administratively the pastoral or clergy identity is primary. The concept of calling should be explored in both civilian and military educational institutions.

- **Faith Formation:** This area is primarily the domain of the faith traditions, and their affiliated educational institutions, and is based on their worldview and theological frameworks. Students should be able to articulate a model of what their tradition teaches about “maturing in the faith” in terms of its theological underpinnings and practical application. Chaplain service schools should encourage continued formation even if they are limited in their ability to teach specific theological content. They can also discuss how supervisors evaluate subordinate engagement in formation practices without evaluating content through the use of active coaching techniques.

- **Theological Engagement/Integration:** Theological educational institutions have a role in encouraging ongoing theological engagement and integration as understood within their faith tradition. The ability to successfully navigate religious ministry in a pluralistic environment is directly related to a chaplain’s ability to integrate their theology into their ministry without compromise of their faith tradition’s standards. Meeting the religious and spiritual needs of service members and families requires a great deal of theological maturity and reflection: the ability to identify core theological commitments and to practically exercise those commitments through the development of religious ministry approaches that meet the spiritual readiness needs of a variety of constituents. Clergy should be able to articulate a theological understanding of human flourishing within their tradition as an aid to this process. Chaplain service schools should encourage continued theological integration in all courses at every level. Evaluative assessments should require students to move to the upper levels of Blooms Taxonomy (analysis, synthesis, and evaluation) by asking them to create models that engage and integrate their theology.

- **Faith Specific Theology:** While it may seem to go without saying, ensuring that graduates understand the core of their theological tradition is at the heart of a theological educational institution’s mission. This is generally not an issue at denominationally sponsored institutions, but may be a problem for students attending non-affiliated schools where theology is treated in a more general way. In these cases, it is the role of the faith tradition to ensure that their prospective faith representatives have a clear understanding of their theology. One area of recommended theological study would be their faith tradition’s understanding of
the nature of evil and suffering.

- **Religious Worldviews:** Theological institutions should teach basic core knowledge about differing religious worldviews. The focus should be on how to ask questions to understand the underlying worldview of other faith traditions as well as their tradition’s view on dealing with different religious traditions in a pluralistic environment. Service schools can focus on how these skills may be integrated in understanding differing religious worldviews internally to the military community, and externally to the advisement role of chaplains as religious worldview experts in a deployed environment.

- **Principled Pluralism:** A principled view of pluralism has always been a critical core competency of the military chaplaincy. Students must be able to articulate their theological understanding of the nature of pluralism and how to function in a pluralistic environment given their theological worldview. In addition, they must understand the constitutional, historical, and legal basis for pluralism in American culture. Other helpful subjects related to this competency could include a discussion on the nature of civility and the definition of tolerance.

- **Leadership:** Most theological institutions offer some level of education on pastoral leadership. This generally focuses on navigating issues of ecclesial polity and congregational leadership. While the military offers its own education and training on leadership, clergy entering the chaplaincy immediately serve at higher levels in the command structure than their line officer counterparts and chaplain students would benefit from an overview of basic leadership theory. The integration of basic leadership theory with the theology of their faith tradition would be the ideal. Cognate subjects could include emotional intelligence, relational intelligence, cultural intelligence, organizational culture and change, project management, and servant leadership.

**Current Trends in Theological Education**

The Association of Theological Schools (ATS), the “gold standard” accrediting body for 270 graduate schools of theology in the United States and Canada, identify several trends (Tanner, 2013 and Wheeler, 2013) that we need to be consider when reflecting on the future of chaplaincy education. Here are a few of these observations.

- ATS member schools have enrolled and graduated record numbers of two-year professional and academic MA students. Enrollment in Master of Divinity (M.Div.) and non-degree programs has steadily declined for nearly a decade (Tanner, 2013, p.1-2).
• ATS member schools have enrolled record numbers of minority and international students. If this trend continues the number of minority students will be the majority of the student population by 2025 (Tanner, p. 2). The number of women students has remained steady at about 37% since 1999, but have declined from previous growth (Wheeler, p. 8).

• ATS member schools have enrolled record numbers of 50-plus and 20-something students. The fastest growing category is the over fifty students at 22% (Tanner, p. 5). The number of 30 and 40-something students which has historically been the pool for the M.Div. degree is declining (Wheeler, p. 9).

• ATS member schools report that the number of students who have taken at least one course on-line or at an extension location has increased over the last decade. While general enrollment has declined, enrollment in distance education has increased (Wheeler, p. 8-9).

What are the impacts? The racial/ethnic population is projected to become the majority in the United States population by 2040. The record enrollment of minority students is a positive sign for DOD chaplain recruiters who will need to keep pace with the increasing minority population in the military. However, both the older median student age of the seminary population and diminishing number of MDiv students will result in a smaller number of qualified applicants and increased competition among the services for the same declining pool. There will continue to be challenges in recruiting women as well as Roman Catholics to serve in the military chaplaincies.

Stakeholders will need to look for ways to increase interest in service as a military chaplain. This means that recruiting efforts will have to aggressively create a positive environment among populations that might pursue this path such as currently serving or separating military personnel, and age-eligible college graduates in the faith tradition’s population. These trends also have implications for the future delivery of theological education.

Current Trends in Theological Education
• A rise in two-year academic and professional Master of Arts degree students and a decline in MDiv students
• A record number of minority and international student enrollments
• A decline in the number of 30 and 40-something students which has historically been the pool for the MDiv degree
• An increase in the number of students who have taken at least one course on-line or at an extension location

Designing Future Education

We have briefly examined the distinct roles of civilian theological versus military education and training institutions, possible broad competencies, and current trends in
theological education. Let us now consider how these impact the design of education in civilian and military educational institutions.

**Civilian Education**

While there have been recent gains in attendance at theological schools, the long-term trend has been downward. Growth has occurred primarily in degree programs that do not qualify graduates to apply for the military chaplaincy. While economic pressures have been a factor, some of the downturn results from a general questioning of the value of formal theological education as a qualification for ministry. The growth of independent, non-denominational bodies that require less than the M.Div. for qualification for ministry is also a factor. In spite of these trends, on-line education did contribute to small to moderate growth in institutions that offer this option (Wheeler, p. 9). Accreditng agencies have faced this new reality in their evaluation of non-traditional approaches to education and training. The *ATS Annual Report for 2015* reported that “more than 23,000 students are enrolled in at least one distance education course for credit, and more than 133 ATS schools offer comprehensive distance education programs, with a dozen schools approved to offer M.Div. and/or professional MA programs largely or completely online.”

While the military chiefs of chaplains have generally been concerned about the quality of distance versus resident theological education and the ability of students to be spiritually formed in a non-resident context, economic and social realities will require a re-examination of these issues. Potential students who grew up digitally fluent and are used to communicating via social media, and who cannot or prefer not to leave their employment to pursue a brick and mortar education will demand the savvy use of digital education platforms. Even ATS has softened on the accreditation of digital platforms of delivery. The issue is not the platform, but maintaining standards. Daniel Aleshire (2015), the outgoing president of ATS writes:

Several schools have been permitted by the board of commissioners of the ATS Commission on Accrediting to begin offering a significant amount of their program online. For many of them, that has contributed to enrollment. There remain many questions about distance learning in theological education, particularly the point of spiritual, professional and personal formation. But the classroom is not the only place where persons are formed for ministry.

ATS, in looking at online programs, looks very carefully at how the congregation or place of ministry is utilized as an educational resource in those online programs.
Aleshire (2015) correctly notes that the “classroom is not the only place where persons are formed for ministry.” The more formative impacts came through personal coaching and mentoring; involvement in congregational life before, during and after my formal education; denominational connections; and most importantly my post-seminary initial pastoral experience. Non-traditional methods of education and training must leverage these means

An example of a promising shift in theological education is the development of competency-based programs. Writing for In Trust, Charla Long (2016) describes this approach:

Competency-based education means that students progress through their educational program by mastering certain prescribed skills, knowledge, abilities, and attitudes. Instead of being given a list of classes that must be passed in order to graduate, students in competency-based programs receive a résumé of competencies that must be mastered before earning their credential or degree.

Other approaches use a combination of a competency-based approach and traditional classroom instruction. The programs are grounded in the congregations of the faith tradition either at large centers or de-centralized locations often digitally linked.

Rather than simply opposing economic and social realities, stakeholders, many of whom did not grow up digitally fluent will have to stretch their vision and leverage younger digitally savvy pastors and educators. Educational institutions need to design new de-centralized approaches that cater to the needs of the new generation of religious ministry professionals and the cultural and religious trends which shape their context.

Military Education

Chaplain service schools must also re-examine how they deliver the education and training of religious ministry professionals. In the past, military education and training (at least until the senior levels) often depended on the identification of tasks to be accomplished in the field. Courses were designed to generally train rather than educate to these tasks. However, beyond the basic entry level, these tasks do not easily translate into educational competencies that can be taught and assessed in the classroom. As discussed above, key reforms in the military education of chaplains could focus on re-engineering course development around a competency-based approach. Some tasks will of course remain that must simply be trained during a chaplains career. However, in general, competencies, similar
to the current task lists, should be identified for every level of service (generally by rank) and in some cases by position or specialized ministry contexts such as hospital chaplains. These competencies should include skills, knowledge, abilities, and attitudes defined by measurable standards and generally at the upper levels of Blooms Taxonomy more appropriate for graduate-level education.

Because of rapid changes in the environment, another key reform is the adoption of rapid course design methodologies. The rapidity of change in the military environment demands more flexibility in rapid course design that can quickly adapt to changing environments. Course changes under the current design approaches often take months or years to implement. A just-in-time training approach would effectively support talent management enterprises. Educators and designers at the service schools need to look at the use of hybrid courses that minimize the costlier time in residence and that leverages the desire to create lifelong learners who continue to develop knowledge and skills while in the field.

The recent creation of a Joint Special Operations University (JSOU) graduate certificate program for Special Operations Chaplains provides an example of how educators can use rapid design and fielding. JSOU designers and educator convened a team of 15-20 subject matter experts for a 3-day design workshop in August 2015. The team, with an eye towards basic course objectives, and parameters, designed three courses focusing on terminal and enabling learning requirements, as well as enduring course themes. JSOU selected an instructor of record to design each of the three sub-courses to include the content for the Interactive Media Instructional (IMI) materials and resident phases. The initial instructor completed the 4-week on-line coursework in 4 months for a January 2016 launch. This was followed by a two-week resident phase in February 2016. During the pilot course, instructional and design teams used evaluative and summative assessments to rapidly review and modify digital and resident content. The program emphasized the themes of pastoral identity, and theological integration, and the use of the upper level Bloom’s taxonomic categories of synthesis, analysis, and creation. Using grading rubrics that identified critical content while allowing for theological integration from the student’s faith tradition, instructors required students to develop frameworks for pastoral identity, spiritual resilience, and crisis counseling and pastoral care.

Chaplains schools, and further training, must make an investment in more robust staff development with skills in rapid design and knowledge of current technology. The services shortsightedly cut many of these positions in the past decades thinking that instructors with sound knowledge and skill base could make up the difference. While good instructors can make up a lot of ground on a class by class basis, schools need a skilled team of designers to build the overall curriculum design and put the knife edge on instructional delivery. As at JSOU, school leadership could opt to contract both the design expertise as well as subject matter experts in desired content.
Connecting Stakeholders

On May 10, 2016, Chaplain Karen Meeker, an Army War College Fellow studying at the Institute of World Politics, convened a panel with the hope of beginning a dialogue between civil and military stakeholders concerned with chaplain education in the 21st century and beyond. Chaplain Meeker’s premise was that at the turn of the 20th century cooperation among a variety of faith traditions established a gold standard of theological education that raised the quality of military chaplains (Meeker, 2016). On the other hand, a more unilateral decision by DOD at the beginning of the 21st century to reduce graduate educational hours from 90 to 72. Subsequently, Liberty University followed by several other seminaries to include traditionally mainline schools began to offer new 72 hour MDiv programs that resonated with many students, particularly those seeking quicker entry into the military. Chaplain Meeker proposes that this resulted in a decrease in quality in some ministry skills. In addition, the high demand for chaplains during the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan exacerbated this problem. The military departments gave waivers that diluted the 2-year post educational pastoral experience requirement.

As the wars came to a close, the military service chiefs, concerned with what they perceived as a decrease in chaplain quality, looked for a way to increase the quality. In addition to tightening up the parameters for post educational pastoral experience, the Navy examined the issue of the MDiv degree programs that were heavily or entirely offered by distance education. Their solution was to set a minimum standard for resident hours. The way that this was initially handled created consternation among schools with such programs and chaplain endorsers. Eventually, the Center for Chaplaincy at Liberty University, now under the leadership of retired Air Force Colonel and Chaplain school commandant Steve Keith, again took the lead and modified their MDiv from 72 to 93 hours. They also require students to have a mentor, attend six courses in residence, and serve a six-credit internship. Liberty potentially decreased their revenue and enrollment by making this bold move but felt it was necessary to create a quality curriculum for preparing the most effective chaplains for the military. Others schools soon made similar moves. These changes avoided a potential conflict and legal action between stakeholders.

The stakeholders could have avoided much of the angst over this process, if as Chaplain Meeker argues in her paper, a formal structure for civil-military dialogue existed to facilitate a discussion on educational issues. Who are these stakeholders? The list would certainly contain the military departments, particularly the offices of the Chiefs of Chaplains; the Armed Forces Chaplain Board (AFCB), a DOD-level
organization for the discussion of mutual areas of interest among the service Chiefs; theological educational institutions from a broad range of faith traditions; accrediting bodies like the Association of Theological Schools; and the endorsers of the various traditions more easily represented through the National Conference on Ministry to the Armed Forces. Because of the unique nature of the Armed Forces Chaplain Board as a DOD entity, direct appointment of a civilian endorser or an organization representing endorsers such as NCMAF to the AFCB would be problematic. However, one approach might be the creation of a best practices advisory committee consisting of the major stakeholders with ATS representing the educators, NCMAF representing endorsers, and AFCB representing the needs of the service. The initial goal of the working group would be to create what Meeker calls a “platinum standard” of theological education and professional development (Meeker, p. 18).

Another cognate area of potential civil-military cooperation is the development of standards for professional certification. While a number of professional chaplain certifications exist, many of them are specifically focused on the clinical context of pastoral ministry. While there are certainly professional commonalities, and military chaplains serving in clinical settings should be encouraged to seek that credentialing, service as a military chaplain has some very unique dimensions that deserve a different approach to professional credentialing. In order to succeed in the long term, the developers of such a standard would need to work with endorsers to identify mutually agreed key professional competencies but keep broad enough not to exclude faith traditions with differing educational and ministry standards or different theological outlooks. DOD considered the issue of faith traditions that did not require a standard MDiv degree when they originally moved to the 72-hour standard for theological education.

Conclusion

The religious landscape of American society is changing and becoming increasingly complex and diverse. NCMAF recognizes that while there is great continuity with what has gone before, the chaplain of the 21st century, and beyond, will need a different set of skills to meet this challenging new environment. We must collaborate to identify the specific impacts upon the military chaplaincy and recommend core educational and training competencies to mitigate these impacts. We must also re-examine educational delivery methods and the processes that shape pastoral identity and faith formation. As the body comprising the largest number, and most diverse group of endorsers represented in the DOD, NCMAF is ready to play a major role in bringing together America’s faith communities and the Armed Forces. As one would expect, differences in the specific selection/ordination and educational processes creates a great deal of diversity among faith traditions. Navigating these differences is not always easy. Yet, all of us involved in providing chaplains to the military services agree that the men and women of the Armed Forces, along with their families, and the DOD civilian workforce, deserve the best religious support possible.
Reference List:


