

TOUCHING LIVES IN ALL THE HARD PLACES

by

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Two weeks after he was baptized my father was inducted into the U. S. Army. As he boarded the troop train for points West, the local elder admonished, “Now, remember, Eldon, Adventists don’t bear arms.” My father was astonished; he had never heard of such an idea, nor had he been instructed about non-combatancy during his Bible studies. Yet, Dad remained true to his scanty knowledge of the Sabbath and the one sentence “study” on church standards, enduring many similar trials as other Adventists like Desmond T. Doss, but without any recognition for his stand.

During World War II Adventists had no chaplains in the military services or prisons. A few ministers were designated to serve in hospitals and on some Adventist campuses as chaplains. A War Service Commission at the General Conference assisted Adventists in uniform under the leadership of Carlyle B. Haynes. Later this commission evolved into the National Service Organization which oversaw ministry to military members for over thirty years. As the denomination matured and grew, so did the requirements for ministry in specialized settings. Adventist Chaplaincy Ministries (ACM) was created in 1985 as a General Conference service. Ten years later ACM was made a department with the distinct mission of endorsing chaplains.

ACM insures pastoral care is available to Adventists in a variety of life situations that often place our members in difficult circumstances; i.e. as students on public campuses, as inmates in correctional institutions, as patients in healthcare facilities and as members of the armed forces. Also, ACM is exploring pastoral care to workers in industry and victims of disasters. ACM oversees the process for selecting and endorsing the best Adventist clergy to serve as chaplains; it insures that those endorsed meet the highest professional standards and fully comply with government requirements. Chaplains bring healing to the hurting. They represent the denomination as agents of faith and hope. Their witness reaches into circles normally closed to other Adventist pastors and programs.

ACM not only maximizes ministry from minimal resources, but also practices stewardship of the denomination's most valuable asset – its members. As mentioned above, Adventists are found in every walk of life and are subject to many of life's vicissitudes. Hence, ACM now endorses over 300 Adventist ministers as chaplains in five critical areas: campus, corrections, healthcare, military and community organizations. For the most part these chaplains are paid by agencies outside the Church, yet they are endorsed and accountable to the denomination. This saves millions of tithe dollars annually that can be used for other priorities. The ACM office staff of only four persons (a director, associate and two admin assistants) carry on a tremendous ministry for the Church. As chaplaincy ministries continue to grow in scope, funds are needed to expand this vital outreach ministry of ACM that does so much for so many for so little cost.

Enrollment at Adventist schools numbers 25,000 students in North America. While that is commendable, an estimated 50-75,000 Adventist young adults attend public colleges and universities. All of them represent the future leadership of our Church. Several years ago ACM fielded a cooperative plan to foster Adventist student activities on public campuses. Working in collaboration with local conferences, churches and pastors, ACM identified dedicated Adventist students to organize and lead their fellow students in spiritual growth, apologetics, discipling and outreach programs. ACM developed and sends out Bible kits and leader packs to students. Some student Adventist groups become significant in size (one had over 150 participants).

The North American Division has designated an organization known as Adventist Christian Fellowship (ACF) for coordinating the activities of around seventy (70) Adventist student activity associations on public campuses. ACM cooperatively supports campus ministries through ACF for sustaining the ties between young adult students and their Church. Limited funding is available for this support. As the former Director of Information, Resources Management and Logistics for the Office of the Chief of Chaplains in the Pentagon, I placed a line beneath my signature block on all correspondence, "Vision without resources is hallucination!" That same statement is applicable to this and all other ministries of ACM.

Every other year the North American Division asks for one offering to support ministry to the “saints in Caesar’s household” (Philippians 4:22) who wear the uniforms of the U. S. Armed Forces and serve in the military. This year the offering will be taken on 14 June. The funds pay for presentation Bible kits that help link the new service-member to the Church, church journals (Review, Sabbath School Quarterly, For God and Country), literature for outreach purposes, worship supplies and annual retreats. Currently, the number of Adventists serving is the size of a medium conference. Fifty Adventist chaplains provide pastoral care for around 7,500 military members and their families. With U. S. military presence in over 100 countries, Adventists in uniform are often scattered and isolated. Corporate worship is not always available. While many Adventists form Military Worship Groups and meet in military chapels, others depend on contact with their Church through the auspices of ACM, prayerful support from family and remembrances from their Stateside Church that holds their membership. Again, one offering does not cover the expenses of this important “bridge” between military member and Church. Our military members give generously to help, but your assistance is also needed. This is one tangible way to show support for our troops.

Patients and prisoners alike practice faith under limiting circumstances. A visit or piece of literature means so much. Today, Adventist chaplains are often by their side in hospitals that are not denominationally owned and operated. All are specially qualified through Clinical Pastoral Education to deal with the sensitive needs of those facing serious issues. More and more Adventist clergy are fulfilling the command of Christ to visit those in prison (Matthew 25:34-46). They do more than visit; they are there daily to exercise “ministry of presence” and bring hope to those cast aside by society. Already, Adventist Correctional Chaplains have been recognized for service beyond the call of duty. Now, chaplains are beginning to be hired by industry, because corporate America recognizes their value in meeting the spiritual needs of employees. Other chaplains voluntarily serve law enforcement agencies, fire departments and the Civil Air Patrol. Whatever you can give 14 June to support this fine work will be appreciated by all and greatly assist Adventist chaplains to touch lives in all the hard places.