



FRONTLINE MINIST

By Lesenamore Thulaganyo Mokgwane, as told to Deena Bartel-Wagner

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Lesenamore Thulaganyo Mokgwane never dreamed he'd make a ministry career change after 20+ years of literature evangelism, pastoral ministry, and administrative work. A conversation with a fellow student during graduate school courses reignited his interest in becoming a military chaplain in the Botswana Defence Force.

"I'd applied to become a military chaplain in 1997, but my application was rejected because of my age. I gave up that dream and continued with my church ministry," says Mokgwane. "During a conversation with my graduate school friend I learned that civilians could enter the chaplaincy and the age factor wasn't an issue."

Mokgwane met all of the requirements and applied. Three weeks later he was called in for an interview. I learned that another Adventist pastor had also applied. The military would only accept one of us, so I volunteered to withdraw my application," says Mokgwane. Instead, he was encouraged

to complete the interview. "I'd heard that I should expect to spend about 20-25 minutes with the committee," says Mokgwane. "Imagine my surprise when the questions continued for one and a half hours!"

Finally, the committee whittled the group of candidates down to three. Suddenly, two dropped out and Mokgwane was the only one left. They had one last question for Mokgwane. What would he do about Sabbath, if he were needed. "I had just one answer," says Mokgwane. "I would be there if I was needed for an emergency." He understood that the soldiers under his care would be his congregation, just as the congregations he ministered to in the local church. Today, he serves as a civilian chaplain in the Botswana Defence Forces and holds the rank of senior chaplain, which is equivalent to Major.

"At the beginning of my chaplaincy career, I was assured that I would not be sent into operational areas," says Mokgwane. "Instead, I have

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been sent and gone where I was needed most. This could be in anti-poaching operations, working with police on crime control, and other situations. The BDF also engages in peace-keeping missions and have participated in Somalia, Rwanda, Mozambique, and Lesotho.

The major component of his work is to provide counseling, both in groups and to individuals. "There is a great need for family life training and helping families to be successful and healthy," says Mokgwane.

During his time with the military families, Mokgwane has witnessed the isolation that children often experience. "My experience as a youth director has helped me to know how to reach out to youth who may be at high risk," says Mokgwane. He believes mentoring is an effective way to guide them. "I help the teens find opportunities to do job shadowing and receive career counseling. This gives them a hope for a future."

Suicide prevention is another facet of Mokgwane's ministry. "The suicide rate is increasing," says Mokgwane. "The chaplain works with social

workers, psychologists, and counselors to provide support to soldiers who are in crisis."

As chaplain, Mokgwane will work one-on-one with a soldier who is in acute need, but he will refer maintenance cases to social workers on staff. This frees up his time to care for more people who are under his care.

"I have 7,000 soldiers and their families who look to me for spiritual guidance," says Mokgwane. "Sometimes it can be overwhelming. I don't always feel like I have had adequate training and that frustrates me at times."

One of the methods that Mokgwane uses to reach many of the families is to provide a type of Bible school for children up to age 12. They are invited to participate in the activities and learn more about Jesus. "This program is done in consultation with the local Adventist conference children's ministry department," says Mokgwane. "It couldn't happen if I didn't have a superb support staff to assist me in this outreach." Supplies are limited and this often means creative planning must fill the gap

Mokgwane and his sons.



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when there aren’t enough materials for the children’s programming.

Another role that Mokgwane fills is that of advisor to the commandant. “When we are faced with difficult choices, the commandant wants my reflection on what is the right thing to do,” says Mokgwane. “He may ask me if I believe an operation is morally right. It is a solemn moment to give that kind of advice.”

Chaplains don’t typically live within the perimeter of the camp, but Mokgwane is a rare case. He is provided a house in addition to his salary. Being near to the soldiers contributes to accessibility by the soldiers when they need to talk with the chaplain. This has been an important factor in overcoming the soldiers’ skepticism. “Initially, when I joined the BDF, soldiers questioned whether I was genuine,” says Mokgwane. “Many couldn’t believe that I would voluntarily leave my church work to join the military as a chaplain. Some even asked me if I had done something to be released from my church positions. I happily told them that I was with them because I

knew God had led me to be in that place at that moment.”

One of the greatest hindrances Mokgwane faces is the lack of a chapel for services. “Currently, we don’t have a chapel where we can meet on a regular basis,” says Mokgwane. “This impacts our programming and spiritual activities. We often find ourselves moving from room to room, which doesn’t provide the stability that we need for a congregation.”

Mokgwane knows that his time as a military chaplain is limited. Mandatory retirement is at age 60, but his commanders have indicated that he could extend his time. As Mokgwane reflects on his role as a pastor and as a chaplain, he has a burden for the church to see the opportunity that is available right now. “I want my church to take advantage of what they could do and be,” says Mokgwane. “There is an open door right now for Adventists to be a part of this kind of ministry. We need to look to the future of the mission in the church and not overlook those who serve in uniform for their country and fellow citizens.”