

Entrusted with bringing the hope of God



'You can't be a Christian and be in the Army', suggested a good friend over supper at Christmas, 2011. I disagreed strongly and I realised that something deeper had been kindled inside me. That conversation started a train of events in my life which saw me call in at an Army recruiting centre and eventually pass selection to join the Army as a chaplain.

I spent four years as a full-time chaplain and in that time served with two units, The Light Dragoons and The Grenadier Guards. I worked in the UK, Morocco, Bosnia, Kenya, the Falklands and also had a short operational tour in Kabul.

Now I'm back in parish ministry, working with two rural parishes in North Essex. God in his wisdom used those four years as a chaplain to remind me of two really important principles, ones that I have sought to apply with renewed focus as I serve for the first time in rural parishes.

Loitering with intent

For me Army chaplaincy can best be described as *loitering with intent*; our chaplaincy mission statement is 'Entrusted with bringing the hope of God'. Chaplaincy to me is a ministry which combines pastoral care of individuals and evangelism. Now that I'm back in parish ministry it's very easy to lose sight of those imperatives while spinning the large number of plates that we all have to juggle. One of my current challenges is coping with only two of the four churchwardens that I should have. Recently I've had the confidence to say to my PCCs that I just don't have the time to do those roles as well as what I really feel called to. A little directness in meetings has meant that several people have stepped up to help.

A prophetic voice

The other key role of a chaplain is to be a *prophetic voice*. In the Army chaplains have a different chain of command to most soldiers and that gives us the opportunity and responsibility to speak up without fear or favour. To me this meant affirming and celebrating that which was in harmony with God's Kingdom principles and challenging that which ran counter to those principles. So in the Army we could celebrate and affirm the deep, sacrificial relationships that exist between soldiers, the 'band of brothers'.

Conversely, there were occasions when I spoke up because I didn't feel that the organisation was doing enough to support those on the margins, soldiers who were injured or struggling with PTSD. This required a discerning and unhurried approach. As leaders in our communities maybe we need to take a step back from the plate-spinning to ask the same questions about the culture we are in, and then ask God for the courage to affirm and challenge where necessary.

Having left the regular army in October 2016 I'm still managing to combine my parish ministry with being a Reservist Chaplain to 4 Para. It's a really fulfilling and life-giving combination. If you are interested in chaplaincy opportunities do get in touch.

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