Committee on Chaplains to HM Forces

Moderator this has once again been a busy year for military chaplains, much has been happening both home and abroad. At home I think it is fair to say that the Registration of Ministries Overture caused our military chaplains some angst and a number brought concerns concerning their status of ministers of word and sacrament to the Committee. However in Sep the Rev George Cowie, Convener of the Legal Questions Committee travelled to the Armed Forces Chaplaincy Centre, Amport House, and briefed the chaplains on the overture and how it could affect them. He assured them of the Kirk’s support and outlined the practical measures which would be put in place to allow chaplains a seamless transition back to parish ministry. In a nutshell the Church will ensure that its military chaplains are kept up to date with changes which affect parish ministry in areas which they may not be involved with in their ministry to the military community. The most obvious areas being changes to Church and Civil Law which do not affect their ministry to the military community. I would like to thank the 3 heads of service chaplaincy for promising to ensure that CofS Chaplains receive an annual update during the chaplains’ annual conference. I would like to thank George for making the long journey from Aberdeen to Amport to brief the chaplains.

Moderator, this has been a busy year for the members of the Armed Forces Community and subsequently a busy one for the chaplains who serve that community. A reading of the reports contained within the Blue Book provide some hint at how operations continue out with the glare of the public spotlight and of course chaplains are involved wherever their people are involved. Presently Armed Forces personnel are involved in a myriad of operations and training deployments throughout the globe. For example operations continue in locations around the Middle East and anti-piracy and anti-people smuggling operations are being conducted in Africa and the Mediterranean. There is a growing requirement to train alongside allies on the eastern side of Europe. Long term commitments remain with the Falklands, Cyprus, Gibraltar, Canada, and Kenya, all absorbing thousands of personnel- and chaplaincy cover.

This year I am not going to speak about the work of our chaplains in these areas, commissioners can of course read more about our chaplains in the Blue Book. This year our report has to be a little different because last year’s Assembly instructed this committee to work together with the Council of Assembly, the Ministries Council and the Social Care Council to examine the principles enshrined in the Armed Forces Covenant and present to this year’s General Assembly a Covenant to which the church can ascribe.

The Armed Forces Covenant represents a promise by the nation that those who serve or have served, and their families, are treated fairly. All 407 local authorities in mainland Great Britain and 4 Northern Ireland councils have pledged to uphold the Armed Forces Covenant. To date over 1,500 organisations have signed the covenant, including businesses and charities. The Church of England has signed and the Methodist Church is about to join the list of organisations who have pledged their support to the men and women of the Armed Forces Community.

Moderator as a starting point we looked at the Covenant the Church of England had signed and then began adapting it for Presbyterian use. We then engaged with the councils and listened to the concerns raised. Of particular concern was the question whether signing an AF Covenant would impede the Kirks ability to critically engage the government over Defence Policy and the issue of nuclear arms. However the AF Covenant is not about policy in any shape or form it is only about people – the people our chaplains are serving, and those who have left the Services. The AF Covenant pledges support to the Armed Forces Community, this is a community made up of Serving Personnel, both Regular and Reservists, Veterans and all their families. The Armed Forces Covenant is therefore about supporting people, not Government Policy. Signing the Armed Forces Covenant would not impinge the Kirk’s ability to challenge the government on any aspect of Defence Policy but it would however demonstrate the Kirks’ support for a great number of Scotland’s families. The current estimate is that there are around 260,000 veterans in Scotland at present, almost 6% of the population. And when you add the families that make up the veterans community, they represent almost one in 10 of Scotland’s people.

While their experiences, aspirations, vulnerabilities, successes and failures are varied, veterans ultimately share only one thing in common. They contracted themselves to a job that required them regularly and uniquely to make considerable personal sacrifices in the service of the Nation. A job where, for good reasons, the working hours liability was almost unlimited, no union negotiated pay and conditions, compulsory personal and family mobility was frequent and, when required, they placed their lives at risk. The proposed wording of the Covenant would allow the Kirk to demonstrate its support of this group of Scotland’s people pastorally, liturgically and organisationally.

Finally Moderator it has also become a tradition to end this address with a plea. A plea to all ministers to prayerfully consider whether or not military chaplaincy might just be a calling. All 3 Services are in urgent need of CofS chaplains. 29 years ago when I began my ministry as a RAF Chaplain, CofS chaplains were numerically greater than every other denomination bar the CofE throughout the Services. That is no longer the case. It is said that the changes and challenges affecting military chaplaincy represent the bow wave for those which are about to reach the church as a whole. The training and ordination of new ministers is a challenge for the Kirk. The recruitment of new CofS Military Chaplains has now reached a critical point. All 3 Services are in need of CofS Chaplains but this situation can perhaps be illustrated most starkly by the RAF. There are only 2 CofS Chaplains remaining in the RAF and one of them is in her final tour of duty. It is unlikely that any member or affiliate of the CofS who joins the RAF will ever be ministered to by a Chaplain of his or her denomination. The RN and Army may have more CofS Chaplains but like the RAF they do not have enough.

So, if any minister of the Kirk believes that they might have the slightest inkling of a Call to either full time or reserve chaplaincy I would urge them to please test this.

Moderator I present the report and as I am not a commissioner ask the Clerk to move deliverance.

Moderator addresses chaplains…. then

Moderator, I understand that Air Marshal Stuart Atha Deputy Commander of Operations RAF is in the gallery as a guest of the Lord High Commissioner, and would be willing to address the Assembly if the Assembly were so minded.’