

Chaplains to Her Majesty's Forces speech

General Assembly 2019

Moderator,

In February of this year your predecessor visited the aircraft carrier PRINCE OF WALES under construction in Rosyth. Susan and I, with the Deputy Chaplain of the Fleet, were shown over that 65000 tonne maze of passageways and wiring by three men from the Ship's Company: an officer, a rating, and Richard, the Ship's Chaplain, who is one of our Methodist colleagues. We walked miles, literally; and we must have climbed hundreds of feet, as every move from one compartment to another involved changing decks up and down to circumvent all the construction works.

Finally, on one of the lower decks, we arrived in this compartment, suddenly quiet and bare after all the busy-ness. It was the Ship's Chapel, though you wouldn't know it yet, looking just like any other functional space in any functional warship, albeit bigger than the biggest space on most warships!

It's difficult to say imaginative and meaningful things in an empty box, and we were doing the 'nod and smile encouragingly' thing, when Richard turned to Susan and asked: would she pray, and bless his chapel? And there we stood, overalls, protective gloves, hard hats, safety glasses, heavy-duty boots, and the Moderator prayed just the most beautiful prayer. She talked about the Ship's Company as a kind of family, and of the chapel as a special place and refuge for them in all sorts of difficult moments in the future. And she prayed too for the wider family of those same people, their actual families and everyone who will love and support them while they are deployed in PRINCE OF WALES. The little silent moment at the end of the prayer, before anyone breathed again, was my highlight of this year in this role, and I don't imagine any of those sailors will forget it either.

Two of the themes of that extemporised prayer are worth underlining.

The first is that, yes, our service personnel – supported by their chaplains deployed with them – may be asked to do difficult, isolating, responsible, controversial tasks. None of them makes the political decisions that create those tasks, and none of us can even presume what their opinions are of those heavy choices that emerge from our democratic processes. But those burdens are then given to dedicated, obedient, loyal servicemen and

women, human beings who need to be loved, cared-for, shepherded, perhaps all the more when their tasks are the most contentious.

The Church of Scotland and its General Assembly have always had the reputation for understanding the difference between the prophetic word spoken to those who lead and decide, and the pastoral word spoken to everyone. In different debates on different days of the third week of May we may speak with passion in different ways; but our voice is not ambiguous or contradictory, but rather intelligent and complex and nuanced. It is worth reminding ourselves of our Church's wise appreciation of these distinctions as each generation of our own leadership provides that voice afresh. It is worth it because every one of the pastors sitting in uniform in front of us, Regular and Reservist, deserves our prayers and our love.

The second theme from Susan's prayer is the scaffolding of support that surrounds our Armed Forces - the wider service community - that includes service families, veterans, service charities and the cadet forces. Your Committee is working in these areas to provide our own element of support.

We are close to completing the list of Armed Forces Champions in Presbyteries, and will then issue a refreshed remit to them as they work to implement the Armed Forces Covenant between the Church and the service community.

We were delighted that in the restructuring of the Huts and Canteens Fund, dealt with at another point in this Assembly Week, it has been possible to support the work of the charity SSAFA, which is one of the most important partners of Armed Forces chaplaincy. We are constructing a 'buddy' system, for those chaplains and their families who would like a named member of our Committee to be a first point of contact and ongoing pastoral concern.

And we have clarified the relationship – different for each service – with their equivalent cadet forces. Chaplains to cadet forces are in one way like those to other uniformed youth organisations. In another way, though, they can form a vital element of that wider service community I mentioned, perhaps especially in the Army Cadet Force whose chaplains are commissioned by the Royal Army Chaplains Department. We are delighted to acknowledge the hard work of all our chaplains to Sea Cadet, ACF and Air Cadet units.

Moderator, I present the Report of the Committee on Chaplains to Her Majesty's Forces; and as I am not a commissioner I ask the Clerk to move the Proposed Deliverance.