

CARDUS PRESENTATION TO THE STANDING COMMITTEE ON NATIONAL DEFENCE, HOUSE OF COMMONS, REGARDING A STUDY OF CANADIAN ARMED FORCES HEALTH AND TRANSITION SERVICES

Submitted by Andrew P.W. Bennett, Faith Communities Program Director, Cardus

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OPENING REMARKS

Dr. Andrew P.W. Bennett:

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I'd like to thank you and the committee members for the opportunity to appear before the standing committee this morning to speak about what I would see as an under-examined aspect of health and transition services provided to Canadian Armed Forces personnel and veterans, and that is their spiritual or pastoral care.

While I am not a chaplain and have not provided pastoral care to veterans or armed forces personnel, as an ordained deacon in the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church, I regularly provide pastoral care and spiritual direction to men and women from a variety of backgrounds and situations.

I'm also able to speak on these questions given my previous role as Canada's ambassador for religious freedom and my ongoing work in this area.

In the Christian tradition, as well as in the Jewish, Muslim and certain other traditions, we understand that the human being has a tripartite nature composed of a body, mind and soul. Each part works in concert with the other two to ensure a healthy and thriving person.

When the body is weakened by injury or disease, it can impact the psychological well-being of the person. Various forms of psychological distress and mental illness can have impacts on the physical body. Likewise, when a person is experiencing existential crises related to their search for meaning and truth, it can impact the physical and mental aspects of the person as well.

We all confront in our lives certain existential questions such as, who am I? Who am I in relationship to others? Who am I in relationship to the world? Who am I in relationship to God or to an ultimate truth according to a given philosophical tradition? The ongoing wrestling with these questions is part of our humanity.

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These questions often come particularly to the fore in times of personal crisis or in times when we place ourselves in harm's way, in conflict, as do the members of the Canadian Armed Forces on a daily basis. All of us are hard-wired to seek meaning, to discover what is true and then to govern our lives according to that truth. In short, we cannot separate out our rational and physical selves from our spiritual self.

Given this reality, it is critical that, in addition to services and treatments that support the physical and mental health of Canadian Armed Forces' personnel and veterans, they also be given access to high-quality care for their spiritual health. The skilled personnel of the Royal Canadian Chaplain Service are at the forefront of providing this care, as well as reflecting the growing religious diversity of the armed forces.

These men and women, both clerical and lay, collectively play an indispensable role in the ongoing spiritual health of our men and women in uniform and after they have left service. Pastoral care is also indispensable to aid in spiritual healing, healing that has beneficial outcomes for the whole person.

In providing essential spiritual care to CAF personnel and veterans, chaplains must be able to provide that care and counsel fully informed by the teachings and beliefs of their particular faith. They must be fully able to exercise their freedom of religion in doing so and thus minister to others in a way that is integrated and authentic, bearing faithful witness to what they confess to be true. This freedom must not be unduly hindered such as through a mandated requirement to adhere to a prevailing secular creed or to conform to a political ideology of any stripe. These religious truths are timeless.

The essential work of armed forces' chaplains of all religious and philosophical traditions must be protected and encouraged, all while upholding freedom of religion and conscience for chaplains and those whom they serve.

As such, I'd like to recommend that this committee and its report on this study call upon the Minister of National Defence to firmly and publicly reject the discriminatory sections of recommendation 6, "Re-Defining Chaplaincy", contained in the April 25, 2022, final report of the Minister of National Defence's advisory panel on systemic racism and discrimination.

Further, this standing committee could recommend that all Canadians, regardless of their religious or philosophical tradition, whether that be theistic, secular humanist or atheistic, be supported through the pastoral services of CAF chaplains as they serve our country.

I would also recommend the establishment of a permanent committee of religious leaders who report jointly to the Minister of National Defence and to the chaplain general on an annual basis regarding the integrity of the Royal Canadian Chaplain Service. Among its principal roles, the permanent committee would serve as a consultative body to ensure and promote ways of advancing and maintaining the religious diversity with the service, serve

as an arm's-length representative body of religious leaders and investigate and report on violations of the freedom of religion or conscience within the service.

Thank you.

EDITED TRANSCRIPT OF COMMITTEE QUESTIONS

The Chair:

You have four minutes each, starting with either Mrs. Gallant or Mrs. Kramp-Neuman.

Ms. Kramp-Neuman, you have four minutes.

Mrs. Shelby Kramp-Neuman:

Thank you.

Dr. Bennett, thank you for being here.

My first question is this: For many, religion can play a very important source of morale for our Canadian Armed Forces who are being faced with combat. At this time, is the Department of National Defence doing enough to provide support and resources to the CAF?

Dr. Andrew P.W. Bennett:

I think, again, I would really hold up the work of the chaplaincy service, but that chaplaincy service needs to be broadened. It needs to reflect the greater religious diversity in the country. I would certainly favour the expansion of that chaplaincy service to reflect different beliefs and different religious traditions.

Mrs. Shelby Kramp-Neuman:

Do you believe that the current resources we possess are at risk of being eroded or cut in the name of secularism?

Dr. Andrew P.W. Bennett:

I don't know if it's in the name of secularism. It's in the name of something. I think certainly some of the recommendations that have come forward recently, which I referenced in my remarks, are problematic, because they would effectively exclude from the chaplaincy service a large swath of religious traditions that maybe do not conform with particular views that are being advanced.

Mrs. Shelby Kramp-Neuman:

In the past you've been interviewed stating that anti-Christian, anti-Muslim, anti-Catholic and anti-Semitic views are all on the rise. How has this progressed since 2021, and how do you believe this has impacted CAF?

Dr. Andrew P.W. Bennett:

I can't comment necessarily on how it has impacted the Canadian Armed Forces, but certainly, in terms of society, StatsCan has demonstrated in its crime reporting survey that there have been increases in anti-religious hate crimes, particularly against Jews—anti-Semitism continues to be a major problem in the country—and certainly there's a significant increase in anti-Catholic hate crimes.

That obviously can trickle down into different parts of society, but I think it's very important that we recognize that religion is something that is deeply important to a significant number of Canadians, and certainly that would be to a significant number of members of the armed forces, who, as Dr. McDaniel mentioned, can often suffer grave moral injury. They're trying to make sense of what is true and what things mean, and they often need support to address those questions.

Mrs. Shelby Kramp-Neuman:

Thank you.

In January of 2022, the Minister of National Defence's advisory panel on systemic racism and discrimination released its final report. In it they made four recommendations. A quick glance, though, at annex E—you may be familiar with it—of the report appears to show that the panel, comprised of four individuals, only met with two different organizations with a religious focus, that of the Centre for Israel and Jewish Affairs and the Royal Canadian Chaplain Service.

Do you believe the panel did their due diligence when taking a look at the question of reforming the CAF chaplaincy?

Dr. Andrew P.W. Bennett:

No, they did not do their due diligence. I would recommend that they should have consulted more religious leaders, certainly a broader range of religious traditions that are represented in the country, and they could have had maybe a bit of a broader view on the importance of the chaplaincy service and how it could be strengthened.

Mrs. Shelby Kramp-Neuman:

Thank you.

Last, could you possibly describe how religious supports could also be extended to family members or loved ones of those in the CAF?

Dr. Andrew P.W. Bennett:

In terms of the role of chaplains, chaplains provide pastoral care, and it doesn't stop once you're outside the armed forces or if you're not yourself an armed forces member but you're part of an armed forces family. The chaplain or padre can play a major role, often when there's not easy access to other religious leaders when serving or when on base. I think ensuring that those chaplains are present, readily available and have the resources they need to provide that care to families more broadly is really critical.

Mrs. Shelby Kramp-Neuman:

Could you elaborate on what you feel is at risk if the CAF loses access to those religious supports?

The Chair:

Be very brief, please.

Dr. Andrew P.W. Bennett:

What is at risk is that you would marginalize significant portions of the Canadian population, and, by extension, the CAF population who adhere to certain religious traditions, who would effectively not be able to have chaplains were these recommendations to go forward.

...

Mrs. Cheryl Gallant:

Back to Deacon Bennett, the Prime Minister's culture wars have spread to the CAF, and now it appears to be discriminating against the three Abrahamic religions from the chaplaincy. Do you think that the CAF understands this issue and that if the chaplains are not able to abide by the new CAF values, then CAF is not the place for them? What are your thoughts on that?

Dr. Andrew P.W. Bennett:

When someone is called to be a chaplain in the armed forces, or a chaplain anywhere for that matter, they're doing it, fundamentally, to serve the people they minister to. Those people, especially CAF personnel, who have a deep religious faith. It could be a theistic faith. It could be atheistic philosophy or another philosophy. They need to have access to those professional pastoral care workers, clerical or lay, who have an integrated authentic faith. They want to be able to go to someone who believes what they believe, so that they can have

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trust there. That's critical.

We have to ensure in the chaplaincy service that the chaplains who are there can live out their faith fully, that they can express their faith fully, so as to best serve those people who come to them seeking support, maybe seeking help in a moral injury. If there isn't that trust that "you believe what I believe," then it's hard for them to find the care that they would be looking for. Trust has to be a foundation for that.

Mrs. Cheryl Gallant:

There's not a specific religion that deploys a chaplain with a specific religion all across the board for each time they go on a tour of duty.

The Chair:

Answer very briefly, please.

Dr. Andrew P.W. Bennett:

Could you clarify your question?

Mrs. Cheryl Gallant:

You mentioned that trust is important, but when a unit deploys, they can't have a chaplain from every religion.

Dr. Andrew P.W. Bennett:

That's correct.

Mrs. Cheryl Gallant:

How does that work?

Dr. Andrew P.W. Bennett:

The chaplain who is there has to be able to engage people of other faiths, but that doesn't mean that they drop their own faith. They have to be able to engage them from their faith tradition, out of love, out of concern and to demonstrate genuine pastoral care.

...

Ms. Emmanuella Lambropoulos:

Deacon Bennett, I have a question for you. I agree that, when someone is in a situation of crisis, they turn towards their faith and begin a spiritual journey, perhaps. I imagine that members in the armed forces are at a particular place and point in their lives where they may need this service and where they may need this guidance.

We also know, though, that we're opening up and we're trying to be as inclusive as possible in the armed forces. There are members of different backgrounds. There are members of the LGBTQIA+ community, and obviously everybody needs to be respectful. We're moving towards a better culture in the armed forces.

Given this context, can you elaborate a little on how we could go forward, allowing people, pastors, imams, rabbis and spiritual leaders of all faiths to be involved while still maintaining that level of respect for all members of the CAF?

Dr. Andrew P.W. Bennett:

We have to recognize that at the core of all these different religious traditions, particularly the Abrahamic faiths, there's an understanding of the inherency of human dignity. While a particular religious tradition might have a different view of anthropology or of sexuality, at the core—certainly of the Christian tradition, the Jewish tradition and the Islamic tradition—is an understanding of the dignity of the human person.

While there might be differences of views on sexuality, anthropology and what have you, we're still called to recognize, in the person with whom we might disagree, their inherent dignity. Certainly, chaplains have to be able to minister to them, recognizing that dignity.

To say that if you hold a particular view that's not in sync with a particular secular view you're not qualified to be a chaplain is very narrow-minded and doesn't demonstrate the sort of robust pluralism and diversity that we should be really advancing within our society and certainly within the CAF. Given the realities of Canadian Armed Forces personnel and what they deal with, they need to be able to have access to authentic, integrated pastoral care.

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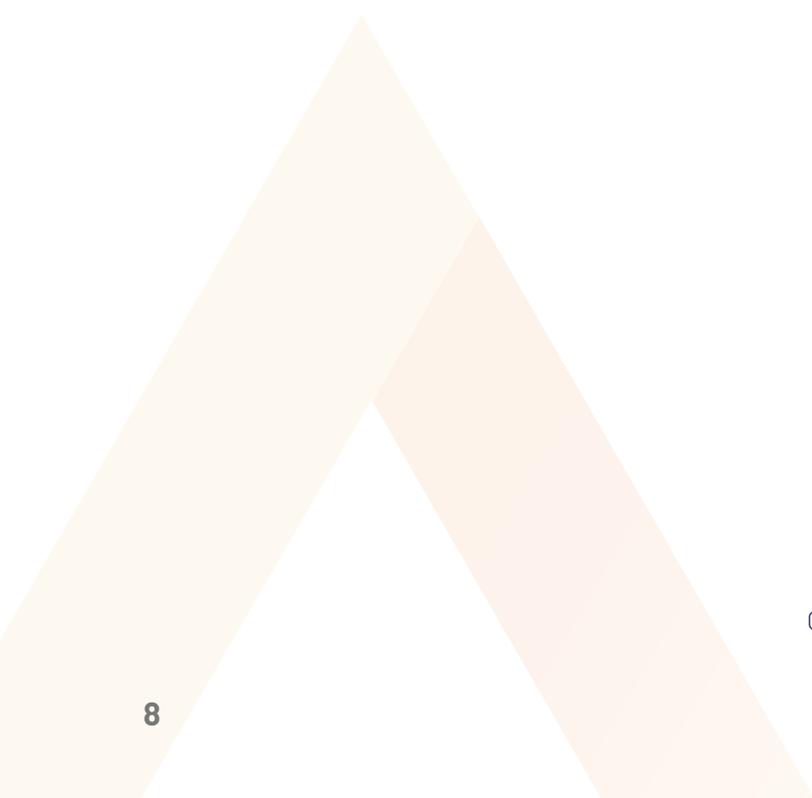
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A large, abstract graphic in the bottom left corner consisting of two overlapping triangles. The top triangle is light yellow and the bottom triangle is a slightly darker shade of yellow, both pointing upwards.

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