

History of the Chaplaincy: Growing Pluralism

Begun as a handful of Protestant ministers, the chaplaincy formally became part of the military in 1775 at the outset of the Revolutionary War. In the ensuing years, not every colony appointed chaplains, and for many decades military chaplains were joined by outside clergy in ministering to troops. Unfamiliar with military requirements and constraints, the outsiders often got in the way of operations or made unreasonable demands. This led, over time, to making the chaplaincy a professional branch of the military.

No sooner did we have a US military chaplaincy than its members began negotiating competing allegiances and fine-tuning their roles. They hammered out the issue of uniform – should chaplains dress like military officers or like clergy? They struggled over the question of rank – should chaplains have a rank and move up the hierarchy like officers or should they exist as a rank-less corps within the military? Should they bear arms and fight or just preach? They wrestled with demographics—should the number of chaplains from each religious tradition be proportionate to the number of service men and women who adhere to those faiths? Should women be admitted? Which religions should be included?

As it has evolved to date, the chaplaincy has male and female clergy representing a wide range of Protestant denominations, the Roman Catholic Church, the Church of Latter Day Saints, the Eastern Orthodox Church, Judaism, Islam, and Buddhism. The religious traditions recognized by the military extend even further to include such faiths as Hinduism, Christian Science and Wicca.

As for proportionality, the chaplaincy for decades adhered as best it could to an informal quota system; however, in the wake of the Vietnam War when mainstream denominations shied away from the military, the chaplaincy lifted the quota in order to meet its needs. For the first time, it accepted clergy from smaller denominations that had previously had virtually no representation in the military. Since then, the proportion of evangelical Christian chaplains has risen dramatically.

For more information on the history of the chaplaincy, check out our [resource page](#).

See also:

[Challenges Past and Future](#)

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