

THE MILITARY CHAPLAINCY

If, as the General Secretary's report said, the system of apartheid is immoral and indefensible, this must have far-reaching implications for the church's relationship with the military. At present, the churches' ministry to their members in the SADF takes the form of military chaplaincy. Most chaplains are full members of the military; wear uniforms; carry the protocol rank of colonel (the highest among military chaplaincies in the world); and are under the command of a Chaplain-General -- a member of the N.G.K., and in whose appointment the churches have no say. In return the chaplains have virtually unlimited contact with the troops.

This church-state accommodation presents theological problems. Full membership, uniform and rank are symbolic of support for the military; they are a statement that soldiering is compatible with the obligations of Christian faith. High rank imposes barriers between chaplains and conscripts, thus introducing a social distance in the pastoral relationship which some chaplains consider unhelpful. The hierarchical structure of the chaplaincy, heavily dominated by the N.G.K., lacks biblical and theological foundation. Finally, the present system biases the church's ministry in favour of men in the SADF, ignoring men on the 'other side', the victims of the SADF, and conscientious objectors.

This situation has given rise to a call for a sweeping demilitarization of the chaplaincy. This would include church responsibility for finance and training of chaplains; civilian status and dress for chaplains; and the withdrawal of chaplains from the SADF hierarchy and SADF control.

For further reading

Ministry to military personnel A report by the USA United Church of Christ, 1973. Available from the UNISA library

South African Outlook (April 1984) A special issue on the military chaplaincy in South Africa. Some copies are available from the Conference bookshop

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