

RABBI BRUCE EDWARD KAHN, D. D.
CAPT, CHC, USN (Ret)
14316 CANTRELL ROAD
SILVER SPRING, MARYLAND 20905
301.384.3309 kahnb7@gmail.com

Good Morning Chairman Wilson, Ranking Member Davis and esteemed members of the Committee. Thank you for inviting me to offer this testimony. It is an honor to participate in this hearing.

I received my commission in the United States Navy in June 1970, went on active duty in July 1974, and retired as a Navy Captain in June 2002. During my career, as the biography submitted with this statement makes clear, I served active and reserve Navy, Marine and Coast Guard commands, afloat and ashore, hospitals and academies, many Chiefs of Navy Chaplains, and numerous other flag officers, O-7 through O-10.

In 1986, I was the Jewish chaplain Mrs. Rickover requested to come to her home immediately upon the passing of Admiral Hyman Rickover, and I ministered to her throughout that time. On October 11, 2001, I was the only Jewish chaplain in the United States Armed Forces who co-officiated in the Pentagon's memorial service for the victims who died there one month earlier. Though retired from the Navy, in September 2003, at the request of Rear Admiral Louis Iasiello, Navy Chief of Chaplains, I accepted non-pay orders to go to the Iraqi Theater during a series of Jewish holy days. There was insufficient rabbinic coverage in the operating area.

Throughout my career, I had the honor of serving sailors of numerous faiths and denominations as well as those with no interest in organized religion.

I would like to begin by stating eight basic principles that I and nearly every US Navy chaplain with whom I served over a twenty-eight year span understood as critical to our service.

1. The military chaplaincy is necessarily a far different ministry from that in a civilian denominational setting. That must be kept in mind at all times.
2. Our purpose is to advise the command on matters of morals and morale and to assist each person in that command to reach a more complete state of being based on the beliefs, values, and practices that individual affirms. Our success enhances unit cohesion, readiness, and mission accomplishment in service to God and country. We also work with command to ensure that the right of all service members to exercise their beliefs, without harming the same right of one's shipmates, is zealously protected and affirmed.

3. In the military we serve everyone regardless of faith group as well as those who profess no faith at all. We chaplains must exercise flexibility and find ways of saying and doing things that work for the people we serve even though we would say and do things differently in a denominational setting. The needs of the troops come first.
4. The challenge is for the chaplain to adjust to the legitimate requirements of the troops, not for the troops to adjust to the denominational practices of the chaplain. The chaplain adapts his or her exercise of religious freedom in order to affirm the religious freedom of the members of the command in which we are providing ministry. Regardless of denomination, the chaplains with whom I served, save just a few, were faithful to this sine qua non approach to the US Navy chaplaincy.
5. Even when we conduct worship for our own faith group, we are sensitive to denominational differences and address them as fully and flexibly as possible. For example, a Protestant Chaplain has to take into account the wide range of beliefs and practices among that population, such as very different approaches to baptism, to the origin of Biblical text, to symbol versus sacrament, liturgical versus non-liturgical worship and more. Jewish chaplains have to take into account a wide range of beliefs and practices among co-religionists based on denominational differences, attitudes about the source and authority of the Torah, the service members' understanding of Hebrew, whether the service members keep kosher, wear a tallit, a kipah, and more.
6. Needless to say, when we participate in events, ceremonies and daily evolutions such as the evening prayer aboard ship, involving the command population at large, we must be determined to be as inclusive as possible, refraining from using language that would without doubt exclude personnel of varying faiths.
7. It is not only logical, reasonable, and caring to provide a thoroughly inclusive ministry but necessary to serve the command's goals for unit cohesion, readiness and mission accomplishment. In what manner would unit cohesion be served by praying, teaching, counseling, and advising in a way that favored and included some unit members while excluding others? How would the motivation to attain the maximum level of readiness be stimulated when diminishing the value of some troops compared to others? How would mission accomplishment be enhanced when acting to create thoughts in unit members that their importance to the command is less than that of other personnel of the "right" faith?
8. When troops go into battle, their lives are on the line and they must have each other's backs. At this time, it is vital for them to feel robustly affirmed by the command, including the chaplains in that command. Chaplains must meet the troops where they are in their faith and beliefs, especially in and around mission-critical moments. Chaplains should say and do that which will leave those troops

in a better position intellectually, spiritually, and emotionally to succeed while going in harm's way and especially when the end of life is tragically at hand. So it was that when I attended chaplains' school, every rabbi was trained to baptize anyone near death who wanted that rite done and every Christian chaplain learned to recite the She'ma in Hebrew, to say those words for Jewish personnel.

Throughout my decades of service, these principles were not things that had to be commanded of us chaplains. We understood and affirmed them regardless of which denomination endorsed us.

I put these principles into practice continuously. During my career, active and reserve, I estimate over 95% of the troops with whom I served were neither of my denomination nor even of my faith group. I served the needs of Catholics and Protestants of every denomination, different groups of Latter-Day Saints, and numerous Christians of other affiliations. I served the needs of different groups of Buddhists and Muslims and more, as well as those with no affiliation, including agnostics and atheists.

It was mission-critical for me to learn as much as I could about these diverse faiths and practices. I tried hard to use that understanding meticulously, sensitively, and in a timely way in order to best meet the needs of service members, who were often at grave risk of injury and loss of life for days, weeks, months, and years at a time.

Nearly all the chaplains I knew felt they served God, country, the command, and the troops in that command best by providing for the needs of all. That overarching belief made it simple to adjust one's denominational preferences so that we might best help that community we voluntarily sought to serve.

Let me give you a few examples of how I applied these principles during my service.

- Late one December, I was attached to a squadron of minesweepers, including one that had just returned from a nine-month deployment that was supposed to have lasted only three months. It was Christmas and the troops from that minesweep and their families were coming apart at the seams. With an understanding of this time of year very much in mind, and understanding the separation syndrome full well, I provided counseling night and day, organized the Christmas blood drive, a holiday dinner, led Christmas services, and delivered the sermon. These were not things a civilian rabbi does. They were all things a rabbi who is a US Navy Chaplain does.
- When working with scores of non-Jews returning from Nam who were shattered and trying to find their way through continued military service, I had to respond to their needs for prayer with words that were familiar to them, not the prayers I say in Hebrew. That is what a US Navy Chaplain does.

- When 130 Muslims from Kuwait were undergoing training at my base and I was assigned to be their chaplain, I knew I could accept in a heartbeat that challenge and hoped they could as readily accept my doing so. That is what a US Navy Chaplain does.
- When counseling a Christian whose service member husband had just died and who believed the devil had killed him, and now wanted to take her own life, I did not respond to her as a rabbi talking from Jewish sources. Instead I approached her based on her beliefs about the devil and suggested that killing herself would be giving Satan an added victory. To fight back against him she might consider affirming life more than ever even as she traversed her grief. I asked her to rely on the grace her faith promises. That is what a US Navy Chaplain does.
- A chaplain does not conduct life cycle events that one's denomination forbids. This is different than saying one only conducts life cycle events the way one was trained to do in seminary. I was once the chaplain for Marine Aviation Training Support Group 90. A Marine Corps lieutenant colonel, a Southern Baptist from Texas who had never before met a rabbi, told me he was dying from cancer. He wanted me to conduct his funeral. I replied, "Sir, there are Southern Baptist chaplains serving Navy commands nearby." He asked, "Are you the Marine chaplain here son?" I answered, "Yes sir, I am." And then he more commanded than stated, "Then I want you!" My denomination did not forbid my officiating the military funeral of a Southern Baptist. I would have to do the funeral the Colonel's way. That is what a US Navy chaplain does.
- During Gulf War I, the staff of the Naval Reserve Center in Baltimore was under unbelievably intense, unrelenting pressure to get reserves mobilized and on their way. I saw what was happening and looked after the Center staff through that crisis. When it ended, two members of the staff, a Pentecostal and a member of the Assemblies of God Church were going to wed. Given what we had just gone through they wanted me, a rabbi, to marry them. They said, "You are our chaplain!" I went to chaplains from the bride and groom's denominations and got smart about such a wedding and conducted it. That is what a US Navy Chaplain does.

Military chaplains should never have to be told to pray inclusively or to teach, counsel and advise based on meeting the service members where they are. It should be a given. Chaplains should be zealous to do so. That is where military chaplaincy differs from serving a civilian congregation. The religious freedom of the troops is not to be sacrificed to meet the demands of the chaplain. The chaplain adjusts to meet the faith requirements of the troops. Doing so creates the right atmosphere for enhanced unit cohesion, enhanced readiness, and enhanced mission accomplishment. What would be gained by creating a military chaplaincy that does not serve directly the needs of the troops of varied faiths? Who gains? Does the country gain, or the command, or the troops themselves? As a chaplain, I thought everyone gained, including me, by

flexibility and inclusivity, by maintaining situational awareness and adjusting accordingly.

I conclude with a quote of Navy Chief of Chaplains Rear Admiral Margaret Grun Kibben. This statement appears on the CREDO web site (Chaplain Religious Enrichment Development Operation):

“I am deeply humbled and honored to serve in this capacity as community leader of over 1,000 chaplains, representing over 100 different faith groups, as well as 1,000 Religious Program Specialists.

“Navy chaplains and Religious Program Specialists help inspire hope, strengthen spiritual well-being, increase personal resilience, and enhance mission readiness in the Navy, Marine Corps, and Coast Guard. In doing so, they support my three tenets: Enrich the lives of our people, Engage with leadership, and Enhance our professional capabilities.

“We should never lose sight of the reason why the Chaplain Corps exists: To enrich the spiritual lives of our Sailors, Marines, Coast Guardsmen, and their families. We in the Chaplain Corps are graced with the privilege and imbued with the sacred responsibility of enriching the lives of those whom we serve so that they remain resilient and mission-ready.

“I believe we all have a fundamental human need to thrive spiritually and connect with the tangible and intangible sources for hope. We live in a day and age where iPhones, iPads, and the fleeting satisfaction of Instagram threaten to isolate our people from the importance of human connections and a sense of community. Chaplains help connect our people to their sources for hope and help them develop spiritually in their personal faith.

“Chaplains are a safe place, a sanctuary where our people can come to regain a sense of wholeness and hope. We have an obligation to uphold the sacred trust they place in us and to maintain absolute confidentiality with our people.”

I understand and affirm what she says. I am a career-long US Navy chaplain. My role is to “create a place where our people can come to regain a sense of wholeness.” It is an honor to do so. A Navy chaplain serves all by meeting them where they are and working to address their religious needs in a variety of ways depending on the religious backgrounds of the people to whom one is providing ministry amid all circumstances and conditions. It is not the chaplain’s religious program. It is the command’s religious program. The chaplain serves the command and the troops within that command along with their family members. One performs such service adjusting reasonably and appropriately one’s verbiage and practices as needed by those to whom we volunteered to provide ministry. As Admiral Kibben wrote, “We have an obligation to uphold the sacred trust they place in us.”

I don't pray in Hebrew or Aramaic when doing so defeats the point of my presence. I pray inclusively. I don't counsel based on the teachings in the Mishnah's "Ethics of the Fathers" when I know the people with me have no awareness of or affection for that source. I don't avoid passages in the Qur'an when conducting a Bible class on a ship that Muslims would like to attend along with non-Muslims. And when someone, perhaps a constituent of yours who is perhaps 20 years old or so, needs me to pray with him or her as one heads into a firefight or needs me to say the right words when, God forbid, he or she is dying from one's wounds, I will endeavor to do so every time. I am a US Navy chaplain.

Thank you for providing me this opportunity to submit my testimony to you.