

MINISTERING TO AN UNPOPULAR WAR

by Frank Brown

FRANK WISMER '73 M.DIV. SPENT OVER 25 years as a chaplain in the U.S. Army Reserve, serving in Iraq, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia and Bosnia. Wismer loved the work, to the point that he came to see the U.S. Army as the embodiment of what he had always imagined church to be.

“The army was a place with dedication to mission, where the people in the community supported one another,” says Wismer, an Episcopal priest who retired in January as a colonel at the mandatory age of 60. “If I’d been killed in one of those places, it would have been worth my life.”

For all that enthusiasm and commitment, Wismer has only been to the Pentagon once in his life—to take part, while still at Yale, in a 1972 Episcopal eucharist protesting the Vietnam War held in the Pentagon’s public concourse. It is a paradox that neatly captures the often-nuanced background that YDS graduates bring to military chaplaincy. Like a number of alumni interviewed for this article, Wismer did not graduate from the Divinity School with a notion of entering military chaplaincy. Instead, it was a calling that, as Wismer put it, “was the last thing in the world that I could’ve imagined doing.”

Probably more than any other segment of YDS alumni, military chaplains as a group are engaging the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan in direct, personal ways. Their experiences shed light on and parallel—in life and death terms—the struggles confronting their congregations as a whole over the war.

After 22 years as a part-time chaplain in the Army Reserve and National Guard, Lee Hardgrove '76 M.Div. was mobilized in May 2004 with the 42nd Infantry Division for deployment in a combat zone. At the age of 54 and with misgivings about the course of the United States-led “global war on terror,” Hardgrove had decidedly mixed feelings about taking part in the hostilities, even as an unarmed noncombatant, as all U.S. military chaplains are.

“I prayed—but not out of being a coward—not to go to Iraq. I didn’t feel comfortable. I felt I was over my head in the task I was being given. And from the just war theological side, I wasn’t comfortable,” says Hardgrove, a Methodist pastor. “The Lord blessed me and sent me to Afghanistan.”



Lee Hardgrove '76 M.Div. in Afghanistan.

Hardgrove spent six months in Kabul, the Afghan capital, as a pastor to soldiers, diplomats and NGO workers. After returning, he retired in 2007 from military service as a lieutenant colonel. Now, Hardgrove works as a family program coordinator based in a small Army Reserve center in New Windsor, NY, not far from West Point, where a cadet, Hardgrove’s sister’s boyfriend, first piqued Hardgrove’s childhood curiosity about the military.

Hardgrove grew up on Long Island, getting a call to the ministry at age 13 in a Methodist summer camp. He opposed the Vietnam War in college, a point of view he maintained at the Divinity School, which he entered in 1972. After graduating, Hardgrove remained active at YDS, serving as a class agent. Over the years, he says, “Yale and YDS have traditionally been very anti-war. But I think it’s softening a bit. I think they are starting to understand that one form of ministry is the military chaplaincy.”

While his YDS friends may not have fully grasped Hardgrove’s chaplaincy work, some of his Methodist colleagues damned him for it. He recalls, “I had the most hostility from other Methodist ministers. One even called me a ‘warmonger.’”

Navy Rear Admiral David Stinson '75 M.Div., the senior minister at the Glen Ridge Congregational Church in an affluent New Jersey town of the same name, agrees, “I’m in a liberal denomination, and I sense a little bit of this ambivalence from them. Although the language is all ‘We support the troops,’ it

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is difficult for people to separate out their political opinions. They ask, ‘How do I relate to someone in the military when I oppose the war?’”

Stinson’s United Church of Christ parish is located in a New York suburb notable for its streets lined with gaslights and stately hardwood trees. According to Stinson, 12 households in the town of 7,000 residents lost family members in the September 11, 2001 attacks on New York’s World Trade Center towers. Stinson has been with the Glen Ridge congregation since 1992 and a chaplain since 1979. As a Navy reservist working typically two days a month and two weeks a year, Stinson’s main time commitment has been to his congregations. Still, he feels an equal loyalty to the sailors he serves: “They need the same hope of the Gospel that my suburban congregation does.”

According to the editor of a recent book on the history of the chaplaincy institution, *The Sword of the Lord: Military Chaplains from the First to the Twenty-First Centuries*, the ambivalence that Stinson and Hardgrove speak of is part of a broader tension that results from military chaplains straddling two worlds. As a result, they are sometimes regarded with wariness in both the church environment and the military one.

“In the American context, it was definitely sharpened by the Vietnam war,” says the editor, Doris Bergen, a history professor at the University of Toronto. “You can see there is a definite tension because the chaplains’ credibility depends on their maintaining their independence but their legitimacy depends on their place within the military.”

For many of the YDS alumni in senior chaplain roles in the military, the Vietnam era was a defining experience. It was, too, for one alumnus whose involvement with the U.S. military is just as committed and personal—Don Coleman ’63 M.Div. At about the same time that Frank Wismer was in Kuwait praying over the remains of U.S. soldiers as they were loaded on 2 a.m. flights bound for an Air Force base in Delaware, Coleman was being arrested on November 19, 2006, for trespassing at Fort Benning, GA during a mass protest.

For two years, Coleman had been attending the mass demonstrations outside the Western Hemisphere Institute for Security Cooperation—the former School of the Americas—where

soldiers linked to some of the worst human rights atrocities in Latin American have been trained by the U.S. military. Before the annual event drawing up to 20,000 protesters, Coleman consulted in 2006 with his wife on how the couple would bear up with his imprisonment. Coleman, who leads a Disciples of Christ congregation in Chicago, decided to trespass onto the military base. As a first-time offender, he was sentenced to a 60-day stint in a Chicago federal prison, sharing a cell with a drug dealer with whom he corresponds.

Despite a commitment to peace that dates back to his days during the Vietnam War as a campus chaplain at Texas Tech University, Coleman says he has occasionally toyed with the idea of joining the military. “Every once in a while information comes through the mail about becoming a military chaplain,” he says. “I chose not to take that approach because chaplains are in the military and they must take orders. The prophetic role of challenging the action of a government is not possible.”

Coleman adds, “I have great respect for military chaplains. I think it would be terribly difficult to minister to people who are not only facing death but also causing the death of others. This would require a lot of strength and courage. I have great admiration for their pastoral ministry.”

The institution of military chaplaincy dates back to the Roman imperial forces. Through the end of World War II, one of chaplains’ main roles was to maintain morale among enlisted men, discourage desertions and encourage them to keep on fighting. Given that the chaplains were all officers, notes the historian Bergen, their role was sometimes resented by enlisted men who viewed the chaplains less as counselors and more as agents of the establishment.

Nowadays, chaplains function to guarantee soldiers’ right to worship regardless of their specific faith, to provide pastoral care, to advise commanders on moral issues, and to serve as enlisted men’s advocates on issues that commanding officers might not ordinarily be aware of. The Department of Defense employs some 3,800 of them from over 100 different faith traditions. As mainline Protestant denominations shrink nationally, so, too, does their representation in the chaplain corps. Aggravating this may be a sea change in the way the military is viewed in those denominations, according to

Navy Captain Brad Ableson '85 M.Div., a career chaplain whose thoughtful insights into the institution shed light on its changing nature.

“Even after Americans gained enough perspective to shift Vietnam-era discontentment away from the military, the mainline churches never again seemed to embrace chaplaincy as they did in the era from 1917 to 1967 for instance,” says Ableson, the command chaplain at the U.S. Strategic Command in Nebraska. “I am not familiar with the demographics of the past couple of years regarding new Navy chaplains but I have heard anecdotal tales that discontentment over the policies of the Bush Administration and the war in Iraq have resulted in lower ratios of new chaplains joining from the mainline.”

Ableson, an Episcopal priest set to retire from active duty in September after nearly 25 years in the Navy, was drawn early to the profession. “During college I met a number of military chaplains through church circles. Almost without exception their work struck me as more important, more dramatic, and more exciting than the work of the civilian clergy persons I had spent a lifetime observing up close,” says Ableson, the son of a Navy fighter pilot. “Once, shortly after I had been commissioned, an older chaplain said to me, ‘Brad, when I see you, I know how the Yankees must have felt when Mickey Mantle showed up at his first training camp.’ I was moved by that and never forgot it. I had a sense I could make a real contribution and that conviction never waned.”

The need in today’s U.S. military for chaplain candidates from mainline denominations makes the Divinity School enticingly fertile ground, according to one former recruiter of chaplains. “My wanting to come to Yale is not just to get a bunch of chaplains but a specific kind of chaplain,” says Wismer, who, after his last tour in Kuwait headed up Army Reserve chaplain recruiting in New England. Wismer’s compelling memories range from furtive Sunday morning drives in a 1983 Toyota sedan from Baghdad’s Green Zone to the Anglican church where he celebrated mass weekly, to counseling soldiers who “had taken a life and were asking, ‘Does God still love me?’” Wismer was frustrated, however, in his efforts to transmit the excitement he felt for the job by a YDS policy that makes the school off limits to military recruiters. It is a policy shared by many other seminaries. As a result, “I would get my best responses from evangelical



Navy Captain Brad Ableson '85 M.Div. leads a burial detail on board the USS Mars, on which he was deployed in 1988 to the Persian Gulf.

schools like Gordon Conwell,” says Wismer, whose memoir, *Life and Death in the Garden of Eden*, is due out in the fall of 2008 from Church Publishing Incorporated.

The YDS faculty member with the most experience dealing with military chaplains is Kristen Leslie '86 M.Div., associate professor in pastoral care and counseling. Leslie served as a consultant to the U.S. Air Force Academy on issues of sexualized violence. After spending a week in the summer of 2004 at the Academy with a group of students, she reported witnessing “stridently evangelical themes” that threatened the Academy’s pluralistic atmosphere. It was an observation that, when it became public, set off a flurry of media attention on the makeup and behavior of the Academy’s chaplains.

Overall, during her visits to the Academy, Leslie says she was struck by how different the institution was from those in academia: “It was a surreal experience in that I had never been in such a highly structured environment where there was no privacy. Everything was being done to make them into warriors.”

Another member of the YDS community with experience in both worlds, former Marine Jason DiPinto '07 M.Div., is returning to the military in 2008 to seek a commission as a Navy chaplain. His career choice—unusual for recent YDS graduates—comes from an experience in the Marines that left DiPinto convinced that “creating a space for God there is so important.”