



From Parish Priest to Camp Bastion

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Being a TA chaplain who has worked with a Field Hospital Unit for some nine years, the opportunity to deploy to Afghanistan alongside members of my own unit had been an aspiration for many a year. Having left my parish at the beginning of January 2012 I arrived in Camp Bastion to find my life as a priest would assume a vastly different appearance to the norm back home. For a start I dress in 'combats', I follow a structured day that in many ways is a recurring routine, I am subject to military law and my parishioners are people in uniform, patients in the hospital military and civilians, plus outside contractors, all of whom are individuals who together form a great tapestry of humanity from all faiths and none.

In this environment, despite its structure, there are no two days the same. The routine for me is a straightforward one. I attend a string of early morning meetings, one where I give a 'Thought for the Day' for the assembled gathering and then begin the first of three rounds visiting each department in the hospital, morning, afternoon and early evening. Compared to visiting NHS hospitals where a chaplain may sometimes feel outside of the whole care structure, this environment by contrast, seems

to draw the chaplain to the very core of its existence. Staff here actively and generously draw me in and seek me out. It would seem that the chaplain is very much an integral part of the hospital's care structure, and my presence here is largely respected and warmly received by colleagues and patients alike.

Often I have found myself in the thick of trauma which comes directly from the battlefield. Soldiers of all nationalities are a tough bunch and they sustain some of the worst and therefore some of the most life changing injuries from their hazardous profession. Yet they remain the most stoical and dedicated of individuals and live to serve and lookout for one another; a blood-tie of fraternal dependence. As a chaplain to the sick, the wounded and the dying I have found in them and in the staff who care so carefully for them, a glimpse of the divine presence of God; although they would never say that about themselves; they're all a little too shy and too humble for that description.

Thank you for the kindness of sending a new bike to help me get about this vast camp. It makes a huge difference and brings a quiet and healthy mode of transport into an arena of conflict.