

**HISTORY OF
THE NATIONAL CONFERENCE ON MINISTRY
TO THE ARMED FORCES**

Presented by

**The Reverend Dr. S. David Chambers
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(The NCMAF staff transcribed this text as accurately as possible from an audiotape of Dr. Chambers' presentation to the NCMAF plenary during our 1988 annual conference.)

A number of years ago I was stationed with the Navy as a chaplain in San Diego at the Naval Training Center. Up the hill from Gate 6 of the Training Center was a large supermarket. If any of you know that area, it was at the corner of Voltaire and Chatsworth Streets. One Saturday night the supermarket was robbed. According to the newspapers the thieves made off with a sizeable amount of cash, plus all the checks the customers had used to pay for the groceries they had received.

What the thieves did not realize was that there was one check in that group that was as fraudulent as a three-dollar bill, and would have bounced as high as the overhead in this room. It had been written, of all things, by a Navy wife for \$86.00 worth of groceries. She wrote the check and did not have a dime in the bank.

When she realized that a thief would never sign his name on the back and cause it to be processed, and when she realized that the check accomplished everything she had desired it to: it paid her bill, never to be charged against a bank account that did not exist, she came into the chaplain's office, casually strolled across the floor, sat down in an easy chair, leaned back, and confidently said, "Chaplain, isn't it marvelous how God works?"

Now I don't embrace her theology, but I heartily endorse what she said, "It's marvelous how God works".

I wish I had with me today all those who were intimately involved in the creation of this Conference and its predecessor Conference, to stand with me here now. I am confident that every one of them would say, looking out on this assembly, "It's marvelous how God has worked."

You have given me quite an assignment: to review the early history of this group. In my own thoughts I have divided it into three sub-heads: (1.) The Birth of a New Idea, (2.) The Search for a New Structure, and (3.) Success Required a New Beginning.

The Birth of a New Idea

We all know that from the very earliest times of the Continental Army and the Continental Navy, chaplains have served the Armed Forces of our country. We also know that in those early days, chaplains flowed on and off active duty with almost no supervision from or accountability to any religious institution. Indeed, it was not until 1901 when the ecclesiastical endorsement was created, first in the Army and then in the Navy, that there was any continuing communication between the religious institutions of our country and the institution of the military.

In 1917 with the influx of many chaplains onto active duty for the First World War, two significant agencies came into being: the Military Ordinariate of the Roman Catholic Church in New York City and the General Commission for Army and Navy Chaplains in Washington, D.C.

The significance of the Military Ordinariate was, for the first time within a religious institution of our country, an agency in the structure of that religious organization was designated for the ecclesiastical support and supervision of the chaplains of that particular communion. The significance of the second institution was that the General Commission became the voice of Protestantism within the armed forces for the next half century. It encompassed 38 Protestant communions and joined them together in a common, effective, unified declaration.

We can never overestimate and we must never underestimate the significance of the General Commission for Army and Navy Chaplains in the ministry to the military. It was that agency, more than any other agency, that crusaded for the establishment of a Chaplain Service in the Army and a Chaplain Corps in the Navy. It was that organization, more than any other organization, that pressed for a Chief of Army Chaplains and a Chief of Navy Chaplains commensurate with the Chiefs of other staff services in those branches of the service. And it was the General Commission, more than any other organization, that crusaded for flag rank for those Chiefs — to give them an appropriate stature for the Chaplaincies of the services. We can never overestimate, and we must never underestimate, what it means to bring 38 voices of endorsing agents together to speak unofficially to the armed forces of our country.

But after the Second World War, things were changing dramatically. The number of faith groups authorized to provide chaplains in the military had increased tremendously. By the year 1970, there were 100 faith groups authorized to have chaplains in the reserves and on active duty. Many of these endorsing agents were spread out across the country and the contact they had with Washington, D.C. was by long-distance telephone lines. They needed information on the whole process of endorsement.

So, in 1971, the Chiefs of Chaplains of the three services instituted semi-annual conferences. They would invite the endorsers to come to the city of Washington and discuss with them the procurement procedures, retention, accessions, and promotions, etc. — and we needed that desperately. It was the first time that this had happened but you remember that those were traumatic times — extremely traumatic. As the Old Testament scripture writer would have said, “We were standing in the swelling of the Jordan” — all of the endorsers. The clamor against the Vietnam War was rising, the decibels against the military were increasing, and the endorsing community was right in the midst of that because many of the churches were on the forefront of the criticism of the military chaplaincy. Faith groups knew that the one way that they could reach out and touch the military was through the exercising of their control over their chaplains.

So these semi-annual meetings gave to us an opportunity to bridge the gap between the churches and the chaplaincies. In the best sense of the word, we were able to speak pastorally and prophetically to the Chiefs and explain to them the thinking of the churches regarding the chaplaincies.

Many of the churches were calling for a moratorium on all ecclesiastical endorsements. They were calling for a demilitarization of the chaplaincy. Some of them were calling for a complete abandonment and a civilianization of the chaplaincy. We were the bridge between the church and the chaplaincy, so

we welcomed, the Chiefs welcomed, we all welcomed, the opportunity to meet in March and October, semi-annually in these conferences.

Yet we knew that the conferences were not all that they really could be. Attendance was sporadic and moderate. There was no continuity from one conference to another. The subject material was often times somewhat superficial, less than profound.

But I think what the endorsers missed most of all was the fact that we were not the creators of any part of the agenda. We were the objects of it. We had no opportunity among ourselves to discuss those problems that were unique and distinctive to us. Some of us would dream dreams and envision visions of the times when there might be a loose knit, ad hoc, collegian of all the endorsers, but that was somewhere far down the road on the agenda. Back in those days, we were completely fragmented.

Then on the 18th and 19th of March, 1976, one of these semi-annual conferences was planned. Indeed, it was right here in this building. This was a new Sheraton National back in those days and we were in the adjacent room. We had requested of the Chiefs that we be given the morning hours for our own discussions, and this was something brand new. We had never had the opportunity to speak together by ourselves. The Chiefs were to come in after lunch.

The Chairman pro tem was Ed Swanson, the Director of the General Commission. He called on Rabbi Gilbert Kollin for the invocation. Then after the invocation he threw the meeting open for plenary discussion of anything we wanted to put on the agenda to have the Chiefs of Chaplains respond to in the afternoon session.

Immediately, Dr. Purnell Bailey, the Executive Director of the United Methodist Church, rose on the floor and said, "I have a motion that I would like to present." This was unusual because we were not given to parliamentary procedures. We had no "parliament" back in those days. We had no organization whatsoever.

Dr. Bailey's motion was this: "I move that this group of endorsing executives organize itself into a body to be the General Council of Endorsing Agents to meet semi-annually with the three Chiefs of the Armed Forces Chaplaincies."

There was silence in the room. No one had anticipated this and no one had the slightest inkling that this motion was going to be offered. It came out of nowhere. We were absorbing what he had proposed, but the motion was magnetic. It immediately drew the imagination of every endorser who was present in that plenary session.

One endorser arose and said, "I think the Veterans Administration Chaplains ought to be included in this with the Chiefs." Another endorser said, "No, we will have to put together a planning committee to implement this motion if it passes—let them decide." Another endorser said, "I think it is a little premature to name the baby before it has been delivered." Dr. Bailey, very wisely, withdrew the proposed name that he had suggested because there was one word in that name that might have scuttled the whole procedure. Another endorser said, "I see no reason to heap another organization upon us. I would not oppose it, but I will abstain in the voting."

We had an effervescent and lively discussion for about 40 to 45 minutes and then someone called for the question and the vote was taken. There was one abstention with unanimous affirmation of the motion.

The motion was that this group of endorsing executives organize. That is the operative word — organize. You see we had never been united before. We didn't even know each other. The General Commission knew itself, the NAE knew itself, but they did not know each other. Endorsers from the outside came into the meeting and spent the time and departed. We never got to know each other. Now we were to organize into a body to meet semi-annually with the three Chiefs of the Armed Forces Chaplaincies.

During the span of 200 years, 1776-1976, we had not come very far, but in the span of a decade, the community of endorsers had come a tremendous distance. The time was ripe, the need was apparent, and a new idea had just been born. I think I might say again—it was marvelous how God was working in the group.

The Search for a New Structure

Now we struck our second and perhaps major challenge, the search for a new structure.

Chaplains, for the most part, are not overly concerned about the faith group of their parishioners, and I think we can say that the parishioners in the military are not overly concerned about the faith group of their chaplains. I had a clerk at my last duty assignment in the Navy, who, next to myself, was the most abominable speller in this world. I can remember one time he brought in a letter for my signature. As I read through that letter, I said, "Bob, when you are in doubt about the spelling of a word, why in the world don't you look it up in the dictionary?" His response to me was "Chaplain, I am never in doubt."

Well, one day a man put his head into my clerk's office and said, "What is the faith group of the chaplain, what is his denomination, what church does he belong to?" Good old Bob scratched his head and said, "Now let me see, it starts with a P, it starts with a P; that's it, Piscopolitan." Well, he was wrong on both counts.

Chaplains don't care about the faith group of their people and the people don't concern themselves about the faith group of their chaplain, but ecclesiastical endorsing agents do — and rightfully so. As soon as that motion was passed, another endorser arose and said that he recommended that the Chairman pro tem bring in a slate of six names of endorsers to serve on the planning task force. Ed Swanson, after lunch, brought in a list of eight names in order to provide appropriate faith group diversity,

The eight persons who served on the planning group that put the Conference together were: Bishop James Killeen, Military Ordinate, Roman Catholic Church; Rabbi Joel Balsam of the JWB; Father Joseph Cappadinitria of the Eastern Orthodox group of churches; Mr. Floyd Robertson, representing the National Association of Evangelicals (NAE); Chaplain Bill Clark of the Southern Baptist Convention; Chaplain Mag Lutness of the Lutheran Council; Reverend Harold Haines of the American Council of Christian Churches and myself, representing the General Commission. We were a microcosm of the larger community of endorsers.

We decided that we were going to meet for these planning sessions in the office of the Lutheran Council down at L'Enfant Plaza. They had the plushiest offices, let me tell you, in Washington, D.C! They were beautiful and they offered to serve us lunches while we continued to work. Little did they realize how many lunches they were going to be serving to this planning group. Little did we realize the magnitude of this task: to bring over 100 organizations together, with no prior format, into one working body.

We thought, initially, that first and foremost we had to design a plan that would be acceptable to the endorsers. We soon discovered that what we really needed to do was plan a design acceptable to the parent religious institutions back in Centerville or wherever. They were the ones that were going to have to sanction participation in this group. We went into it extremely naïve. We just did not know! We were ignorant of the positions of so many of our colleagues.

We thought that we could come together and talk about a constitution and bylaws. Not at all — that implied “allegiance”. We had to talk about “guidelines”. We thought we could come together and talk about “membership”. Not at all — that implied “affiliation”. We had to talk about “representation to”. We thought that we could come together and talk about “ecumenism”. No way — that implied “mutual acceptance”. We had to talk about “religious “pluralism”.

When it came to the point when we tried to find a name for the organization, we pondered over “Association”, “Council”, “Convention” and “Commission”. All of those names implied “belonging to”, and if this religious faith group belonged to it, then that religious faith group could not belong to it; so we had to find something that was non-binding for all of us. Well, on Monday morning quarterbacking, it seemed so obvious—“Conference”—meaning a forum, a time for discussion, for dialogue. I can recite this to you in a minute and a half, but I could not begin to tell you in an hour and a half all the avenues that we walked down to come to “Conference”.

The Conference of what? I think, even if we had thought of, which we didn't, National Conference on Ministry to the Armed Forces, it would not have been acceptable, because we were on the bare bones, bottom level of what we were all about. Then, one endorser seated around the table said, “Well, let me suggest in the vernacular of today that we just tell it like it is: we are a **Conference of Ecclesiastical Endorsing Agents for the Armed Forces,**” and that became the name of the predecessor Conference to this one.

Then Joel Balsam of the JWS said, “There are going to be 100,000 persons out there who are going to have absolutely no idea what an ecclesiastical endorsing agent is, so let's put a subscription under our title in italics or in quotation marks ‘*involved with the spiritual and moral welfare of military personnel*’.” Not “moral and spiritual”—everybody says “moral and spiritual” the way they say “bread and butter” and “salt and pepper.” Turn it around and it becomes a little more attention-gathering. The spiritual should come before the moral anyway — “involved with the spiritual and moral welfare of military personnel.”

Every piece of correspondence that went out from our office to the churches, to the Congress, to the Chaplaincies, to everything, carried that subscription underneath it. If I may leap ahead by a good number of years for just a footnote, the inspiration for the present name of your Conference, National Conference on Ministry to the Armed Forces, was that line—“involved with the spiritual and moral welfare of military personnel.”

Now the major challenge was yet ahead of us.

What was going to be the relationship of endorser to endorser? Would we vote by agency, or would we vote by representative? If an agency had five representatives and only one came to the meeting, could that one bring in his vest pocket the votes for the other four and cast them on the floor?

One agency had supervision over 300 chaplains and another agency had supervision over 3 chaplains. What would the equality be? Would one be more equal than the other?

This question we all recognized was really the most significant question that we had to ponder because misdirection on this question could have shattered the Conference. We were very, very fragile in those days. We bisected and dissected it. We looked at this subject from every angle.

Let me remind you of the composition of the representatives in that planning group around the table: Bishop Jim Killeen of the Military Ordinariate of the Roman Catholic Church was assigned as a representative to that committee as was Reverend Harold Haines, representing the American Council of Christian Churches, a clergyman of the Presbyterian Church of America.

Here was the Roman Catholic Church with 2000 years of history. Here was the PCA with two years of history. Here was the Roman Catholic Church with 1,000,000,000 communicants in this country. Here was the PCA with about 50,000 communicant members. Here was the Roman Catholic Church with one third of all of the chaplains on active duty — one thousand. Here was the Presbyterian Church of America with two chaplains on active duty. What would the voting power be? Who held power block in the Conference?

I will never forget it. Jim Killeen was seated just opposite me at the table. He was not given to parliamentary procedures so he said, "Dave," (I had served as the Chairperson of the Planning Committee) "let me make a suggestion. I'm going to suggest that every representative who comes to a meeting possesses one vote."

We were over the hurdle and every one of us around the table knew it. The one who had the most to sacrifice, Bishop Jim Killeen of the Military Ordinariate, had given to us complete equality, complete parity, from the largest faith group to the smallest.

After we had finished all our work of the administrative type, we moved over to the purposes and responsibilities.

I wish I could go through all of them because every purpose and every responsibility on that list has its own little biography and its own little story. Floyd Robertson, who sat on that committee, knows where of I speak.

The purposes and responsibilities are divided into four sections — if you have ever noticed them. The first one deals with the Conference as an area for dialoguing — for communicating among ourselves. That is statement number one. The Conference was also an interchange for information from the Chiefs to ourselves, from our churches, etc. Those are statements two, three and four. Then the Conference, as it deals with the institution of the chaplaincy, are statements five and eight. The Conference in relationship to us ecclesiastical endorsers and to the chaplains are statements six and seven.

For example, we had just come through this lengthy discussion on voting, and we had opted in favor of equality among us all; but then, the question arose: Here is Endorser A and here is Endorser B. Endorser A has supervision over 500 chaplains. When he stands up in the Conference, he is going to be heard when he says his chaplains have a problem; but here is endorser B with only two chaplains. When he stands up and speaks in the Conference, will he be listened to with only one or two chaplains?

Here is endorser A. When he is going in to talk to the Chief of Chaplains of the Army, Navy or Air Force, he will be heard; but here is endorser B, with only two chaplains. When he goes in to talk with the Chief of Chaplains, and he does not receive appropriate attention, it is the concern of all of us, not on the merits of the case, but because he is one of the endorsers.

We also wanted to say something about the chaplains. Any chaplain who has served on active duty knows that there are three main dangers on active duty for a chaplain. These are my own terms, but I speak of "ecclesiastical amnesia". The second is "ecclesiastical homogenization" and the third is "astigmatism".

"Ecclesiastical amnesia" sets in when a chaplain reports to active duty and very soon forgets the faith group that nurtured, trained, endorsed, and ordained him or her. That becomes a tragedy in the ministry of that chaplain. "Homogenization" is when a chaplain goes onto active duty and for the first time rubs shoulders with other faith groups, and those doctrines and tenets and traditions of that particular chaplain are eroded away as he/she becomes homogenized in a large group. That is a tragedy for the chaplain. If a chaplain loses the focus, develops "astigmatism" of his or her ministry, why he/she was ordained, or why he/she was endorsed to come into the ministry, that becomes a tragedy for that chaplain and for the chaplaincy itself.

The chaplain may not care about the faith group of his/her parishioners and parishioners may not care about the faith group of the chaplain, but the chaplain sure better know who he or she is — his/her own identity and his/her own integrity.

So we wrote on the end of statement six, "to foster within the conference an understanding of and a concern for the welfare and interest **of every endorsing agency and to protect the chaplain's denominational integrity.**" That's the concern of the Conference.

When we had finished all of this work, and it was tedious all summer long, we took the guidelines to each Chief of Chaplains and sat down with each one and went through every statement in the guidelines, because we wanted them to know that this was not an adversarial group, but an advocacy group. We were not contentious. We wanted to be in a trust relationship and we were at that time.

Then we took the guidelines to the October meeting of our plenary session, which was at Andrews Air Force Base, and the vote was taken. There was not one abstention. It was a unanimous affirmation and the **Conference of Ecclesiastical Endorsing Agents for the Armed Forces** came into being. I was elected to serve as the first chairperson of the Conference.

We had our March meeting on the 17th and 18th, 1977, in the Holiday Inn, Crystal City. It was a little less expensive than this place and we had no budget. No budget! No money! No staff! Nothing! Floyd Robertson is smiling. How well we knew we had nothing.

The Holiday Inn was a little less costly. The room was about two-thirds the size of this one and we sat in an open box style around tables. The room was jammed. We had never had as many endorsers present as we had at that meeting. We had meticulously planned the agenda. We had set 30 minutes for self-introductions.

We began at my right and proceeded around the table. The farther we went, the more loquacious these endorsers became. It went on and on and when some Southern endorsers got going, the humorous stories that they were telling were catastrophic for the agenda. Two hours was spent, but it was congealing. It brought us together. This was the first time that many of us had heard the first names of some of the endorsers. We didn't know them. Previously, they came to the meeting and they went home.

The General Commission didn't know the NAE; the NAE didn't know the General Commission. Only the Washington group knew each other. Two hours we spent, but it brought us together. One endorser said to me afterward and I'm not going to tell you the faith group. He said, "Dave, I never thought I could have sat next to a man of this faith and had such a meaningful and marvelous meeting together with him."

We had a blue plywood box that we conned from the Navy. It was cubed and inside we put a rear view Kodak slide projector to project onto a screen. We had taken pictures of all the endorsing agents in October. We had gotten a lot of additional pictures, beautiful pictures, head, neck, and shoulders. We put those in the carousel to project onto the screen and then we had a continual-run tape recorder that we put on top with a speaker and a thirty second biography of every endorser. We put that on in a corner of the meeting room before the meeting and at coffee breaks and at lunch breaks. Everyone gathered around to see the pictures and to get the names and the biographies of their colleagues. The Chiefs of Chaplains and their staffs gathered around the blue box to get to know us. When you get to know people, you appreciate them, and the more you appreciate them, the more you can work together with them.

We left on a high note from that first meeting.

Success Required a New Beginning

About two months later I received a telephone call from the Pentagon. The word was that Congress had drastically cut the funding for the reserve programs for the Army, Navy and Air Force. Category D pay billets were going to be eliminated. That meant that all of our chaplains in the reserve programs were to be cut on funding.

The Conference went into high gear. I cannot begin to recount all that happened. We made contacts with the churches, contacts with the Pentagon, contacts with Congress, with the Senate, and with the House and attended their meetings.

Twelve months later, another phone call came from the Pentagon, "Reverend, call off your churches, you have won! No reduction in Category D for the chaplains." One Congressman said he had never received as much mail on a single subject as he received for the justification of ministers in the reserves to be paid.

Two months after that first meeting, I received another call from the Navy Chief of Chaplains. He was hosting a conference over in London of all the Chiefs of Chaplains of NATO — the 15 NATO countries. He wanted to demonstrate to them how in this nation, that prides itself on the separation of church and state, the churches work together in ministry to the military. He wanted the Chairman of the Conference to go over and speak on this pluralistic, diverse religious organization that we had just created, and so I went.

The first instance above was a testimony of how corporate voices united together have an impact. This was a testimony on the trust that the Chiefs had in our group.

About three or four months after the first meeting, another telephone call came from the Pentagon. Five faith groups were indicating that they might want to become endorsing agents with chaplains on active duty: The Church of Ancient Wisdom, The Universal Life Church, The Hari Krishners, and two others. The question was would we as an endorsing community study and revise DOD Directive 1304.19 — The Nomination of Chaplains for Military Ministry? We formed a committee. Norm Folkers was the chair of the committee. We worked through the criteria on which a religious faith group would become an endorsing agency, presented it to the plenary session, and then it went to the Pentagon. Although that Directive has been through a number of revisions, I still see the vocabulary that this Conference put into it. It was a testimony of their confidence in the work that we could do.

Success required a new beginning. The Conference of Ecclesiastical Endorsing Agents had ascended. The General Commission had deteriorated.

In March 1980, the General Commission for Chaplains and Armed Forces Personnel, as it was then known, came to the Conference and recommended that we join together in a joint study for the future of both organizations. The members of the Conference could not understand why. The members of the General Commission knew exactly why: The Conference of Ecclesiastical Endorsing Agents had ascended; The General Commission had deteriorated. We joined with them in the study. Nine persons from each group served on the task force.

The following year the committee brought back its recommendations. The recommendations were these:

That on the 31st of December, 1981, the General Commission for Chaplains would dissolve and go out of business, and on the 31st of December, 1981, the Conference of Ecclesiastical Endorsing Agents for the Armed Forces would dissolve and go out of existence, and on the first of January, 1982, a new Conference would come into being.

The name of the new organization would be **The National Conference on Ministry to the Armed Forces.**

The new Conference was not to be viewed as a merger of the old even though the guidelines would be the guidelines of the previous Conference (The Conference of Ecclesiastical Endorsing Agents). The new Conference was a new creation.

All of the tangible property of the General Commission would now become the property of the new Conference. The General Commission's office was located in downtown Washington D.C. They had a magnificent building near the capitol. They sold it to the John R. Mott Foundation for \$305,000.00. Every month, you receive money from that sale. Their total bank account became your bank account. All of the tangible office furniture became your furniture and the magnificent library that they possessed on the chaplaincy is now your library.

Success had required a new beginning and a new Conference was born.

Dave Chamber's Speech

December 6, 1988

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I can say without any hesitation that everything that was done was done with a spirit of prayer. We began every Planning Committee meeting and ended every Planning Committee meeting that I was related to with prayer.

The first devotional of our previous Conference which I conducted was from the book of Ezekiel — the valley of the dry ones and how God's spirit entered and enlivened those dry bones.

For those of us who sat around the Planning Committee table, as we designed the Conference, I think I can say there was one text in scripture that was of great significance. It is in the Acts of the Apostles, the fifth chapter, the 38th and 39th verses. Now, this is a Chamber's free translation, "If this thing be of man, it's going to collapse, but if this thing be of God, there is nothing that can stand in the way of its success."

I think I can say it's marvelous. "It's marvelous, how God has worked." Thank you and God bless you all in His ministry.