



Pennsylvania Fire Chaplain: an occasional Newsletter

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A Happy New Year to all of you. May God bless you and your ministry this year.

In this issue of the newsletter

- I have some observations from the fall conference of the Pennsylvania Society of Chaplains in October. This is a new organization to me. Thanks to Joel Hummel for making me aware of the organization and its conference. The theme of the conference was "Self-Care for Chaplains: Building Resilience, Healing Trauma, Nurturing Happiness and Caring for Mind, Body & Spirit." Resilience, according to my old dictionary, is the ability to recover from or adjust to compressive stress. Self-care and resilience go together for without self-care, a person will not be resilient. This is true for us who are chaplains as well as for the people we serve. I know this from my own chaplaincy experience on calls that involved a fatality to a member of the local community. Dealing with the grief of family members is challenging. I have often gone out to eat afterwards or come home and sought the quiet of my office as a way of unplugging from the situation. Self-care for me is food, prayer and (because I am an introvert) time alone.
- In November Joel and I met with Dave Williamson to discuss how to identify and organize the fire department chaplains in Pennsylvania. A summary of that discussion follows.
- Finally, I will share some comments from chaplains in Pennsylvania regarding the impact of the reduced number of volunteers on their role as a chaplain.

BECOMING RESILIENT: NOTES FROM THE PENNSYLVANIA SOCIETY OF CHAPLAINS FALL 2015 CONFERENCE

Practicing self-care is the best gift we can give ourselves and encourage others to practice for at least two reasons: to counter compassion fatigue, the stress of caring for others who grieve losses or who have experienced trauma; and to deal with the vicarious trauma we experience from helping others in crisis and the effect that has on us physically, psychologically and spiritually.

The speakers at the conference presented a variety of ways to care for ourselves. Tina Lightner-Morris talked about and used insights from neuroscience to care for ourselves. These insights include identifying what we are thankful for in the situation, identifying negative emotions that arise from caring, making a decision that while not perfect is good enough for you at that time and finally getting hugs. Because trauma is stored in the right side of the brain, she encouraged us to use the right side of the brain by play and other creative activity to practice self-care.

Keith Espenshade discussed compassion fatigue, the ways in which caring eats at our souls. Compassion fatigue is marked by discouragement and physical, emotional, mental and spiritual exhaustion. Signs of compassion fatigue include anxiety, guilt, depression, not feeling ok about yourself, having problems with boundaries with others, poor sleep, loss of faith and questioning your faith, headaches and related physical symptoms. Keith identified several risk factors for compassion fatigue: our personalities and coping styles, our personal histories, our current life circumstances, work styles and the spiritual resources that are available to us. Compassion fatigue affects us in cognitive, emotional, behavioral, spiritual and physical ways. The ways to cope with compassion fatigue include being aware of our fatigue, balancing our work and life, setting boundaries and making choices that will help us cope.

While the Society focuses on chaplains in health care settings, there was a session on stress first aid for fire and emergency medical service personnel. Stress first aid can be summarized by seven Cs: check, coordinate, cover, calm, connect, competence and confidence. Check involves checking on each other to discover any stress and its level. Coordinate means referring another person for help. Cover involves getting a person showing signs of stress to safety. Calm means relax, slow down and refocus. To Connect is to avoid being alone and get support from others. We are Competent when our effectiveness is restored because we have dealt with the stress. Confidence is an outgrowth of competence. An online class for Stress First Aid is available at www.fireherolearningnetwork.com.

While not emphasized at the conference, another way to practice self-care is to make use of our spiritual resources: prayer, meditation, reading Scripture, turning our work over to God and connecting with our church or other group.

Here are some resources I have identified to help chaplains practice self-care:

[Resources for Pastors and Chaplains](#)

[Developing A Self-Care Plan](#)

[Spiritual First Aid: Disaster Chaplain Guide](#)

THE PENNSYLVANIA FIRE CHAPLAIN NETWORK

Do you know other fire chaplains in Pennsylvania? Do you think that you're all alone in your service? How would you like to become a charter member for FREE (at least for the first year) of a Pennsylvania based organization of fire chaplains?

One of my dreams as a chaplain is to connect with other fire department chaplains in Pennsylvania. I have connected with some of you at training sessions that I sponsored. I hope this newsletter is a way of connection, too. However, I have wanted more ways to connect.

Others have wanted this, too. To that end, Joel Hummel (a York County chaplain) Dave Williamson (a chaplain in Mercer County) and I (a Chester County chaplain) met in Carlisle in November to discuss how to do this. The outcome of our meeting is the formation of what we are calling The Pennsylvania Fire Chaplain Network. We have called it a network because we hope it will be a way for fire chaplains to connect with each other for training, support and encouragement. It will be a way to announce training opportunities and coordinate them state wide.

Beginning in January 2016 chaplains will have the opportunity to join the Network. There are no dues for the first year; after that no decision has been made about the price of dues. There is of yet no massive organization. There will be three regions with a coordinator in each one.

I have created a web site for the Network [The Pennsylvania Fire Chaplain Network](#). Here you will find the application for membership, a way to contact me, links to other resources and the newsletter.

OBSERVATIONS FROM THE FIELD

We all know that the number of volunteer firefighters is decreasing in Pennsylvania. What we may not have thought about is the impact this has on the chaplains in these fire companies. There are chaplains whose only role is that of chaplain. They are not trained in firefighting, vehicle rescue or traffic control. They may or may not respond to calls with their company. There are chaplains who are firefighters, trained in firefighting and vehicle rescue, or are trained fire police. These chaplains could find themselves torn between which to be on a given call: a chaplain or firefighter/fire police.

A Schuylkill County chaplain wrote to me recently with this observation about this conflict:

Being a member of a small community volunteer fire company is becoming more challenging. Due to the dwindling numbers of people, we have become very shorthanded at times, especially

during the day. My primary job in the company is firefighter/fire police officer. Most of my duties involve traffic control, crowd control, and scene safety. Occasionally we must also assist our fire crews with firefighting activities, due to the lack of manpower. One of the things that the fire officers or another assigned firefighter would usually do is stand by the family members or homeowners, or persons involved in accidents or other incidents. Because all personnel are now desperately needed for active firefighting, staying with family, owners, etc. has become impossible until late into the event. If my help is not needed for Fire Police duties, my priority is to make contact with the family or owner and keep them advised as to what is going on with their property or loved ones. Acting as the liaison between the fire officer and concerned involved persons, keeps a buffer between the fire officer, and allows the fire ground activities to continue and not be interrupted by panicked people. Being a Chaplain brings some calm to an already tense situation. What you say, what you do can make a difference in keeping people calm and charged emotions from erupting. Assisting them in making necessary phone calls, explaining to them what is happening and why, or just standing near them, as you silently pray for guidance and comfort for them, can mean so much. They may not even remember that you were there, or your name, but you will know, and so will God.

This is a good statement of the tension some chaplains face who serve in multiple roles. The ministry of the chaplain on calls is important. It has been said that when the chaplain arrives, God shows up. That is bad theology but it helps explain the power of the presence of the chaplain.

Is there a solution? More volunteers would help. Ultimately, though, it is up to the incident commander to decide where a dual trained chaplain would be most useful. A written SOP would also be helpful.

Training Opportunities

[Emotional and Spiritual Care in Disasters](#). May 23 and 24, 2016 in Hermitage, PA

[Delaware County Fireman's Association Educational Conference](#). February 27, 2016. Classes of interest to chaplains are CISM on the Fireground and LODD. Click on the link, scroll down the page to the conference entry. Registration is at the bottom of the page. This conference is FREE!

Share Your Story

Every chaplain has a story about how they became a chaplain, about the challenges of being a fire department chaplain, about how God has used them. We can all profit from these stories by being encouraged, by learning, by realizing that we are not alone. Consider this an invitation to write for this newsletter so you don't have to read only what I think is important. Tell us about training you've had or training you know about. Share whatever you think will be good for other chaplains.

We're on Facebook

You can find the Pennsylvania Fire Chaplains on Facebook. I share on that site posts that I think are relevant to chaplains including posts about suicide among emergency services personnel, PTSD and anything else that seems appropriate. If you have not done so, like the page and join the conversation.

A Final Word

Being a fire department chaplain is a great privilege. It is a privilege to stand by people in crisis, to pray with them, to reassure them that they are not alone. As the Rev. Donald J. Mahoney, Catholic chaplain with the Boston Fire Department has said, "I call this a ministry; it's more than just a job," he said later. "It's an easy job to love because of the people."

Do not be discouraged in this ministry. Trust God. Your strength is in him.

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