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Presbyterian Chaplaincy during the First World War

by

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The following paper will provide a general introduction to the Canadian Chaplain Service of the First World War, and specifically, Presbyterian involvement in that service. The first section attempts a brief overview of the Chaplain Service, its organization and development, along with a look at the administrative response of the Presbyterian Church in Canada -- primarily the creation and development of the Military Service Board of the Church. The second section will then examine the various duties and responsibilities of the chaplains during the war, taking examples from the work and experiences of some of the Presbyterian chaplains. This is not aimed at placing the Presbyterian chaplains in a different category than the Anglican, Roman Catholic, Methodist and other denominational chaplains as they performed the same work, but rather to bring to light some of the actions and experiences of those Presbyterian ministers that felt "called" to this service.

On the morning of 9 April 1917, Easter Monday, the Battle of Vimy Ridge began. As the 1st Canadian Infantry Brigade entered the action, the Reverend George Wood, minister from St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church, Chatham, New Brunswick and chaplain to the brigade, scrambled out of a trench near the ridge and moved forward through the German barrage with other members of the 4th Battalion Headquarters. Since 8 p.m. the night before, with limited equipment, he had been preparing coffee so that by zero-hour he was able to provide each of the 800 or so men in the nearby assembly trenches with "half a pint of steaming hot coffee."

They passed over the open ground without casualties, before clambering into a trench and scrambling forward through mud almost knee deep. With him was the C.O. (Commanding Officer), the Adjutant, the liaison officers, and a few runners and signallers. The Medical Officer and stretcher-bearers were with them originally, but had fallen behind in the mud. As they moved forward through the barrage, a shell made a direct hit on the trench, killing the Adjutant and one of the liaison officers, and wounding everyone else but the C.O. and Wood. Wood stopped and gently lifted the Adjutant in his arms, witnessing his last breath.

Wood and the C.O. then continued down the trench, trying to reach the dugout where a temporary headquarters was to be established. When they arrived, they found it filled with wounded men taking cover from the intense shelling. Wood did what he could, tending to the wounded before sending them back to friendly lines: two, who could no longer walk, he sent back on stretchers carried by German prisoners. He then left the dugout, and after a brief search, found and re-joined the Medical Officer at a temporary Aid Post filled with wounded. There he remained, tending the men as best he could and organizing parties of German stretcher-bearers to carry them back to the British trenches. At noon they began moving forward again and by 2 p.m. had set up the foremost aid post of the Division. Wood stayed at this post for the next two days assisting the Medical Officer.

Through prayer and gentle words Wood did his best to provide spiritual comfort; he took names and addresses and wrote dozens of letters on behalf of the wounded and dying to their mothers and girlfriends, fathers and brothers. Due to the intense shelling many of the wounded had not eaten in twenty-four hours, so he scouted the surroundings and eventually found a dugout filled with German rations of coffee, biscuits and "Bully Beef" to feed the men. During these two days he also established a cemetery later recognized by the War Graves Commission, and buried twenty-six soldiers.¹

Based on the documentary evidence that exists, these activities of Major Wood during the Battle of Vimy Ridge, courageous and impressive as they are, were in fact, not all that extraordinary or uncommon of the work of the chaplains during the Great War. Whether they were attached to an Infantry Brigade at the Front, or appointed to one of the hospital districts in England, the chaplains performed a surprising range and breadth of duties in an equally diverse range of situations and locations. They tended the wounded, visited and prayed with soldiers in hospitals, wrote letters of re-assurance to loved ones, provided hot coffee and tea, established cinemas and recreation huts for the soldiers' entertainment, and buried the dead, and in so doing, cared for the religious, moral and social welfare of the troops.

Compared to the duty of the individual soldier, to fight and die if necessary, the chaplains' services may appear less brave and less courageous; yet far from simply preaching Sunday services behind the lines, the chaplains' efforts were many, and truly aimed at caring for the men, both in body and in spirit.

From a purely Presbyterian point of view, it appears that very little has in fact been written on the Canadian Chaplain Service during the First World War. This is surprising. Some of the Presbyterian Chaplains that served in the war wrote brief accounts of their activities separately or as part of an autobiography, such as Alexander Gordon's recollections in "A Chaplain at the Front," published in *Queen's Quarterly* in 1919, Clarence MacKinnon's *Reminiscences*, published in 1938, as well as Charles Gordon's, *Postscript to Adventure*, published posthumously, also in 1938. William Beattie, a Presbyterian minister who served as chaplain for the entire length of the war, eventually rising to the position of Director of Chaplain Services in Canada, wrote a history of the service in 1921, but it was never published.

Duff Crerar of Grande-Prairie Regional College, has written the most descriptive and in-depth account of the Chaplain Service in his *Padres in No Man's Land*, providing

¹ National Archives of Canada (NAC), Series R611-275-6-E Canadian Chaplain Service Records, Vol. 4666, Vimy Ridge file, Report of G.W. Wood.

a great deal of insight into the work of the Anglican, Roman Catholic, Methodist and Presbyterian churches during the war. However, few glimpses exist into the Presbyterian involvement in the Chaplain Service of the First World War. As Dr. Crerar noted in his book, "Great War experiences fascinate us. Yet, curiously, our uniformed clergy have never been given much attention or credit."²

Development of the Canadian Chaplain Service

Before looking at the development of both the Canadian Chaplain Service and the Military Service Board of the Presbyterian Church in Canada, it may be of interest to look at some numbers. Of the 447 Canadian Chaplains that served overseas during the war, 98, or approximately 22%, were from the Presbyterian Church in Canada. If we take into account those that served as chaplains in Canada, then the number grows to approximately 116.³ Of these 447 chaplains, a total of seven died as a result of the war: two of these were killed in action, one died from wounds received, one was killed when his ship was torpedoed, and three died of sickness or debilitations resulting from the war.⁴ Of these seven, two were Presbyterian ministers: the Reverend Donald MacPhail, and the Reverend Joseph Elliott.

MacPhail was minister of Knox Presbyterian Church, Cayuga, Ontario, when he enlisted as a chaplain in April 1916. He served briefly at the Bramshott Camp in England before traveling to France in November. He served at the front with the 6th Infantry Brigade, 2nd Canadian Division, and the 12th Infantry Brigade, 4th Canadian Division until September 1917 when he returned to England as chaplain to the London Area. In June 1918, he became chaplain to the hospital ship "Llandoverly Castle," which later that month was torpedoed and sunk by a German submarine. His body was found washed up on the coast of France.⁵

The Rev. Joseph Elliott, minister for eleven years to the congregation at Beechwood/Nairn Presbyterian Church, Ontario, was taken on strength as chaplain in December 1915. Posted to the 6th Infantry Brigade, 2nd Canadian Division, in June 1916, he served in the Ypres Salient, on the Somme, and at Vimy Ridge before being invalided to England in November 1917. He never recovered, remaining in hospitals in England until July 1919, when he was transferred to St. Andrew's Military Hospital in Toronto, passing away later that year.⁶

The growth and development of the Chaplain Service is in itself quite an interesting story. Denominational differences and tensions, the military attitudes of both officers and

² Duff Crerar, *Padres in No Man's Land* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1995), p. 10.

³ *Ibid.*, pp. 235-247, 298.

⁴ NAC Series R-611-275-6-E, Vol.4653, Honours and Awards #1 file, report Feb. 7th, 1919; NAC Series R-611-275-6-E, Vol. 4649, Biographies #1 file, Joseph Elliott.

⁵ NAC Series R-611-275-6-E. Vol. 4649, Biographies #2 file, Chaplain Service Records – Biographies File, D.G. MacPhail.

⁶ NAC, Biographies #1 file, Joseph Elliott.

men, pressures from home, and inexperience, all could have de-railed it, yet after the war, Lt. General Sir Arthur Currie commented on the service saying:

throughout all the weary months of war I have learned to rely upon the Chaplain Services as a very dependable and helpful organization. It is hard indeed to estimate at its proper worth the true value of their services. In the line and out of the lines, on the battle-fields, in the rest areas, on the Lines of Communication, and at the rest camps, they have at all times most unselfishly performed their duty, and it is indeed a pleasure to me to testify to this fact.⁷

In 1914, it was a different story – the chaplains were, for the most part, inexperienced and the Chaplain Service itself would not be formed for another year. With the outbreak of hostilities in Europe at the end of July 1914, and the declaration of war made by Britain in early August, Canada promised an initial contingent of 25,000 soldiers.⁸ Through the month of August, militia units and newly-enlisted soldiers made their way to Valcartier, Quebec for training at a hastily established military camp. Within weeks the number of soldiers at Valcartier had grown to 32,000.

In the same way, a number of clergy also found themselves called to Valcartier. Some were chaplains of local militia units, but many were not. One that was not, was the Rev. Alexander MacLennan Gordon. However, Gordon was the son of "Fighting-Dan" Gordon, who had won renown for his conduct as a chaplain during the Northwest Rebellion of 1885, and as a result had the Minister of Militia's attention⁹. Gordon arrived at Valcartier on 5 September 1914. With him was the Reverend Dr. Herridge, Moderator of the 40th General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in Canada, who addressed the recently assembled soldiers the next day.¹⁰

During these first few weeks, tension between the denominations was, unfortunately, high, as each wished to have due representation when the first contingent was assembled. On 14 October, Sam Hughes, the Minister of Militia, announced the names of the thirty-three chaplains that would accompany the first group of soldiers overseas. Of these thirty-three, five were Presbyterians: William Beattie, John Beattie, John Pringle, Alexander Gordon, and Alexander Cornett. As Duff Crerar indicated, Hughes based his selections more on zeal and conservative politics than on militia service and experience, and as a result this "left a record of spectacular leadership and embarrassing failure."¹¹

⁷ NAC, Vol. 75, "10-8-26" file, Currie to the Minister of the Overseas Military Forces of Canada, May 6, 1919.

⁸ NAC website, http://www.archives.ca/02/02010601_e.html, Records of the Canadian Expeditionary Force.

⁹ Crerar, p.33.

¹⁰ Queen's University Archives (QUA), A.M. Gordon Papers, Diary entry 4 Oct. 1914, pp. 3-4.

¹¹ Crerar, p. 33.

For Presbyterians, however, it may be of interest to know, and safe to say, that the five Presbyterians chosen by Hughes, leaned more towards spectacular leadership than embarrassing failure. All of them served the length of the war, with numerous decorations between them: William Beattie eventually rose to the rank of Hon. Colonel, becoming Director of the Chaplain Service in Canada, and was one of only five chaplains to be decorated as a Companion of the Order of St. Michael and St. George; Pringle rose to the rank of Hon. Lieut. Col. and was mentioned in dispatches for "gallant and distinguished service in the field;" Alexander Gordon was awarded the Military Cross and decorated as a Companion of the Distinguished Service Order; Alexander Cornett was one of only three chaplains in the war decorated with the Order of the British Empire; and John Beattie, although less decorated than the others, nevertheless rose to the rank of Hon. Major, and diligently served the entire length of the war both at the front and in the military camps in England.

As mentioned, Sam Hughes personally selected this first contingent of chaplains to proceed overseas with the soldiers; at the same time he appointed Richard Steacy, an Anglican priest, to be the Senior Chaplain. As Canada's involvement in the war increased and a Canadian Corps was formed, Steacy recognized the need for a separate "Chaplains Department" to oversee and administer the work of the Canadian chaplains overseas, both in England and in France. This led to the formation of the Canadian Chaplain Service on 19 August 1915.¹² Steacy was, in turn, appointed Director of Chaplain Services (DCS) with a staff stationed in London, and assumed command over all Canadian chaplains sent overseas by Hughes. John Almond, also an Anglican priest, was in turn appointed Assistant Director of Chaplain Services (ADCS) with responsibility for administering the work of the chaplains in France.

In early 1917, Almond replaced Steacy and instituted several reforms in order to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of the Service. Chaplaincy to the Roman Catholic soldiers was finally improved with the appointment of an Assistant Director to oversee the work of the Roman Catholic chaplains. Further changes instituted by Almond over the following year included the appointment of two additional Assistant Directors: one to oversee the work in England, and another, appointed in Dec. 1917, responsible for the chaplains work on the Lines of Communication in France (the hospitals, clearing stations, railway and forestry units, etc.). Another development was the establishment of the Chaplain's Social Service "Department," responsible for planning and organizing social and recreational programmes for the soldiers. This "Department" was administered by a "Corps Chaplain," reporting to the Assistant Director (Canadian Corps). A final development, instituted in 1918, was the creation of a Director of Chaplain Services in Canada, to oversee the work of organizing and providing reinforcements overseas, while at the same time, helping to re-integrate into civilian life, those who were returning home.¹³

To become a chaplain a member of the clergy had to be appointed by the Ministry of Militia, but first had to gain the approval of the Officer Commanding of a local military unit, usually a battalion, as well as from their denomination -- in the case of Presbyterians, this meant from the Military Service Board of the Church. After his

¹² Crerar, p. 45.

¹³ *Ibid*, p. 75

appointment, the chaplain would serve with this unit, and when the time came, travel overseas with them. Once in England, he would serve at one of the Military Camps under the administration of a senior chaplain, before being appointed to one of the Canadian convalescent hospitals in either England or France. After a period of time, he might then be transferred to one of the Canadian Casualty Clearing Stations nearer the front, before finally being posted to one of the Infantry Brigades of the Canadian Corps at the front. Some then remained in this post, while others were transferred back to England, or to a hospital in France, to serve as a Senior Chaplain. Not all chaplains followed this path, but this appears to be a fairly standard method of progress.¹⁴

Response of the Presbyterian Church in Canada

How then did the Presbyterian Church in Canada respond? How did the church as a national body interact and respond to the needs of the Chaplain Service and to the needs of the ministers that served overseas? These seem like simple enough questions, yet answers are not that easy, primarily because very few administrative records have survived relating to this topic. The minutes of the first General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in Canada following the outbreak of hostilities barely mention the work of the chaplains overseas, or for that matter the men at the front. A brief resolution was passed during the 15th sederunt, recording the Assembly's appreciation of the work of the chaplains, but that was about it.¹⁵ The fact that the Canadian Chaplain Service itself was not fully formed and that relatively few chaplains were serving overseas at this time may help explain this fairly meager response of the Church.

At the 1916 General Assembly, the chaplains sent greetings to the commissioners with a request that they appoint a committee "empowered to suggest to the Minister of Militia the appointment or recall of Presbyterian chaplains." The Assembly then established the 18-member Military Service Board with the Moderator of the Assembly, the Rev. Dr. Andrew Baird, as Chairman. This Board was given the following mandate: to deal with all matters pertaining to chaplaincies, to work with other denominations in arranging religious services in training camps, to consider methods for caring for returning Presbyterian soldiers and ministering comfort to dependent and bereaved families, and doing whatever else it may deem necessary or advisable in the interests of the Presbyterian men in training, on active service, or invalided home.¹⁶

This Board appears to have been a fairly significant development, and it continued to exist with the Moderator as Chair, until the 1918 Assembly, when it was enlarged and re-established as the National Service Commission.¹⁷ Unfortunately, records of this Board's activities do not appear to have survived. At the very least they were never deposited as a collection with the Presbyterian Church Archives or the United Church Archives, nor at the Archives of Ontario, or at the Queen's University Archives. Neither were they deposited with the National Archives of Canada. All that appears to remain is a

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 84-109.

¹⁵ *Acts and Proceedings of the General Assembly of The Presbyterian Church in Canada*, 1915, p. 2235.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 1916, p. 2372.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 1918, pp. 2545-2556.

single letter, written on "Board of Military Service of The Presbyterian Church in Canada" letterhead, found in one of the personnel files of the Chaplain Service records at the National Archives. Other isolated letters of the Board may indeed exist, but in all the boxes and files, finding aids, guides and indexes researched for this paper, that was the only item found. This is extremely sad and unfortunate.

Judging by the annual reports of this Board, which can be found in the yearly *Acts and Proceedings* of the General Assembly of the Church, and by the fact that the Moderator was appointed as chair – and even by the fact that it had its own stationery -- it is probably safe to say that the work of this Board was quite significant. The records of the Army and Navy Board, the equivalent body for the Methodist Church, are a wonderful and detailed collection of minutes, reports and correspondence spanning the years 1915 to 1919 and taking up several metres of shelf space at the United Church Archives. It is really quite unfortunate that nothing similar exists for the Presbyterian Church.

One year after its formation, Dr. Baird presented the first report of the Board to the 1917 General Assembly. As previously mentioned, the Board had responsibility for "all matters pertaining to Chaplaincies." From the few reports that do survive this meant a fairly large scope of activities. One of the earliest acts of the Board was to request that the Department of Militia and Defence respect the Board's endorsement, or approval, of a Presbyterian chaplain before appointing them to overseas service: this in hopes of avoiding the appointment of someone not in regular standing with the Church, or generally not suited to the work of a chaplain. Oddly enough, the one surviving letter of the Military Service Board mentioned earlier, includes an apology to the Assistant Director of Chaplain Services in England, for the fact that an individual the Board had endorsed didn't quite work out.¹⁸

Other activities of the Board included: co-operating with the Methodist, Baptist and Congregational churches in producing two small booklets of hymns, prayers and scripture readings for the soldiers; communicating with the Department of Militia and Defence on issues such as the moral and social conditions in the camps, especially relating to the consumption of alcohol and the spread of venereal disease; and, as is mentioned in the Board's report to the 1917 General Assembly, adjusting difficulties and securing rights on behalf of a number Presbyterian chaplains and soldiers.¹⁹ What exactly this involved is, unfortunately, not mentioned, but it does indicate that the Board was to some degree in touch with the chaplains overseas and willing to assist and support them as they could.

The 1917 General Assembly was also addressed by the Rev. Dr. Thurlow Fraser, who having spent the previous eighteen months as chaplain in both England and France. He spoke on the work of the chaplains overseas and the conditions under which this work was being carried out. Brief greetings from William Beattie on behalf of the Presbyterian

¹⁸ NAC, Vol. 4616, Wm. Beattie (C-B-8), Letter from J.G. Shearer to Wm. Beattie, 28 Dec. 1917.

¹⁹ *Acts and Proceedings* 1917, p. 546.

chaplains overseas were also once again delivered to the Assembly, with the interesting postscript of "every Chaplain consulted enthusiastically endorses [church] union."²⁰

In terms of financial support, the Presbyterian Church, through the Military Service Board, also helped provide monetary assistance to the chaplains. In late 1917, the Director of Chaplain Services appealed to the churches for \$50,000 to help support the social work of the chaplains overseas, and by June of 1918, the Board had raised \$14,000 of their required share of \$15,000.

In early 1918, the Board was also involved in sending the Moderator, Dr. John Neil, to England and France to visit the chaplains, give a personal message to the men and visit the fields of battle, and to report upon the moral conditions in the camps. Thus, although few records survive to help tell the story, there is enough, at least, to provide a brief outline of some of the work undertaken during the war by the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in Canada and its Military Services Board.

Duties and Functions of the Chaplains

The preceding has provided some insight into the development and growth of both the Chaplain Service of the Canadian Expeditionary Force, and the Military Service Board of the Presbyterian Church in Canada: the administrative framework in which the chaplains served. The next half of the paper will focus a little more on the actual work of the chaplains, outlining the functions and activities that the chaplains performed, while at the same time highlighting some of the experiences of the Presbyterian chaplains.

What exactly were the chaplains duties? At the beginning of the war, the role and functions of the military chaplain were not explicitly laid out. As the Rev. Alexander Gordon, assistant minister at St. Andrew's in Ottawa prior to the war, noted in his diary shortly after arriving at the Valcartier military camp in 1914, "the duties of a chaplain, as far as I can learn, are not laid down exactly...Preaching on Sundays is one of them, but only one of them. His first business is to identify himself as closely as he can with the life of the troops."²¹ Even when the first contingent of Canadians arrived in England and was stationed on Salisbury Plain, Gordon later noted "part of our work was to find out what our work was."²² Nevertheless, during the course of the war the chaplains' experience in providing pastoral care and ministry showed through in the way the scope of their work grew and expanded and became more clearly defined.

The Presbyterian chaplains that served overseas did so in a variety of ways, but as mentioned earlier, not all served with the Canadian Divisions at the front. Many were stationed in England, where they served at the military camps, ministering to the men being trained for service in France, or in one of the "hospital areas, ministering to the Canadian wounded. Others served in France, not with an Infantry Brigade, but on the "Lines of Communication," which included work in the hospitals and casualty clearing stations, the Railway Battalions, Tunneling Battalions, Labour Battalions, and the

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 1917, p. 44. In fact, as Duff Crerar notes on page 215 in his *Padres in No Man's Land*, "of the 93 Presbyterian ex-Chaplains in Canada at the time of Church Union, thirty-six (or 39%) remained with the original church, while fifty-seven (or 61%), led by MacKinnon, Gordon and Oliver, proceeded into Union."

²¹ QUA, A.M. Gordon Papers, Diary entry 4 Oct. 1914, p.5; Crerar, p. 274.

²² QUA, A.M. Gordon papers, "A Chaplain at the Front," *Queen's Quarterly*, 1919, p. 170.

Forestry Corps. Beyond this, several Presbyterians were posted to even more exotic places, such as George Farquhar who served as chaplain with the Siberian Expeditionary Force late in 1918, or Samuel Compton, William McConnell, Charles Shelley and Thomas Thompson, all of whom served with the Mediterranean Expeditionary Force.

During Fighting/At the Front

Most chaplains that enlisted, however, wished to be at the front; although many were, indeed, stoic about where they were stationed. George Kilpatrick, a young Presbyterian at the time, wrote a fairly hot-headed letter to the Director of Chaplain Services when he found out he was being transferred to the Shorncliffe Military Camp, rather than to France with his unit, but quickly wrote a second letter apologizing, saying:

I have been doing some thinking since I wrote to you. My conclusion is this, I am not nearly grateful enough for the privilege of service that is mine. How many men in Canada would just give anything if they could get a chaplaincy. I have that honor and then have the nerve to talk about going to Shorncliffe merely as a duty. This sentence sprang out of a page and slapped me in the face. "The man who 'does his duty' never gets to heaven... But the children of God go singing up the road, go laughing into paradise, even while crying." Henceforth I sing.²³

Three months later he was posted to France and remained at the Front until the end of the war. Mentioned twice in dispatches, he was also awarded the Distinguished Service Order for conspicuous gallantry, and somewhat ironically, for devotion to duty.²⁴

The chaplains that were lucky enough, if that can be said, to serve with one of the Infantry Brigades at the front, performed a variety of roles and functions. During active fighting some were posted with the forward lines, finding themselves "going over the top" with the troops, tending the wounded and ministering to the dying, and organizing parties of stretcher-bearers to carry them back to the dressing stations. Other chaplains were then stationed at the dressing stations, ministering to the dying, serving hot coffee, biscuits and cigarettes to the wounded, and writing letters to their loved ones.²⁵

Like George Wood's activities during the Battle of Vimy Ridge recounted earlier in the paper, the following excerpt from a report by George Taylor, Presbyterian chaplain to the 43rd Canadian Infantry Battalion, helps shed some light on the work of a chaplain posted to the Front during fighting:

The line was extremely difficult owing to the nature of the ground and we lost many men and officers by sniping. I was dressing a man who got wounded in the arm a second time by a sniper working near us. Later in

²³ NAC, Vol. 4629, "C-K-4" Kilpatrick file, Letter to Col. Steacy from G.G.D. Kilpatrick, 11 Feb. 1916.

²⁴ NAC, Vol. 4649, Biographies #2 file, Kilpatrick.

²⁵ NAC, Vol. 4666, Amiens file, Report of ADCS (Canadian Corps) to the DCS, 20 Sept. 1918.

the afternoon when I went forward with "D" company to the attack on Jig-Saw Wood we were driven to shell holes by snipers in a place we thought clear of the enemy. I had two water-bottles full of hot coffee and ran about among the men giving this to them as long as it lasted. The want of water made this doubly acceptable. By three, the company had gained its objective but we had lost heavily. I went back and took a party of 60 prisoners forward to carry out the wounded. So intense was the gun fire that we could not do much for the first two hours. In this time four of the party had been killed. At dark I went forward with the Medical Officer... we rested until the moon rose and then brought out the last of the wounded. The Division was relieved the next morning, but I remained from Monday till Saturday with the Burial Party when I returned to the regiment for the Sunday Services."²⁶

Both Wood's and Taylor's reports highlight the chaplains' role in tending the wounded, organizing parties of stretcher-bearers, and burying the dead; but interestingly enough, both also highlight something else - the providing of coffee to the soldiers. The provision of hot coffee and other "comforts" was in fact a cornerstone of the chaplains' work that began during the Somme offensive in July 1916 when a coffee-maker was first given to the Canadian chaplains by the Australians.²⁷ The success of providing hot coffee to the men during this battle, led to the establishment of numerous chaplains' "coffee stalls" at advanced dressing stations, casualty clearing stations, in support trenches and other areas; often within range of enemy shelling. Although it may seem like a trifling service, the thankfulness of the men for a hot coffee is summed up in the following statement by a Field Officer and later reported to the Director of Chaplain Services, "If the Chaplains are doing no other work than this they have more than justified their existence in France by the help they are giving the troops in the coffee stalls alone."²⁸

Not only was coffee and tea provided at these stalls and by the chaplains in the lines, but also biscuits, chocolates and cigarettes, and always free of charge. During the fighting at Passchendaele from 21 Oct. to 11 Nov. 1917, 2456 lbs of coffee, 536 lbs of tea, 2404 tins of milk, 3200 lbs of sugar, 15874 packages of biscuits, 8928 chocolate bars, and 108500 cigarettes, were all distributed by the Chaplain Service.²⁹

These examples highlight some of the activities carried out by chaplains during an offensive. When an active operation wasn't involved, however, the chaplains attached to infantry battalions would divide their time between a number of activities in order to care for both the religious and social welfare of the men.

²⁶ NAC, Vol. 4664, Reports France file, Report from G.C. Taylor to the Senior Chaplain 3rd Cdn. Division, 26 Aug. 1918.

²⁷ Crerar, p. 119.

²⁸ NAC, Vol. 4653, Historical #1 file, Precis - Canadian Chaplain Services, Aug. 1917.

²⁹ NAC, Vol. 4648, England 1917-1918 file, Report - Quantities of Benefit Supplies distributed by Chaplain Service from 21st October to 11th November.

The most obvious activity in terms of ministering to the soldiers spiritual well-being was providing Sunday worship services, or church parades. The value of these services has been questioned by many, both during and after the war. As noted by Duff Crerar, "if there was any event in army life where chaplains, soldiers and officers were at cross-purposes, it was the parade service."³⁰ Alexander Gordon, one of the first Presbyterian chaplains to be sent overseas, wrote the following on the topic, "Most people know the arguments both for and against church parades. It might be urged that human beings could not be forced to worship, that church parades were wearisome...Well, church parades had no monopoly on weariness to both flesh and spirit."³¹

To Gordon, at any rate, it was not the church parade that was the most beneficial, but the voluntary services. As he later noted "these services were a pure joy. There was no constraint about them, men were free to attend or stay away, just as they pleased. In point of fact a most gratifying number usually did attend."³² Sometimes the services held were evening "sing-songs," or Sunday Communion services. Daniel Oliver, Minister in Moosomin, Saskatchewan both before and after the war, reported holding "an average of four services on Sundays, with Communion in the early morning and twice in the evening,"³³ while William Muncaster, from Calgary, reported holding services in German for some of the prisoners-of-war.³⁴ Bible study classes and short prayer services were also held.³⁵ It was these quiet times, when they were able to hold private conversations with the men, that the chaplains felt the greatest impact was being made on the spiritual life of the soldiers. As Alexander Gordon later wrote

It seemed to come to some men as a great surprise when they discovered that a parson was not of necessity a milksop or a fool. When he deserved their confidence by showing himself a true man, in rest billets and on the field alike, they usually talked to him most freely. Many a chaplain will cherish as long as he lives the memory of personal conversations held with the fighting men of all ranks.³⁶

Although rarely mentioned in reports, the sheer numbers of men appointed to each chaplain must have hindered this "personal" touch. Charles Gordon, a.k.a. Ralph Connor, brought this topic up in a letter to Father John Almond, Director of the Chaplain Services, in July 1917. In it, Gordon strongly advises that there are not nearly enough

³⁰ Crerar, p. 92.

³¹ QUA, A.M. Gordon Papers, *A Chaplain at the Front*, p. 170.

³² *Ibid.*

³³ NAC, Vol. 4664, Reports France file, Report of D. Oliver for the month of October 1917.

³⁴ NAC, Vol. 4664, Reports ADCS France file, Report of ADCS to DCS, 10 Oct. 1917.

³⁵ NAC, Vol. 4664, Reports of ADCS France file, Report of ADCS to DCS, 17 Sept. 1917 (John Pringle reported holding 30 short prayer services with small groups of men while the Battalion was in line).

³⁶ QUA, A.M. Gordon Papers, "A Chaplain at the Front," p. 173.

chaplains in the establishment to allow them any true influence over the men in their care. To give an idea of the ratio of the number of soldiers per chaplain, a report of August 1916 indicates that at that time there were eighteen non-Anglican, non-Roman Catholic chaplains in France, serving a total of 26,180 men; a ratio of 1 chaplain for every 1454 men. The ratio for Anglican chaplains was 1 to 1270, and for Roman Catholic chaplains, 1 to 665. However, more than just the numbers, Gordon felt it was the geographic dispersal of the battalions which made the chaplains' work difficult: of the four Battalions, one would generally be at the front, one in support, one in reserve, and one in rest, with miles of trenches, both difficult and dangerous to navigate, in between. The ability of the four Brigade chaplains to maintain personal relationships with so many men, scattered over such a large area was, at least in Gordon's mind, "impossible."³⁷

Similar to the importance of personal conversations with the men, many chaplains felt it was extremely important that they be alongside the men when things got dangerous, and to experience the same situations. Oddly enough, the military authorities in the first years of the war didn't share this feeling and chaplains were not officially allowed into the front lines until mid-1916. To them, the chaplains were there to preach on Sundays and stay with the Medical officers on weekdays – out of the way.

One of the most famous of the Canadian chaplains of the First World War, and one who frequently disobeyed this rule, was Canon Frederick Scott, who once remarked, "I knew that an ordinary officer on running away under fire would get the sympathy of a large number of people, who would say 'the poor fellow has got shell shock'... But if a chaplain ran away, about six hundred men would say at once 'we have no more use for religion'."³⁸ With Scott leading the way, the other chaplains followed, frequently disobeying regulations and joining the men in the front lines. By mid-1916 these actions were rewarded as the new Corps Commander, Sir Julien Byng responded with praise when he met several chaplains in the trenches. John Almond, Assistant Director of Chaplain Services wrote to Alexander Gordon on August 27, 1916, informing him that Byng personally felt that the chaplains needed to be seen by the men "at the posts of danger" if they were to have any influence over them. Gordon, along with the other Senior Chaplains, were from then on free to post their chaplains in line at the Front.³⁹

In addition to ministering to the spiritual well-being of the men, the chaplains were also involved in tending to their social welfare through the provision of recreation huts, canteens, cinemas, by managing sporting events and organizing concerts. These activities formed part of the "social-service" work of the chaplains. The YMCA was also quite active in providing recreational and social services for the troops during the war, which unfortunately, lead to some rivalry and tension.

This aspect of the chaplains' work had its beginnings in the summer of 1915 when regular concerts were provided to the soldiers of the First Division by a troupe under the direction of Arthur McGreer, an Anglican chaplain. The success of these concerts led to similar developments in the other divisions, and the organization of social and recreational activities became a prominent feature of the chaplains' work.

³⁷ NAC, Vol. 24, "7-4-2" file, Report of the DCS to Sam Hughes, 11 Aug. 1916.

³⁸ Crerar, p. 29.

³⁹ QUA, A.M. Gordon Papers, Letter to Gordon from John Almond (ADCS), 27Aug. 1916.

Canteens, with recreation rooms and usually a small library, were established in areas where they could serve the most men. The proceeds from these sales were then used to purchase the coffee, tea and biscuits that were provided free of charge at the Chaplains' Coffee Stalls. Cinema huts were also established to show "good and wholesome" films throughout the week, except of course on Sunday, when the huts were used for worship services.⁴⁰ Profits from both the canteens and cinemas were also used to provide libraries for field ambulance rest stations, pictures for decorating mess halls and billets, and sports equipment.⁴¹

Sports and other recreational activities were often organized for the men. James Whillans, Presbyterian minister from Balmoral, Manitoba, and chaplain to the 8th Battalion Winnipeg Rifles, reported in July 1917, "I organized four baseball games, securing the grounds upon which they were played. A league was started amongst the Companies of the Battalion, and another amongst the platoons: it is hoped that we shall be able to finish the games later on."⁴² Numerous requests were sent to the Chaplains' office in London for footballs, rugby balls, baseball bats and gloves, tennis racquets, cricket bats and even decks of playing cards. Dominion Day in both 1917 and 1918 were recognized by the Chaplain Service with track and field athletic activities. On 1 July 1917, over 250 participants and 5000 spectators from the Canadian Corps enjoyed the sports organized by the Chaplain Service.⁴³

The social-service work was administered by the "Corps Chaplain," Allan Shatford, an Anglican priest. Accounts of individual Presbyterian chaplains organizing sports and other recreational activities, however, are numerous and scattered throughout the Chaplain Service records at the National Archives of Canada. Captain Frederick Anderson, reported to the Assistant Director of Chaplain Services in October 1917, "We have just opened here... a fine new Mess Hall which is also fitted up with an excellent stage outfit, and I am endeavoring to assist in securing suitable programmes for their entertainment;"⁴⁴ Capt. Charles Oke, established a canteen for the 2nd Artillery Brigade, which was reported by Shatford as "doing good work for the men;"⁴⁵ while the same Captain Whillans that organized the baseball games, also reported giving educational lectures twice during the 2nd week of July 1917, "once to 300 men and another to 800."⁴⁶

⁴⁰ NAC, Vol. 4658, Newspaper clippings file, *Chaplain Service and Social Work, Montreal Gazette* (n.d.)

⁴¹ NAC, Vol. 4666, Vimy Ridge file, Report of ADCS to Col. Anderson, Assistant Chaplain General of the Second Army, 27 Nov. 1917.

⁴² NAC, Vol. 4664, Reports ADCS France file, Report of ADCS (Canadian Corps) to the DCS, 1 Aug. 1917.

⁴³ NAC, Vol. 4664, Reports ADCS France file, Report of ADCS (Canadian Corps) to the DCS, 14 July 1917.

⁴⁴ NAC, Vol. 4664, Reports France file, Report of F.W. Anderson for the month of Oct. 1917.

⁴⁵ NAC, Vol. 4664, Reports ADCS France file, Report of the ADCS (Canadian Corps) to the DCS, 16 June 1917.

⁴⁶ NAC, Vol. 4664, Reports ADCS France file, Report of the ADCS (Canadian Corps) to the DCS, 14 July 1917.

Military Camps and Hospital Work

As noted previously, however, many chaplains served in areas other than the front. Many were stationed at the Canadian hospitals and Casualty Clearing Stations in France, or in one of the military camps or hospital areas in England. This work was perhaps not as "glamorous" or dangerous as those of the chaplains at the front, but was no less arduous. Again the numbers of soldiers per chaplain must have made this task exceedingly difficult. One chaplain posted to the Purfleet Hospital Area in England, which covered Essex and Sussex, reported visiting the Canadian wounded in fifty different hospitals during the month, most of them at least once a week. In doing so he figured the average number of miles he covered per day by "train, tram, bicycle and walking" was fifty-five.⁴⁷ The duties of the chaplains in these areas were in essence the same as those of the chaplains at the front: providing worship services, Bible study classes, educational and other social activities, writing letters for the wounded, and burying the dead.

Work at the Casualty Clearing Stations in France would have been exceptionally difficult as well, especially during active fighting when the numbers of wounded would swell. Speaking words of comfort and praying with these men was a dominant activity of the chaplains, as was writing letters to the family of the wounded or dead. Presbyterian chaplain, Capt. Robert Howie reported one incident during the fighting at Passchendaele, when a young Australian was brought into the station badly wounded, "his lower jaw completely shattered: one eye almost destroyed":

When I asked if I could do anything for him – was there anyone to whom he would like me to write – the poor fellow was quite unable to speak... But I saw that there was evidently someone to whom he wished me to write. I looked therefore through his pocket-book, and found a letter signed "Mother." I showed him this letter and pointed to the address at the top, and asked if he would like me to write to his mother...His face at once lighted up, indicating that he certainly wished this. But he did not seem altogether satisfied...I looked through his pocket-book again, therefore, and found the photo of a beautiful girl signed "Gladys," and then found a letter with the same signature. I showed him the photo and letter...and asked him if he would like me to write to "Gladys" at this address and send her also his love. It was marvelous to see how his face seemed almost to light up with joy even through his terrible wounds. It made me realize in a new way the truth of these words of Scripture, "Many waters cannot quench love, neither can the floods drown it."⁴⁸

Capt. Howie later received a letter from Gladys thanking him for his letter and asking him "Will you convey just one little word of hope to him? Tell him my love is just the same as ever, and will continue whatever happens." He heard again from Gladys a little later, letting him know that her sweetheart was in hospital in London and doing

⁴⁷ NAC, Vol. 4664, Reports Lt. Col. Beattie file, Report to DCS, 22 Feb. 1918.

⁴⁸ NAC, Vol. 4664, Reports to DCS London file, Extracts – Capt. Robert Howie.

wonderfully and that they would be married as soon as he was able to return to Australia.⁴⁹

The extent of letter-writing is actually quite incredible. While attached to the No. 3 Canadian General Hospital, Edmund Oliver reported writing 1025 letters during the month of October alone.⁵⁰ This is undoubtedly a unique example, and yet the same Captain Howie mentioned earlier wrote a total of 838 letters during the same month. He also received 260 letters from family or friends to whom he had written earlier, which he noted "bears testimony to how much this service is appreciated."⁵¹

Education

Finally, one of the most interesting endeavors of the chaplain service - and one that was the focal point of a few specific Presbyterian chaplains - was providing educational opportunities for the soldiers. In the summer and autumn of 1917, Principal Clarence MacKinnon of Pine Hill Theological College in Halifax, who was serving as Senior Chaplain to the 5th Canadian Division at Witley Camp in England, began organizing educational lectures and classes for the men in the camp. By the end of October 1917, approximately 800 soldiers had enrolled in these classes. Following the success of this work and its gradual development in the other military camps, MacKinnon was appointed to a newly-created three-member Military Education Committee for the army -- Col. Birks from the YMCA and Captain G.C. MacDonald from the General Staff Headquarters were the other two members appointed. MacKinnon was then given responsibility for developing educational programmes in England, with another chaplain, Professor Harold Kent, also from Pine Hill, serving as his deputy.⁵²

Edmund Oliver, Principal at the Presbyterian Theological College in Saskatoon, serving in France at the No. 3 Canadian General Hospital, was also keen on the development of educational programmes and had been working with General Lipsett of the 3rd Canadian Division in this area. In late November, Principal MacKinnon and Captain MacDonald travelled to France to assist Oliver in bringing this work to fruition. The end result of this concerted effort was the creation of the University of Vimy Ridge, also known as the Khaki University. It was established by a Canadian Corps Order issued by Lieut.-General Sir Arthur Currie⁵³, and placed all educational programmes and services in the Canadian Corps in France under the purview of the University and appointed Oliver as the officer in charge.

Although given the title of "University," it was designed more as a means of providing technical and vocational education and skills to the men, to better prepare them for integration back into civilian life, or alternatively, to provide a sort of bridge for those

⁴⁹ *Ibid.* Extracts -- Capt. Robert Howie.

⁵⁰ NAC, Vol. 4664, Reports France file, Report of E.H. Oliver for the month October 1917.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, Report of Robert Howie for the month October 1917.

⁵² Crerar, p. 79.

⁵³ NAC, R1878-0-9-E, William Beattie fonds, Manuscript on history of the Chaplain Service, Chapter "Chaplains' Part in the Khaki College."

whose studies were interrupted by the war⁵⁴. The University began by providing classes on agriculture, business efficiency, applied sciences, and civics to registrants from the 3rd Canadian Division. French was also taught, as was instruction in various elementary subjects, if needed.

Education Officers with the necessary skills and abilities to lecture in these subjects were organized and trained at the Battalion, Brigade and Division levels, and helped secure the formation of classes, suitable rooms for study, and in many cases helped establish libraries. In addition to the regular coursework in agriculture, business efficiency, applied science and civics, Education Officers also provided one-time lectures on various subjects relating to the war and the history of the countries involved. Reading courses were also prescribed for soldiers who wished to take more advanced studies, and arrangements were made to ensure that credit for such work would be accepted from educational institutions in Canada⁵⁵. As the programme met with success in the 3rd Canadian Division, it was quickly expanded and developed in the rest of the Corps and through the Lines of Communication.⁵⁶

Like the social-service work, the educational activities were also a joint-venture with the YMCA, with the Y providing the financial support and often the classroom facilities. Again, this co-operation strained relations between the two organization. However, as Duff Crerar noted in his book on the Chaplain Service, both organizations "fought over their spheres of influence [with the men] and the credit for educational work, not because they were merely glory-seeking but because they were intensely, even desperately concerned about the post-war nation and their influence upon it and in it."⁵⁷

At any rate, the establishment of the University of Vimy Ridge and the development of the education programme by Oliver, MacKinnon and others, is an interesting chapter in the work of the Chaplain Service and a testament to the way in which individual chaplains took the initiative in broadening the definition of their work in ministering to the soldiers.

Conclusion

In conclusion, therefore, we can see that the chaplains serving overseas during the First World War provided a broad range of services in an equally diverse number of situations. What was the impact of this work? What results were obtained? Is it even possible to tabulate, and if so, by what can you judge success? Many soldiers no doubt, had no use for the chaplains, while at the same time many surely found great comfort and strength in their presence. The soldier receiving a steaming cup of coffee after sitting in a trench, marching through mud, or taking cover in shell hole all day, or the mother who received word from the chaplain that her son was wounded and unable to write, but

⁵⁴ NAC, Vol. 4651, Education #4 file, Report "Resume of Educational Work on the Continent" by E.Oliver, 23 April 1919.

⁵⁵ *Ibid*.

⁵⁶ NAC, Manuscript on history of the Chaplain Service, Chapter "Chaplains' Part in the Khaki College."

⁵⁷ Crerar, p. 78.

otherwise alive and okay, must no doubt have been thankful and grateful for the chaplains' service.

Overall, the chaplains' work and the development of the Canadian Chaplain Service is a fascinating story. The Great War took the lives of over 56,000 Canadians, and wounded more than 149,000,⁵⁸ wreaking terrible destruction. Charles Oke, Presbyterian chaplain to the 2nd Brigade of the 1st Canadian Division, reported after the Battle of Vimy Ridge that "during those five days I saw three phases of the war which were new to me, the Hospital Dressing Station, the military cemetery and the battlefield, and I have no hesitation in saying that this last phase was the most terrible sight of all, the saddest sight I have ever seen or ever hope to see."⁵⁹

One might wonder how the chaplains managed at all, explaining to soldiers the presence of God in such a terrible wasteland. Perhaps, in conclusion, the Rev. George Kilpatrick, chaplain to the 42nd Battalion, best answers that question, in a letter he wrote to his parents on 14 May 1918, while at the front:

All the rude iconoclasm of war... the apparent denial of our faith by the fact of war – has failed to alter the fact that Christ and His Gospel alone can save men. Indeed the very bitterness of the experience has only served to reveal in new and wonderful ways His power to do this. On the battlefield it has been seen daily as men in the grip of pain – or confronted by approaching death felt the need of power greater than their own and fell back on God. In that Aid Post of bitter memories, in the pill box at... Passchendaele, I spoke to a big rough-looking American with a shattered leg of the sustaining Presence of the Master and he replied – 'I know it and have been hanging on to that for 24 hours in a shell hole.' To hundreds of stricken men I have said the same thing – even trying to tell it in faltering German to a dying enemy and not once has the great assurance been received with anything save gratitude, often pathetically eager.... surely it has significance enough that in an hour of extremity – faced by grim realities men found comfort and strength in God – as in nothing else... For 4 years the figure of the Christ has been very busy on the battlefield saving men. His unseen but living Presence has still its ancient power to strengthen and uphold.⁶⁰

Of all their duties, sharing this awareness was perhaps the chaplains' greatest duty.

⁵⁸ <http://www.firstworldwar.com/features/casualties.htm>

⁵⁹ NAC, Vol. 4666, Vimy Ridge file, Report of Charles Oke.

⁶⁰ UCA, G.G.D. Kilpatrick fonds (#3303), Box 2, File 39, Letter from G.G.D. Kilpatrick to his father, 14 May 1918.