

Theological Observer

Learn from the Centurions

The Museum of the Bible in Washington, D.C., is currently showcasing the Megiddo Mosaic: Foundations of Faith exhibit, featuring a third-century mosaic floor discovered in northern Israel. The Megiddo Mosaic was discovered in 2005 at a site in northern Israel, within what had been a Roman military camp. This mosaic is believed to be from one of the earliest known Christian worship sites, and it includes the earliest known inscription identifying Jesus as God. The mosaic floor was dedicated to “God Jesus Christ” and includes inscriptions indicating it was funded by a Roman centurion, an artist, and five women.

Consider this for a moment. Third-century archaeological evidence of a church, one of the earliest we know of, shows us that early on the worship of Christ had reached the military (Megiddo was a military town) and was so openly practiced that a centurion (Gaius by name), a military leader, could openly fund the building of a church. Christianity was not even legalized by Constantine until nearly a century later.

While this is early archaeological evidence of the positive place of the military in the growth of the church, this is not the first time we hear of the positive faithful example of the military. Nearly every reference to a centurion in the New Testament is positive and teaches us a lesson about faith and how we respond to the gospel.

There was the centurion in Capernaum (Matthew 8), living in the same town as Jesus, who humbly pleaded for the healing of his servant. The centurion, most likely the senior military officer in Capernaum, would not normally speak to any itinerant preacher in such a humble manner. Nor would the average master be so concerned about the well-being of a slave; slaves were dispensable. This centurion was an honorable man. So, he came pleading to Jesus for his slave. When Jesus suggested he himself go with the centurion in order to heal the slave, the centurion, again humbly, confessed his unworthiness to host Jesus, but instead trusted the word of Jesus that if Jesus said the slave would be healed, it would be so. Jesus commended this faith and we are given an example by which to live.

Both Mark and Luke record the reaction of the centurion overseeing Christ’s execution on the cross. Upon Jesus’ death, he immediately recognized Jesus’ divine nature, saying, “Truly this was the Son of God!” (Matt 27:54; cf. Mark 15:39). Could it be that one whose profession is to “walk through the valley of the shadow of death” (Ps 23:4) can more readily see the divine in death?¹

¹ Unless otherwise noted, all Bible translations are from the ESV.

The apostles' ministry also received significant influence from centurions. It was through the centurion Cornelius that God opened for Peter the ministry to the Gentiles (Acts 10). An angel appeared to Cornelius telling him to summon Peter and listen to what he had to say. When Peter arrived in Caesarea, Cornelius had gathered up a whole group of Gentiles to hear the gospel. While Peter was speaking, the Holy Spirit descended on them, they believed the gospel, and they were baptized. Caesarea, one of the foundational churches of Christendom, was built out of the faith of a centurion.

The apostle Paul owed his life to the centurion Julius, Paul's custodian during his sea voyage to Rome. Acts 27 recounts how Julius treated Paul "kindly and gave him leave to go to his friends and be cared for" (Acts 27:3). Julius gave more than kindness to Paul, though, when during the shipwreck on Malta Julius stood up against the other soldiers, who wanted to kill Paul to prevent him from escaping. Paul eventually made it to Rome, bringing the gospel to the capital of the Roman Empire, and the implication is clear: It was the centurion Julius who got him there.

What can we take away from these accounts of centurions? God used military leaders at critical junctions to grow his church. God can do that again today.

Immediately following World War II, much of the overseas mission work and the start of Lutheran churches were accomplished by Lutheran military chaplains in occupied territories. Confessional Lutherans in Germany, Japan, Guam, and Korea all can trace the influence of Lutheran military chaplains. Military chaplains can support missionary endeavors again today with a deliberate approach to mission work that forms a partnership between overseas international mission and military chaplaincy.

With LCMS military chaplains and LCMS military families serving overseas, there may be an opportunity for an intentional and strategic partnership to leverage LCMS military chaplains and LCMS military families to plant churches at overseas locations near U.S. military installations. The key for this to work would be a sustained, regular pastoral presence developed through a partnership and deliberate planning between LCMS International Mission leaders, military chaplains, and the Ministry to the Armed Forces (MAF).

Currently, military chaplains negotiate their orders with assignment officers based on career needs and personal needs. I believe if LCMS chaplains were made aware of LCMS mission needs, we could suggest to these chaplains locations that would also support mission plants. Imagine: Instead of one missionary in Japan, we have an additional four military chaplains supporting the mission work, and LCMS families attending the mission plants and giving their support to the host nation. Granted, these LCMS chaplains and families would be volunteers with limitations on their time, but they would also be supporting mission work at no cost to the LCMS.

If this idea works to support overseas mission work, it could also be applied to domestic mission plants close to military installations. An intentional outreach to young single service members and young military families, with the support of LCMS chaplains, would reach a key demographic to foster the life of the church: young people.

Of course, the challenge in all of this is being able to raise up more LCMS military chaplains and more missionaries, but the foundation to this approach is coordination. Traditionally, we have viewed the call to military chaplaincy and missionary work through a lens of individual vocation; is God calling you, as an individual, to this or that work? This is very appropriate. But, in addition to that lens, we should also apply the strategic lens, stepping back to see the whole picture and identifying places of greatest opportunity. Once we identify the opportunity, we can coordinate chaplains and missionaries to mass on the objective (to borrow military language), synchronizing resources effectively to maximize impact.

In addition to the support of overseas and domestic mission work, a secondary benefit to this coordinated approach would be in the realm of ministerial recruiting. Involving military members in mission outreach exposes them to the vocation of full-time ministry. Recently, a Marine confided to me that upon his discharge from the military, he intends to enroll in seminary. This is a man who has led Marines in difficult conditions for over twenty years. He is a devout Christian with a heart for people. With the high-quality theological education that marks our synod, he will be an amazing pastor. He is certainly not the first military member I have encountered who has felt a calling to ministry; I suspect there will be many more. But without the encouragement of a pastor or chaplain to fan it into flame, the sense of calling often fades.

The LCMS needs to learn from the centurions. Rather than see military ministry as a specialized ministry, ancillary to the work of the church, the centurions of our day (military members and their families) can be used by God to foster critical junctions in building the church. Specifically, I ask the synod to consider the following:

1. Each district promote military chaplaincy to the pastors as a critical opportunity for the church.
2. Each district establish a task force identifying military installations in their district. Request a congregation near that installation to take the lead in military ministry. The district task force will support the lead congregation in developing an outreach plan.
3. The Office of International Mission (OIM) lead a task force that includes MAF, identifying mission opportunities that could be supported by LCMS military chaplains. Regularly distribute this list of opportunities via MAF, encouraging chaplains to request orders to these areas. OIM coordinate partnership with missionaries and military chaplains.

4. In discussing military chaplaincy with candidates, in addition to identifying the need for word-and-sacrament ministry for military members, include conversation regarding the opportunity and responsibility to support mission work both overseas and domestically.
5. Seminary recruiting staffs work with MAF to develop products specifically inviting military members to consider ministerial vocations.

In the early centuries of the church, God used strong, faithful, and honorable centurions at key junctions in her formation and growth. The centurions gave us examples of faith, established churches, protected the preaching of the gospel, and funded churches. The centurions of our time, military members and their families, offer the same contribution and service to the church today. With more military chaplains and more intentional partnerships between missions and military ministry, the proclamation of the gospel will continue to benefit from the support of the centurions.

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