

Georgina Elsey – Army Chaplaincy

In September 2019, I went down to the headquarters of the Royal Army Chaplains Department for a week on the Theological Students course and a week on secondment.



The first week was a series of talks and discussions about what army chaplaincy was and what it involved – this was specific to the army, rather than the RAF or navy – as well as the ethics and theology of being chaplain to a military force. We also went on trips to visit a regimental padre, and a team at one of the phase 1 training institutions.

We met various 'padres' and had plenty of time at meals and twice-daily tea and coffee (very civilised!) to hear their personal stories and share our own. It was a mixed group, mostly ordinands from several colleges, and also Baptists, Roman Catholics and Pentecostals; some had military experience, some had a specific interest in becoming a padre, and others did not know a lot about it.

I have had an interest in military chaplaincy for a while, so it was not all new to me, but it was more in depth and covered more, such as cadet and reserves chaplaincy, than the reading and conversations I had already had. Every padre has a slightly different take on the job, as is common in ministry, but the most consistent themes were of listening, loving, presence, compassion, making the time, and ecumenism.

I spent the weekend with some of those who were also doing the secondment in an officers mess, with a trip to see Salisbury cathedral. This speaks to the great level of hospitality we encountered – the chaplains were considerate and generous, and I felt very well looked after.

I and a Westcott ordinand were sent to two garrisons, two days at each, one padre at the first, and two at the second. There is so much variety to the contexts that the padres operate in – for example, the presence of training on a base changing the dynamic of the ministry significantly. The military is a bubble, but with subcultures galore within that, with friendly rivalries rife, and the role of the padre is a strange creature among them; to be in uniform, and have a rank, to be alongside soldiers, even when they travel on exercise or on deployment, but to also remain



entirely a minister, to “provide spiritual support, pastoral care, and moral guidance to all”.

I think it is an example of the fundamentals of chaplaincy being put into practice in a way that is sometimes lacking in other areas where chaplains work. It was a fantastic placement, and I feel privileged that I could attend.