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Chaplains' reach grows in Afghanistan during pandemic

by Tobin Perry, posted Monday, April 13, 2020 (14 days ago)

KABUL, Afghanistan -- Like many other ministry leaders around the world, Dan Thompson has needed to make a number of adjustments to minister to the people he shepherds. When he counsels people, he sits six feet away. Worship services are limited to no more than 10 people in them at a time.

Thompson's parishioners are facing two wars right now -- one against the COVID-19 pandemic and another against terrorism. And though the COVID-19 pandemic has forced changes in the way chaplains minister, Thompson has seen the Gospel's reach grow -- including a growing number of people listening to the New Testament on their very own "Bible stick."

Lt. Col. Daniel Thompson serves as a U.S. Air Force chaplain at the Resolute Support Headquarters (HQRS) in Kabul, Afghanistan.

"Our main mission is to provide spiritual support for NATO, coalition partners and civilian contractors so that they are able to accommodate their right for the free exercise of religion," Thompson said. "A significant amount of my duties involves holding worship services, counseling, monthly memorial services to honor the fallen, conducting Bible studies and a ministry of presence as a visible reminder of the holy."

Thompson can no longer hold chapel for Protestant worship services due to the COVID-19 restrictions, but he still hosts Bible studies of 10 or fewer people where they study the Bible, serve communion and pray.

"Sometimes we [he and the other chaplains] get creative and walk around our small camp while counseling and giving hope to individuals who are in need of advice and encouragement," Thompson said.

Thompson and his team have been using technology to increase opportunities for ministry. One of the tools they are using is a Military Bible Stick, which is an MP3 player that provides a verbal retelling of the New Testament with music.



Southern Baptist Air Force Chaplain Dan Thompson stands on a C-17, one of the most flexible cargo aircraft in the airlift force. Thompson serves with a team of chaplains at Resolute Support Headquarters (HQRS) in Kabul, Afghanistan. Submitted photo

The stick is small enough to fit in a cargo pocket. Chaplains are handing out the sticks to other coalition partners as well, including soldiers from the army of the Republic of Macedonia, many of whom are taking several to send back to their families.

Thompson said he handed sticks out to two Turkish soldiers who came by the office wanting something to help them learn English. They each took four sticks to pass out to other soldiers.

"Nothing gives me any greater joy than seeing soldiers listening to the Bible sticks as they walk around our tiny camp," Thompson said. "They are proud to have this device in their possession. Many have come up to me at various venues just to thank me for letting them have their very own Bible stick."

Thompson has also seen God expand his preaching ministry "exponentially" by sharing his sermons weekly through a podcast. With more soldiers confined because of social distancing, many, he said, have been turning to messages that "bring them hope, rather than narratives of despair through other channels."



Southern Baptist Air Force Chaplain Dan Thompson preaches to a full chapel in Kabul, Afghanistan, last October. Today, because of social-distancing restrictions, military services must have fewer than 10 people in them. Last December, chaplains at the base baptized six people. Thompson said it was the first time in 18 years there had been a baptism on the base. Submitted photo

Unable to meet in person, Thompson and the other chaplains developed

what they called a "circuit chapel" for Easter. They walked to five different stations to meet with small groups to pray, read Scripture, administer communion, share a message and sing praises. Such a service had never been done in the 18-year history of the chapel, Thompson said.

"I am finding that our soldiers, airmen, sailors and Marines are able to be very resilient during these times of change," he said. "In the military, we are generally used to rapid change. It's part of how we are bred at basic training or officer school. We are learning how to adapt, even though we may not like it."

Thompson asked Southern Baptists to pray for the troops in Afghanistan and around the world.

"What the coronavirus may have meant for evil, God has intended for good," Thompson said. "Please pray that the Lord will continue to allow us to transform our current restrictive situations into a means that will radically make a difference in those troops who are serving here at HQRS. Please pray that in my remaining time that I will be able to not only prepare the soil, but that I will be able to plant more seeds so that when my replacement arrives, he'll be able to reach a harvest that spills out over all of Afghanistan."

Tobin Perry is a writer from Evansville, Ind.