

Educational Ministry on the Front Line

“Our Soldiers have been deployed for 15 months in Afghanistan. Now that they’re back, some are having trouble reintegrating into family life. Let’s come up with something we can do to help.”

That was the “front line” challenge given to me when I arrived at U.S. Army Garrison Italy, Vicenza as a Director of Religious Education (DRE) in January 2008. Our response was to host a series of “Family Building: Assembly Required” gatherings at the Chapel where soldiers and their families were guided through a table blessing, shared meal, and simple evening prayer experience. Participants seemed to think it helped.

Army DREs are Civilian professional staff members of the U.S. Army Chaplain Corps serving in military communities across the globe. DREs have been a part of the Chaplaincy since 1948 when E. Bryan Johnson, a graduate of the Assembly’s Training School for Lay Workers (ATS), was invited to serve in the Chapel at Fort Bragg, NC. There are currently about 50 DREs supporting garrison Chapels from Daegu, Korea to Fort Benning, Georgia to Grafenwoehr, Germany, and numerous communities in between.

In many ways Army DREs function like any educator in any local church. Our “behind the front line” work includes training Chapel volunteers, directing Vacation Bible School programs, and ensuring that child protection standards are met. However, Army DREs have unique requirements and face contextual challenges that set us apart from others engaged in educational ministry.

Our most unique requirement is that we commit to support the religious practices and religious education/faith formation needs of all soldiers and family members of all faith groups, Buddhists, Catholics, Hindus, Jews, Muslims, Protestants of all denominations, etc. Each DRE must consider how to do that faithfully, but most agree that to guarantee free exercise for all is to guarantee one’s own.

Some of our contextual challenges include working within the highly mobile military environment and focusing our educational ministries on the readiness and resilience needs of soldiers and their families. The benefits and challenges of mobility are a reality in many contexts, but for Army DREs it means that approximately one third of all Chapel congregations and their volunteers move every year. When that move takes a soldier or military family far from home, including overseas assignments, the need to provide spiritual support and a sense of ready religious community only increases. Therefore, front line subject matter expertise for DREs includes understanding the dynamics of families in transition, the value of intentional hospitality, and the need for ongoing community building.

Army DREs also advise Chaplains on potential study themes, curriculum resources, and programs that build spiritual readiness and resilience in response to deployment cycles

that separate families and regularly put soldiers in harm's way, keeping in mind that most military members are young, single, and male. Like others engaged in educational ministry Army DREs are continually looking for fresh, front line ways to connect with today's younger generations who have diverse relationships with organized religion and religious communities.

Grace Yeuell is the Religious Education Program Director for Installation Management Command – Europe, currently serving in Vicenza Italy. To find out more about educational ministry in the military context visit the Army DRE Facebook page at <http://www.facebook.com/armyre>



Figure 1 Grace (wearing vest & skirt), Chaplains and Chapel volunteers host a Prayer Wall for deployed Soldiers.



Figure 2 Dr. Grace C. Yeuell