

From the Chaplain's Desk ...

When I was a young child, my family owned the corner store in the tiny village of Carlisle, near Burlington, Ontario. One day, the house across the street from our store caught on fire. I remember the huge commotion taking place in the street – fire fighters from more than one volunteer company were on hand, hoses snaked along the street, red trucks, swirling lights, lots of noise – and it seemed every person from the village was standing in front of our store to watch.

My most vivid memory of that day was seeing the bright orange flames shooting out of the windows of the home as it was engulfed. For a five year old, it was all too much to take in, and I remember going into my bedroom to play with my toys so I didn't have to watch the terrifying scene.

A young boy about my age died in that fire. As the story was told to me later, the fire fighters had gone into the building a number of times to look for him, but to no avail. Finally, the ferocity of the flames made it impossible to continue. His body was found afterwards – it seemed he had crawled under his bed to hide.

That was my first, and to this day, most terrifying encounter with a fire. I've seen other buildings burn down since then, but it is this first event – this first exposure – that stands out. When I was asked to serve as the Chaplain for the Stratford Fire Department, it is that memory that motivated my willingness to accept. I have always wondered about the terrible fear and pain the family must have felt as they stood out on the street looking at their home going up in flames, knowing their son was inside. And, as I grew in understanding, I have wondered about the deep anguish of the fire fighters as they searched amid smoke and flame for a boy too frightened to be found. It must break one's heart.

The people I work with are a mix of both well-seasoned pros and (relatively) fresh-faced newbies. They are all well-trained, motivated, dedicated, and courageous. I have no doubts about their readiness to do whatever is necessary to save a life. But they also know that at some point, no matter what they do, no matter their best efforts, lives may be lost. My primary role as Chaplain of the Stratford Fire Department is to be present and ready to listen when those moments of anguish arise for the fire fighters – so they may know they don't have to carry that burden alone. Perhaps, it is to represent the presence of God in situations where such divine presence is desperately needed, but seems so distressingly absent. I am here to offer spiritual and emotional support whenever the need arises.

As I shared with each of the crews when I was introduced to them – I have three basic roles as Chaplain: To officiate at departmental services; to be a listening and supportive presence for the firefighters and their families; and to serve as part of the critical stress management team (a group which debriefs and cares for emergency professionals during times of significant stress). Like the fire fighters, I pray that I am up to the task.

It is a pleasure to serve as Chaplain of the Stratford Fire Department. My responsibilities include:

- *Being a pastoral presence to the fire fighters and their families.*
- *Celebrating religious ceremonies, assisting at department functions as needed.*
- *Extending the good will of our department to firefighters everywhere I meet them.*
- *Providing confidential support with those struggling with issues of crisis, loss and/or stress, including being part of the debriefing process after traumatic events.*
- *Working in partnership with other community clergy to ensure the fire fighters and their families are provided with the needed spiritual support.*
- *Visiting those fire fighters who are sick or hospitalized.*
- *Praying for the members of the department – and if requested, praying with them.*
- *Being available for anyone in the Fire Department whenever they need someone to listen, to care, to act on their behalf.*

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Almighty God, Protector, Comforter, Helper - Your strength, power, and wisdom are a beacon of light to all men and women:

Give **special guidance** to **firefighters** so they may be **protected from harm while performing their duty:**

Help them with your **loving care** while they work to save lives and property of all people young and old:

Give them the **courage, the alertness, the strength** to protect their neighbours and all others whom they are pledged to aid when involved in fire or accident.

Amen

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After six months ...

*Reflections by the Chaplain of the Stratford Fire Department
January 15, 2008*

So, it has been six months since I took on the role of Chaplain for the Stratford Fire Department. In that time, I have visited with the crews – some of them a number of times; led a Service of Thanksgiving for the Fire Department; participated in the Advanced Critical Incident Stress Management training program; written prayers for firefighters; written prayers for their family members as needed; and spent a lot of time just talking with the firefighters about anything. And during these past months, I've come to discover three things about me and about my role:

First, even though I have been in active congregational ministry for twenty-three years and dealt with a great deal of very human stuff over the years, there are times in my role as chaplain when I feel like I don't really know anything – I feel like a rookie. There is nothing unusual in that – there are plenty of times in my congregational ministry when I feel that way. I think it comes from the fact so much about ministry is unique. There is rarely what one would call a 'normal' day. I come into the office ready to do a day of program planning, and get a phone call that someone has died, or is in hospital, and all plans change.

Well, I feel the same way as chaplain for the fire department – there is no such thing as a 'normal' day. I drop in at one of the stations to see how folk are doing, and one day it might be a conversation about new trucks, and another day it might be about someone who is sick. I've sat around the table sharing a meal with the guys, stood in the truck bay talking about family, or joined some of the crew to watch poker on TV. (Why in the world do people watch poker on television)?

Every day is different – and I still feel like I'm just beginning to scratch the surface, the potential, for the role of chaplain. I'm looking forward to discovering all the possibilities this job may entail.

The second thing I've discovered in my first six months is that I am really coming to understand how important the bond is within crews. Some firefighters have been together with the same crew for years, and they really get the fact that the guy sitting next to them watching poker on TV will also be the guy who looks out for their safety during an emergency call. They kid each other ... a lot ... (God protect the new guys). They disagree with each other about sports, politics, and any number of life issues ... like any other group. But they share something significant – and behind all the truly bad humour and the seemingly endless ribbing – are people who put human life above everything, and will do anything to protect it. That bond is something special.

The third thing I've discovered in my first six months is that every time I hear a siren I notice it – even if it is far in the distance. I find I immediately begin to wonder who is riding the trucks to the call; will it be a real emergency or a false alarm; will it be something routine and simple (if there is such a thing), or something that will challenge their skills and abilities to the maximum? And I find when I hear the sirens, I say a prayer – a prayer of protection for the crew, and a prayer of concern for the people whose lives are caught up in the emergency. And when I'm passing by the stations, and see the truck backing into place, the crew back safely from a run, I add a prayer of thanksgiving.

All in all, I'd consider this a pretty good first six months. I can't wait for what lies ahead.