

Do Military Chaplains Preach?

Exploring Sermons for Soldiers by Protestant Military Chaplains in the Dutch Army¹

Theo Pleizier

Abstract

This paper provides an introduction to the study of the sermons of military chaplains based on 10 sermons by Army and Navy chaplains within the context of peacekeeping missions. Three concepts emerge from these data, focusing upon the homiletical activity of military chaplains. They redefine the liturgical conditions for preaching, offer witness to sources of wisdom, and dignify the individual soldier in the presence of Christ.

Among the many fears soldiers face, those who work in modern armies and contribute to peacekeeping missions have to deal with strain on intimate relationships and with the insecurity of being able to continue as a human being *compos mentis* after military service. In a complex variety of personal, relational, work, and battlefield related fears, military chaplains (MCs) empower soldiers in the moral and existential challenges they encounter.² One of the ways they do this is by speaking publicly within and outside the setting of Christian worship, commonly called “preaching.” Various historical, sociological, and moral-philosophical studies have been devoted to the work of military chaplains (Boon, Hoffenaar, and Veltkamp 2016; Brekke and Tikhonov 2017; Hansen 2012; Hassner 2016; Todd 2016), including their practice of spiritual caregiving (Alexander 2013; Coulter and Legood 2015; Doehring 2018). However, the work of MCs among practical theologians in general and homileticians in particular is not well researched. When it

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² “Military chaplain” (MC) is used in this article for chaplains who work within the legal and institutional boundaries of the Ministry of Defense and are attached to a specific military unit. In the Dutch context, it is possible to speak about Army chaplains, Air Force chaplains, Military Police chaplains, and Navy chaplains, depending upon the unit that the MC is attached to. This is relevant due to the fact that units have different histories and cultures, including religious cultures. This article does not address the differences between the various types of MCs.

comes to homiletics, we find references to memorial services and services for veterans or the topic of war in Christian preaching (Eddinger 2008), but a comprehensive homiletic study of the practice of MCs is lacking. In the literature, war sermons usually refer to sermons that were preached in the public domain during a time of war but not specifically for military personnel as the primary audience (Bledsoe 2012; Teulié 2009). These sermons help us to understand the relationship between public religion and war but they do not pay attention to the practice of worship and preaching by MCs.

The literature that pays attention to sermons addressed to soldiers tends to reduce the practice of preaching by MCs to those situations in which MCs are called to boost the morale of soldiers or to provide them with a questionable divine legitimation of the battle they are about to fight. This reduction of the military context to actual combat means that liturgy and preaching are immediately turned into moral issues. A sermon from the 9th century may function as an example of this rather stereotypical image of the MC as morale booster: “Men, brothers, fathers [...] Act on this campaign in such a way that God does not desert you in the day of tribulation. Whatever you do, do it for God and God will fight for you” (McCormick 2004). Obviously, this kind of preaching raises many ethical questions. Yet, it also raises the question whether the moral ambiguities that surround preaching in the context of preparation for war by military chaplains create obstacles for a homiletical or practical-theological approach to preaching for soldiers by MCs. If so, empirical research in practical theology and homiletics may help to move beyond a rather one-sided ethical interest in the military by theologians.

This lack of research stimulates the design of open research questions to study the sermons and speeches of military chaplains and move beyond the rather dominant perspective of theological ethics. In this paper, I ask the question: What do MCs actually do when they preach for soldiers in war zones?³ This question focuses upon empirical phenomena (what MCs actually do) and is driven by a practical-theological interest within a particular military domain or substantive area.⁴ This question holds open the possibility of discovering how the sermons of contemporary military chaplains function in a wider variety of ways than the stereotypical pastor who is called on to bless the guns.

In the following section, I describe a worship service led by a Dutch military chaplain in Kunduz, Afghanistan and televised for national viewing in 2013 to illustrate the nuanced practice of worship and preaching in the military. After outlining the empirical-homiletical research project on “sermons for soldiers,” I present some of its initial findings.

³ ‘War zone’ is used to indicate the situation between the base and actual combat, such as ‘peacekeeping’ missions.

⁴ Also called ‘area of interest’ or ‘substantive field’ (Glaser 1998, 118-131).

Exemplary Case: Description and Analysis of Worship in Kunduz⁵

A group of soldiers assembles in a temporary building constructed in a camp that is part of the NATO Trainings-Mission Afghanistan, and located somewhere in the Afghan region of Kunduz. Some wear camouflage, others are dressed in civilian clothes. The building is used for multiple purposes. The room contains a small library. We see photos on the walls; religious symbols including candles and crosses. Thirty soldiers are sitting in chairs. The chaplain is clothed in military uniform, with no recognizable liturgical symbols except a cross on his uniform that designates his religious function and identifies him as a non-combatant under international humanitarian laws outlined in the Geneva Conventions. In this setting, we infer that the chaplain acts in a sacred space, suggested by the burning candle imprinted with a cross representing the light of Easter. In front of the soldiers, a simple wooden cross is placed in the center of the room. As the service unfolds, the chaplain starts to dress the plain cross with a military uniform. Slowly, he adds new pieces of military equipment to the cross. Finally, he adds a helmet on top of the cross as it gradually comes to represent some kind of soldier.

How do we analyse this scene? It obviously depends upon our liturgical theology and the assumptions we have concerning the military. Seeing a chaplain dressing a cross with a military uniform may generate resistance. The symbols of violence, death, and war on the cross, are understood by many to represent the ultimate symbol of God's victory over violence and death and Christ's reconciling love. This first reaction, however, connects to the stereotype of chaplains as primarily relating to soldiers as combatants. According to this interpretation, the cross and the violence of military combat cannot come together. The moral ambiguity is obvious. Yet, there is another possibility in analyzing this scene from the documentary on the Easter service in Kunduz. If the chaplain was standing in front of a group of doctors and put a white doctor's coat on the cross, or was preaching for politicians and put a suit on the cross, we might view this symbol differently. We may not like the idea of altering liturgical symbols, but the meaning that the preacher conveys becomes broader than the context of violence and moral ambiguity that so often permeates our assumptions about military service.

If the uniform symbolizes the daily life of the soldier, like the doctor's coat or the politician's suit, the cross is also the symbol that God comes to our everyday lives. We are allowed to bring to God the things that we carry with us daily. If we analyze the scene from a less ethically loaded and more descriptive practical-theological point of view, the association with violence and combat may not be gone entirely but put into wider perspective. This theological point also illustrates that the soldier is not immediately put into the category of sinner, at least no sooner than anyone else. The soldier is a human being and the chaplain's vocation is to come as close as possible to the everyday life experience of military personnel. Hence, the ultimate Christian symbol of the cross has

⁵ This example is taken from a recording by a Dutch Television channel that broadcasted an Easter service from a war zone. The documentary was broadcast on Easter Sunday, March 31, 2013, on Dutch national television as part of a program called 'Zendtijd voor de kerken' [Airtime for churches], a Dutch television program that broadcasts religious services.

meaning for the daily existence of a soldier, represented by the uniform and the soldier's safety equipment.

In the final analysis, we must conclude that in this scene the military chaplain does not primarily deal with soldiers in their role as combatants or even as a group of morally vulnerable or questionable people. Rather, as human beings bringing their everyday lives into the reality of Christ's presence.

Research Design

As part of a research project on preaching in the military, the central question of this paper is how Protestant chaplains fulfil their roles in worship and preaching in the context of the military within the changing conditions of modern war, including peacekeeping or state building. The data in this study varies according to types of sources, sites, and military units. For this paper, participatory observations (Afghanistan 2016), interviews with MCs (2017–2018), and 10 sermons are studied as a first step in a project that seeks to reconstruct the homiletic practice of Protestant Army chaplains. The sermons are from three different chaplains—a Navy chaplain and two Army chaplains. All are parts of services that were held during deployments in Mali, Afghanistan, and the Horn of Africa. The manuscripts of the sermons were coded in Atlas.ti, following procedures of open coding according to Grounded Theory methodology (Charmaz 2008, 47–56; Holton 2007).

Two assumptions guided the initial collection and interpretation of the data. First, the conditions of contemporary warfare have an impact on the way military chaplains provide religious services to military personnel. This has consequences for the function and topics of preaching. Though the complexity of modern war requires more discussion (De Landmeter 2018; English 2013), peacekeeping missions have largely changed the role of chaplains (Dörfler-Dierken 2011; Moore 2014; Volf 2009). Also, the fact that many Western armies moved away from conscription and to professional armies has had consequences for the interaction between chaplains and military personnel.

Second, armies usually reflect the religious situation in the nations they serve and military chaplains adapt their work to this. For Western armies such as the Dutch Defense Forces, this means that military chaplains work in a highly-secularised environment. The Army is even more secularised than Dutch society due to the young age of the soldiers. Though 19% report affiliation with Protestantism, it is estimated that 3-4% of the soldiers regularly attend church. However, research also shows that 18% of the soldiers attended services led by a chaplain at least once during the year.⁶ These figures do not provide evidence of 're-churching' but rather show that military chaplains are able to connect to soldiers who are not used to attending religious services.

⁶ In a research report on the scope and distribution of military chaplaincy in the Dutch armed force, almost 18% of the military personnel report that they attended a religious service led by an army chaplain during the previous year (Ton Bernts et al. 2014, 20).

Though theory formation might be an ultimate goal for empirical research, the outcomes presented in this paper are rather modest. The second part of this article presents three conceptual ideas that have emerged during the analysis of the data (Pleizier 2010, 85–94). They point to patterns in the data that provide promising leads to enrich existing theory in homiletics. One of these patterns is a model that describes the various types of religious discourse in the context of the military.

Emerging Conceptual Ideas: First Results of Data Analysis

The first conceptual idea that emerges from studying the empirical material is that chaplains redefine the liturgical conditions for preaching. Second, the analysis points to a highly personal use of Scripture as a source of wisdom. Third, military chaplains are particularly sensitive to the dignity of the individual soldier.

1. Redefining the Liturgical Conditions for Preaching

Military chaplains conduct worship services in unusual circumstances. With some exceptions, such as a chapel that was built at Camp Marmal in Northern Afghanistan, the services conducted by Dutch Protestant chaplains are usually held in informal and transient circumstances: in a bar, the back of a truck, or a dining room. If there is anything structural in Christian worship it is the time and place: Sunday, as the day of the Lord; a church building that carries traces of history and breathes the life of today's church that gathers for worship there. With some exceptions, Dutch Protestant military chaplains choose not to work within a traditional liturgical structure. In an interview, one chaplain compares the Dutch practice of worship with that of his German colleagues. Every Sunday, the German chaplains in Afghanistan organize services in a specially built chapel at Camp Marmal in Mazar-e-Sharif, part of the NATO mission named Resolute Support. He explains that the Dutch chaplains, however, are very pragmatic. They conduct services at whatever times the soldiers are available.

Dutch soldiers have Fridays off since this is the Islamic day of rest, so the chaplain hosts services on Friday. The trainers of the Afghani Police and the Force Protection units that provide necessary security for the trainers, do not leave the camp that day. The soldiers are free and the chaplain uses this time to offer a religious service. Sunday is a day of work for the military and they would probably not go to church unless they were highly motivated churchgoers. Therefore, liturgical time is redefined within the framework of “pastoral presence.”⁷ The chaplain does not

⁷ “Pastoral presence” reflects a particular pastoral attitude and practice. It falls beyond the scope of this article to explain the importance of the concept of “pastoral presence” for the work of chaplains (Sullivan 2014; Dunlop 2017). Cf. Winnifred Fallers Sullivan, *A Ministry of Presence: Chaplaincy, Spiritual Care, and the Law* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 2014); Sarah Dunlop, “Is ‘Being There’ Enough? Explorations of Incarnational Missiology with Chaplains,” *Journal of Practical Theology*, Vol. 10 (2017), Issue 2, 174-186.

expect the soldiers to come to him or her when it suits the chaplain's religious time and place, but adapts the time of worship to the schedules of the soldiers. Another chaplain tells a story of accompanying soldiers on multiple day trips for security checks in the desert of Mali. "Are we going to have a worship service?" the soldiers asked him before they left. They agreed that when the schedule allowed for a service, the chaplain would organise a "moment for reflection."

Likewise, liturgical space is redefined in chaplaincy contexts. The redefinition of liturgical space in Western Europe is connected to processes of increasing multi-religiosity and secularisation. For example, Christian chapels in prisons and hospitals have transformed into multi-faith environments to facilitate diverse religious expressions of worship (Gilliat-Ray 2005). Military chaplains have been redefining liturgical space for a long time. They have used all sorts of places in a variety of terrains to celebrate worship. Contemporary MCs provide worship services at the base where the soldiers live. The multi-religious and secular context strengthens the ancient practice of praying where the soldiers are: if the soldiers spend leisure time in a room with couches, television sets, and a bar, the chaplain does not try to move them out of their space into a sacred space of a specially built chapel but rather uses that and hosts small worship services in the room where they spend their spare time.

During the previously mentioned trip in the desert of Mali, the chaplain used the back of a truck to create a small worship space. This practice is also performative. One chaplain reported that soldiers asked whether they were allowed to use the room that was used on Fridays for sacred space, as they themselves had made a sign on the wall saying "Lion's Rock Chapel" (named after the building at the Dutch part of the international military compound). The sign referred to the fact that this place was to be used as a place of worship and it seemed appropriate for them to ask the chaplain's permission to use the space for leisure activities.

As liturgical time and space are redefined so is the definition of preaching itself. It is relevant to ask whether the Dutch Protestant chaplains actually preach. They do not speak about preaching nor do they call their speeches "sermons." Instead, they use terms like "moment of reflection," or even more accessible, "musings." A Navy chaplain uses "column" for his speeches, like a column in a newspaper with an informed yet personal opinion. These redefinitions not only move away from church jargon but also help the chaplains to develop their own personal approaches to the practice of preaching. It creates a new theological attitude to the act of preaching in general and to the language, structure, and content of sermons in particular. It also demonstrates openness toward military personnel from all walks of life. They are not "preached to" nor are they offered "sermons" but are invited to join the space of meditation and to engage with opinions on existential matters offered by the chaplain with the help of biblical texts and Christian faith.

These redefinitions of liturgical space, liturgical time, and liturgical elements such as preaching signal to the soldiers that the chaplain wants to meet them within the conditions of their lives and work as military personnel.⁸ It also does justice to the widely-expressed experience of soldiers that

⁸ For the purposes and limits of this study, only space, time, and preaching as worship elements are examined. Obviously, a more in-depth analysis of worship with soldiers and how chaplains prepare for and lead worship also

worship is a moment to relax, to ponder life and especially home. To underscore the humanizing impact of worship on some who attend services, one of the soldiers told me during a visit to Afghanistan, “I am not religious but I usually go to these meetings with the chaplain because they make me feel human instead of useful.”

2. Using Biblical Texts: Witness to Sources of Wisdom

The connection between preaching and Scripture is of great importance. From a Protestant perspective, preaching may even be considered the primary use of Scripture in worship. When the congregation assembles to hear God’s Word in preaching, the biblical text is at the center of attention, both liturgically and homiletically (Pleizier 2018). Yet, the situation for a military chaplain is rather different. The chaplains encounter a situation without a traditional congregation that considers itself to be God’s people waiting for God’s word. Instead, as one of the chaplains states in an interview, “Most of the soldiers do not know anything about church, they do not mind the chaplain talking about God either.” The Bible as authoritative, sacred text for preaching is intrinsically related to the liturgy of the community of faith and yet is unfamiliar to many. How do military chaplains deal with Scripture if they cannot rely upon a commonly shared notion of a sacred text?

Despite differences in style, chaplains do take a similar approach when it comes to the use of Scripture in their preaching. One of them, for instance, addresses the issues that are at stake in the mission, such as the dreams of peace that are shattered by cynicism. He raises the question whether their work in Afghanistan will have any effect when they leave. The chaplain relates these hopeless experiences to Heman’s cry in Psalm 88: Has God forsaken God’s people? Speaking in this way, the chaplain helps to put shattered dreams in perspective, offering wisdom from the text of Scripture.

Another chaplain cultivates the hope of peace in the weeks of Advent with help from the story of Luke 1. The chaplain is realistic about the soldiers’ quest for freedom and their contribution in the peacekeeping mission. But taking his cue from Luke 1 and quoting the biblical text that for God nothing is impossible, the chaplain urges that we should not recoil in cynicism nor lose hope. “Even if you do not believe in God, even if there is enough reason for cynicism, leave the final word to someone else.” A third example relates to the story in Exodus about God delivering the Hebrew people through the Red Sea. The Navy chaplain asked, “Where does this journey lead us?” Then he referred to Jacob who dreamed about a different reality, “For Jacob this has to do with God.” He closed by saying, “You don’t have to proceed in your own strength, God is also there, I would like to say.” These chaplains consult the Scriptures as sources of wisdom that communicate values of hope and anticipation.

requires a discussion of the structural elements of worship (e.g., theological patterns used in worship) and other elements in worship, such as prayer and the use of popular music (Velema 2016).

In these speeches, wisdom is not presented as general truths but shared in the form of personal testimony. It is common for chaplains to use phrases in the sermon such as “for me as a Christian” or “I take this as.” The wisdom in Scripture is communicated through personal witness. The spirituality of the chaplain relates to biblical wisdom. Speaking with a chaplain about this, she explained how spirituality and professional interests intersect: “I tried other texts, but I came back to the Bible, because it speaks to me and I am able to enter these texts more than any other text.” For this chaplain, Scripture is a treasure trove of wisdom, professionally communicated in a way that embodies personal spirituality. Chaplains become witnesses to the wisdom in Scripture and in doing so they combine professional competencies with a spiritual attitude. They share wisdom grounded in the Scriptures. This wisdom has helped them and is offered to the soldiers to make sense of their lives in the military. Although the image of the witness is well-known in contemporary homiletics, empirical research shows how witness functions in contexts that do not assume the Christian church as an interpretative community (Lose 2003; Florence 2007; Long 2005).

3. Dignifying the Individual Soldier in the Presence of Christ

One of the Army chaplains writes: “It is simple. Churchgoers are under no obligation. They choose their moment: not to be lived but to be aware of themselves. That’s the route into inner silence.” These thoughts reflect what chaplains aim for in the moment of worship and what they try to touch upon in their sermons. They remind soldiers that they are more than cogs within a closed system but more importantly are human beings to be cared for and respected.

In one of his sermons, the chaplain starts with naming the feelings that the soldiers might have after four months in Afghanistan. They start thinking about their return home and with these thoughts necessarily come questions such as “What are the sacrifices that we make, as a nation, as a unit, as individuals? What do we actually think about the political decisions to participate in these missions?” The chaplain gives ample space for discontentment, sadness, and even cynicism. The soldiers are loyal to the politicians who send them abroad, they are loyal to the Army as an organization, yet they have ambivalent and mixed feelings about the value of their contribution: Will everything fall apart the moment they leave?

In his sermon on the first Sunday after their Navy vessel departed for a mission in the Caribbean, the chaplain ended his sermon with a reminder of home. He helped the Marines to both remember home and also cherish their work. While referring to Easter, the light of Christ’s resurrection, he helped his listeners to accept who they are in their work as Marines, not as a duty or as a functional element, but as individuals who work together. In a brief reflection during a mission in Mali, the chaplain refers to king David who, as a young man, is an age that the soldiers can identify with. He helped his listeners to link their responsibility and the hardship of their work with Ps 131: “David could have told a spectacular story about qualities and competencies. Yet he did not. He looked into the mirror and said: My heart is not lifted up...” The chaplain ends the reflection with the implicit suggestion that this has to do with God by simply quoting the final verse of the Psalm: “O Israel, hope in the Lord, now and forever.” It is a brief proclamation, in which the soldier is affirmed in his dignity.

The contents of the sermons are usually close to the everyday life of the military personnel. Chaplains deal with a variety of topics in a light, accessible, but profound way: soldiers feel there is more to their everyday issues than they realize. Chaplains provide hints but do not force the soldiers into a particular Christian religious framework.

Contextual Types of Preaching: A Tentative Typology of Situated Religious Discourse

Military chaplains engage in a wide variety of situations that, following their redefinition of sermons, could count as preaching. In a broad sense, however, preaching can be used for any situation in which an ordained person speaks before an audience in his or her role as ordained minister or religious representative. MCs do engage in various situations of public discourse. These incidents of *situated religious discourse* contribute to reflecting on preaching as empirical reality and urge the question: What constitutes preaching and what does not? This section integrates the concepts presented in the previous section with examples of situated discourse. This integration tentatively points toward a conceptual pattern in the data that classifies preaching in the military according to *types of situated religious discourse*.

One feature seems to apply to all the sermonic activities that MCs engage in: they are all incidents of *contextual* or *occasional* preaching because every situation is specific and requires a unique act of religious communication. To some extent, this is also the case with parish ministers: their preaching relates the Scriptures to contemporary contexts and each instance of preaching stands by itself as a very contextual act of religious speech. Further, in homiletics we find the distinction between Sunday worship as regular preaching and other types of preaching that are usually connected to special occasions such as weddings and funerals. The distinction between regular and occasional, however, does not seem to apply for preaching in the military. For MCs, every event of preaching is noticeably contextual. The distinction between regular and occasional does not apply.

Comparing the various situations of religious discourse, the material in this study can be analyzed with the consideration of two dimensions. First, the ceremonial dimension: official (or ceremonial) versus informal (or spontaneous) contexts. Second, the dimension of religious language: implicit versus explicit religious references. Let me give three examples:

First, the chaplain organizes an Easter service with Holy Communion. This service is ecumenical in the sense that it aims to unite Christian soldiers from various Christian denominations and traditions. The service has the feel of a regular church service. The chaplain wears some kind of clerical robe, not entirely hiding his uniform and is officially recognized as a member of the clergy. In the service in which communion is celebrated, the chaplain uses specific ecclesial language. During the service, it is clear that this is also a very contextual instance of preaching. The chaplain addresses the problems of the mission, speaks about the soldiers who are about to return home after four months of service in Mali, and encourages them not to become cynical about the effects of the many sacrifices they have made. While this is a very contextual

service and the sermon addresses issues that were meaningful for those present at that very moment, the language contains many *explicit* religious references and the service is rather *formal* because it can be recognized as a regular church service with Holy Communion.

Further, other examples of *formal* occasions in which the chaplains speak publicly include examples of remembrance services. Given their ceremonial and public nature, the chaplain will not use very explicit religious language. Kim Hansen refers to civil religion which requires for preaching “a spirituality that is bland and generic because they (MCs, TP) have to integrate a large number of people who are diverse” (2012, 34). These services are not held for a specific, religious group of people, but must include a wide variety of the military personnel. If these services contain religious language it is only done implicitly because of their public nature. Perhaps the term “service” is already too explicit and ecclesial. In the material used for this study, one chaplain narrates the process in which he prepares his speech for a memorial day. The commander of the mission in Uruzgan had asked him: “Are you going to say something, Reverend?” In the story of his preparation, the chaplain shows how he is aware of the special place (earlier two Dutch soldiers were killed there and the square was named after them) and how the theme of remembrance brings alive the stories of many soldiers who have been injured or killed. “How can the sacredness of human life be connected to the sacred, or ‘the glory of God?’” the chaplain wonders.

Third, there are the *informal* or *spontaneous* services. These are most frequently done during missions abroad. The chaplain does not lead a formal worship service in a church building but transforms the space of the common room into a temporary sacred place. The chaplain takes the initiative for the service. He or she puts candles on the table and uses the television set to play secular music or to show video clips of popular songs, reads a few lines from a biblical story and gives a short talk which connects life issues with biblical sources, all related to the life and work of the soldiers abroad. The “sermon” takes an existential topic, such as farewell, comradeship, or relations. In one of his services, a chaplain explicitly addressed non-believers by titling the service, “A Special for Atheists.” The language in these meetings is not specifically religious, but the chaplain feels free to include his or her own spirituality and to share religious sources. Here we find a type of contextual preaching that moves between implicit and explicit religious language. The occasion is very informal: only those soldiers are present who choose to be there, regardless of their religious affiliation. There is no congregation that expects the MC to preach. At the same time, the informality develops into more formal structures with expectations, regularities, and durability. Soldiers start to ask whether there will be a service, the chaplain designs a leaflet with his or her own personal approach to the services, and adapts informal services during the mission into something more permanent back home at bases and veteran homes. These new initiatives are currently called “Soldiers-church.”⁹

⁹ Soldiers-church (Dutch: Soldatenkerk) is a recent initiative by a few Protestant MCs to have monthly services at various bases in The Netherlands, keeping the soldiers connected to the informal services that they attended when they were abroad during their missions.

These three examples indicate a tentative typology of contextual preaching. From this, a hypothesis can be formulated that needs further research: the formality of the speech-situation determines the use of religious language.

Concluding Remarks and Further Research

These first reflections on the sermons by military chaplains indicate a few possible contributions to homiletics as an academic theological discipline and they enrich our theories of preaching. First, what does preaching look like without a typical liturgical community? Second, how can we understand preaching as an existential hermeneutic? Third, how can empirical research add to the growing interest in the role of the spirituality of the preacher for the practice of preaching? Homiletics in turn can help in answering a broader set of questions, two of which emerge from this first study of the sermons of military chaplains: What contribution can practical theology make at the intersections of missiology, chaplaincy studies, and empirical research? How does preaching as religious communication contribute to public theology?

Military chaplains have particular professional experiences in communicating *extra muros ecclesiae*. In a time when the church is inventing itself anew with the help of fresh expressions or “pioneering spots” as they are called in the Protestant Church in the Netherlands, the experiences of MCs can contribute to rethinking the practice of preaching in creative ways. They know how to do church where there is no church. Though they do not see themselves as missionaries, Victoria Slater is right in connecting the ministry of chaplains to the mission of the church (Slater 2015). Military chaplains have a role in this evolving missional development, though they have to reinvent and embody this mission constantly. The institutional framework of separation of church and state makes it necessary to reflect on the relationship between mission as Christian ministry and the context of this ministry, namely the military missions of the Ministry of Defense. Preaching could be one of the practices that clarify this relationship and practical theology could encourage the appropriation of the theological language of mission within chaplaincy studies which, according to Dunlop, is a “much-needed paradigm” (2017).

For soldiers in peacekeeping or state building missions, boredom is a bigger enemy for the soul than fear of death. Soldiers fear that they might lose their unique selves or experience different emotions as they are cut off from their loved ones. The secularized contexts in which military chaplains operate create a unique situation for preaching. In some ways, they operate in a religious vacuum: many young soldiers have never attended a church service before. The chaplains adapt to these situations by speaking as personally as possible in a public setting. They share the life of a soldier and in their role as chaplain they speak to the existential dimension against the functionalist orientation and the potentially dehumanizing structures of the Army. They guard the soldier’s humanity before God. Or, as one of the chaplains remarked: “Even if they do not believe in God, they welcome the thought that God cares for them.” Military chaplains do indeed preach although they would never call it preaching.

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