

Thinking Christianly about Career: Reflections on a personal odyssey

by Al Shine, Colonel, U.S. Army, Retired

“...seek first the Kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added unto you. (Mathew 6:33, New King James Version)

The purpose of this article is to share with others some lessons I believe God taught me about service, career management and careerism along the paths of my 27-year career in the U.S. Army, and beyond. These lessons will resonate with every military officer who believes that God has called him or her into the service.

Summary

It is my contention...

...That there is no place for careerism for the soldier-Christian.*

...That there is a place for career management, but not in the sense it is often taught and followed.

*I use the term “soldier-Christian” instead of the more common term “Christian-soldier” to emphasize the fact that as followers of Jesus Christ we are Christians first—the noun of our identity—and everything else we are, to include the noble and God-ordained calling as soldiers, is an additional aspect of who we are and what we do.

Definitions

By “career management” I mean seeking (and doing) various jobs/positions with developmental considerations in mind, i.e., with consideration of your individual gifts and interests, as well as the long term impact on your military (and perhaps post-military) service.

By “careerism” I mean seeking to do one's assigned duties and manage one's career path for the primary objective of personal advancement.

Careerism includes career management, but career management need not, and should not, be governed by careerism.

The Providence of God in the Life of a Believer

Before I share my personal odyssey relating to the above, I need to make clear my understanding of the providence of God as it relates to human choice and events in the lives of people, particularly those who believe in and seek to follow Him.

The story of Job, the interaction of God with the people of Israel, the book of Esther, and numerous challenges in the Old Testament for people to make choices, coupled with similar admonitions in the New Testament and the actions of the 1st century Church, all indicate that notwithstanding the concept of election, God does grant to humans some degree of choice and holds them responsible for those choices. However, it is also clear that these choices are limited by His overall plan for the human race—and sometimes for the individual—and that He intervenes directly at times and in ways of His own choosing.

Further, Jesus' statement that not even a sparrow falls to the ground apart from the will of the Father (Matthew 10:29), the promise that God works all things together for good to them who are the called according to His purpose (Romans 8:28), as well as the illustrative story of Job, indicate that nothing happens, in particular to God's elect children, which God does not know about and allow.

I find a useful analogy in thinking of a cruise ship crossing the ocean. God is the Captain, the members of the crew are the Church, and the passengers are the world. The Captain is going to ensure that the ship reaches its destination. He entrusts much of the running of the ship to the crew, desiring, but not always ensuring, that they do so in accordance with the principles He has taught them and any specific instructions He may give them at any time. He also desires that they work together as a team, each member doing his or her particular part in combined service with the others. To some degree, however, He allows them autonomy in their actions, intervening at times and circumstances of His choosing to ensure that what He ultimately intends actually happens. Further, in addition to his broad plans for the ship, and for all on the ship, both crew and passengers, He is particularly concerned with the development of the crew—that they might grow in their seamanship and their understanding of and obedience to His principles and commands. Hence, He will often allow and sometimes cause hardship to come upon crew members, and will sometimes allow them to make bad choices so that from these choices they might learn and grow into better sailors.

Like any analogy, the above is inexact in that unlike a ship captain God is omnipotent, omniscient, omnipresent, and all wise. But in His sovereignty, He has chosen to allow a degree of choice and apparent chance to enter into the affairs of His world and the lives of His chosen people.

As applied to the career of an soldier-Christian, this suggests that though individuals and "the system" may have some influence in a soldier's assignments, the Christian may have confidence that no assignment happens outside of God's permissive will—He is the ultimate Assignment Officer; that He desires soldier-Christians to be servant-leaders, leaving promotion or lack thereof in His hands; and that He has different roles for different soldiers within the military as within any segment of society where Christians legitimately serve God and man.

This explains my current understanding, but as the narrative below illustrates, it has taken me a while to get there.

Career Management under the Hand of the Living God – a Personal Odyssey

My first career decision came during my second class summer at West Point. It was a fairly general assumption that those who were good in math and science would choose the Corps of Engineers branch. I had the academic credentials, so consequently I requested Engineers for my second class summer "real Army" experience, spending five weeks with a fine engineer outfit in Germany. I learned a lot and enjoyed some of the engineer activities. But Army engineers have as their secondary mission to "be prepared to fight as infantry if needed." One day we went to our battle positions on alert and proceeded to do some infantry training. In considering my summer experience I found that it was the infantry training that I most thrived

on. It was a matter of the heart more than the head, but I made the decision then to select Infantry vice Engineers as my Army branch. It was the right decision.

I was commissioned in 1963. My first assignment was to one of three U.S. infantry battalions then stationed along the Demilitarized Zone in Korea. It was an exciting and very rewarding assignment including live ammunition patrols (looking for infiltrators – no contact, but a sense of the real thing) and some great training, often at my own initiative. During a 13-month tour I served as a rifle platoon leader, weapons platoon leader, and rifle company commander, and was privileged to be mentored by some outstanding officers and NCOs. Excited about soldiering and ready to charge on, I put in my preference statement for either the 82nd or 101st Airborne Divisions.

Then my orders came—to the 3rd Battalion (reinforced), 3rd Infantry Regiment (The Old Guard), at Fort Myer, Virginia. I had never heard of The Old Guard, but when I found that it was (in my sophomoric view) a prissy-pants outfit that did nothing but look pretty, I was not happy. This was not the place for the Army's newest version of John Wayne. My letter to the Army's Personnel Center (MILPERCEN) explaining this erroneous assignment came back with a terse but clear response. So I reported to Fort Myer, but mentally fought the duty and had a visibly negative attitude for about a month.

Finally one morning, God got my attention. Driving in to work and mentally grouching about a great combat-type infantryman forced to focus on spit-shined shoes and thumb positions on rifle butts, I heard the closest thing to an audible voice from God I ever remember hearing. The Lord said to me something to this effect: "Who do you think gave you that assignment, turkey?" "Uh—I guess you did, Lord." "You got it right, bean head, so get with the program."

I got the message, changed my attitude, started to get excited about what The Old Guard was excited about, and found it to be a rewarding and important assignment with superb soldiers—and by the way, a perfect introduction to the Army for my new bride. (It was also a real help in my first post-retirement job as Commandant of Cadets at Culver Military Academy. In this position there was little use for my skills in attacking a hill or campaign planning, but the Culver cadets did a lot of parading, and I knew how to march!)

Lesson 1: *He whose eye is on the sparrow is the ultimate assignment officer for the soldier-Christian.*

We may think a particular assignment is not right for us, but if we acknowledge His sovereignty in our lives we can also trust Him in our assignments, and in doing so approach each duty with the attitude so clearly expressed by Paul in Colossians 3:23, "Whatever you do work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for men... It is the Lord Christ you are serving." (emphasis added)

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While in The Old Guard, Vietnam began to heat up so I drove across the street to see the major in charge of infantry lieutenant assignments and told him I was ready to volunteer. He of course welcomed my request, but strongly encouraged me to volunteer for advisory duty with a Vietnamese unit. This was 1966 and U.S. units had been committed to the conflict. It was obvious now that, like me, almost every Army officer and NCO deploying to Vietnam wanted to

be with one of the great U.S. divisions. It was also clear that this was a problem for the rugged, cigar-chewing infantry assignments officer, because he still was under pressure to fill the advisory slots. He gave me all the best reasons to request an advisor slot, encouraged me to think about it and come back in a couple of weeks, but implied (perhaps, as I thought, promised) that in the end, since I was a volunteer with a good record, the decision was mine.

I did think about it for about two weeks (maybe prayed about it, though I don't remember that I did) and came back with a "Thanks but no thanks. I'd like the 1st Cav—my old Korea outfit—the Big Red One, or one of the other storied divisions now engaged in the war." I was not a happy camper when my orders came a few weeks later, assigning me to the Military Advisory Group, Vietnam. And, like with the Old Guard assignment, I groused about it, at least to my wife and probably to a bunch of others. Some folks learn slowly.

I went to Vietnam, of course, and was assigned as Senior Advisor to the Vietnamese 52nd Ranger Battalion, a crack outfit of very professional and very tough soldiers. It turned out to be a very rewarding and often enjoyable assignment. In the process I also gained a kindergarten level of Vietnamese language skills and more importantly, got to know Vietnamese as people, not "gooks" (an all too common GI term.) This not only served me very well during my second Vietnam tour (as a rifle company commander with the 1st Air Cavalry Division) but was also very helpful in later years when Sandra and I were involved in the sponsorship of a number of Vietnamese refugee families.

Lesson 1 above, reinforced: *Once again, "His eye is on the sparrow," and He really does know best.*

I think after this I was finally beginning to internalize this lesson.

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My next assignment, after two Vietnam tours and some schooling in between, was to graduate school with a follow-on assignment to the faculty of the History Department at West Point. This was one I sought, to a large degree because I had been the recipient of some excellent teaching and mentoring from Christian officers on the faculty when I was a cadet. Sandra, as a cadet "drag," had also been the beneficiary of some of this, having been invited to stay as a guest in officers' quarters, participating in Bible studies and Officers Christian Fellowship (OCF) retreats, etc. It seemed natural that we should do the same for another generation of cadets.

I had always enjoyed history as a youth, and was a square peg in a square hole both in days alone in the dusty bowels of Harvard's Widener Library during graduate school, and teaching young cadets in Thayer Hall. I remember once being asked by a friend in the Chemistry Department why anyone would want to teach history, and wondering equally why anyone would want to teach chemistry. Sandra and I were also privileged to train and mentor many Christian cadets and their "drags" in those early 1970s classes and to see them go on to multiply their ministry in others. (see 2 Timothy 2:2)

Lessons—

2a. As in the "body life" concept for the church (see 1 Corinthians 12-14), we have different interests and gifts, and will most often be most effective in those areas of duty

for which we are best suited.

2b. In our military service, a consideration in our assignment request (but not the only one) should be where we can best use our spiritual gifts in ministry while serving effectively as professional officers.

Both of these lessons suggest service- oriented career management, rather than promotion-oriented career management.

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It was during my faculty duty that I had my first conscious encounter with careerism. As a perhaps naïve young officer it had never occurred to me that some among my peers would be mapping and scheming their way up the career ladder rather than simply serving in keeping with “duty, honor, country.” But among those on the West Point faculty I heard a lot of discussion about which career “tickets” needed to be punched, how to do so most expeditiously, and why West Point faculty members were not getting a fair shake in the promotion system of the time because they had to be ranked among themselves and “obviously as a group we are a cut above other groups.” I was surprised by such discussion because both as a professional and a Christian it was clear to me that the careerist approach was wrong. We are called to serve, not to climb. (see Matthew 20:24-28)

Lesson 3: *Careerism is self-focused, not service focused. It should have no place in the officer corps, and it most certainly should have no place in the attitudes and actions of soldier-Christians.*

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Following West Point, where I received an early promotion to major, we went to the Command and General Staff College at Fort Leavenworth where we enjoyed a relatively relaxed year of study and some great ministry with our peers in the chapel and the OCF ministry so effectively led by Dr. George Kuykendall. After Leavenworth it was time to return to the real army, i.e., a tactical division. I was a bit nervous about this. I still remember a comment from one of my peers while we were together at Leavenworth. Pete had come off an assignment as operations officer for a tactical battalion. Describing one of many days in this position he said with great enthusiasm, “There I was. A radio handset in one ear, a field telephone in the other, a half-eaten hamburger in my mouth, maps on the wall, guys running in and out. It was great!” Pete was in hog heaven in that high pressure, crisis-a-minute, fast tempo situation. But my thought was, “I would hate it!” I had thrived in the physical, hands-on atmosphere of company level leadership, and in the academic classroom, but I was beginning to suspect that I would neither like nor be fully effective in the jobs in tactical units that majors and above normally did.

However, I needed to find out, so was pleased when Army’s former “Lonesome End” Bill Carpenter, then assigning infantry majors, sent me to the 101st Airborne Division (Air Assault) at Fort Campbell, Kentucky. The division was good, the soldiers were good, the training was great, and I was able to get the best jobs for an infantry major, namely battalion and brigade operations officer positions. I had good commanders and many good experiences, but as I suspected I was often very tense on the job and my reactions to the day-to-day challenges in garrison and the field were, if I objectively evaluated them, mediocre at best.

During my three years at Fort Campbell my greatest fulfillment (and I believe effectiveness) came in the last six months when someone wisely assigned me to the division plans office where I could study, think, and write long range plans, not react to short term fast-moving situations – the kind my friend Pete so loved. My evaluations in the battalion and brigade positions were probably kinder than I deserved, but though I was selected for promotion to lieutenant colonel it was not below the zone. (We were able to have some good ministry at Campbell, and the OCF fellowship was a special blessing to Sandra and I and our growing family; but professionally it was an exciting but less than satisfying experience.)

Lesson 4: *The best evaluator of who we are and what we can do or cannot do well is ourselves (that is, ourselves prayerfully led by the Holy Spirit, and usually with the advice and counsel of wise peers and mentors—especially those who are believers—not the least of which should be our spouses.)*

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Having found, as I suspected, that my gifts were at best mediocre for the normal track for a field grade infantry officer, after serious prayer together with Sandra, I requested an ROTC assignment. Having spent five years “out of the mainstream” in graduate school and on the West Point faculty, I made the request knowing that if it were granted I would be far off the fast track for promotion. I expected that if I got the assignment I would then retire as a lieutenant colonel at or around 20 years of service.

In making this decision I had to struggle with two things: First, wondering if I was running away from what to me seemed to me like the harder, and thus perhaps more noble, regular track for an officer of my grade and branch. And second, the ego struggle knowing that some might look at what I was doing as wimpy—not what real soldiers do. But it was the right decision; and it was made much easier because Sandra and I were both secure in the knowledge that our worth was not dependent on what others thought of us, or what rank or status I might gain, or even what I might at times think of myself. Our worth and our duty lay in the call of the “Audience of One,” our Lord Jesus Christ.

It seemed clear to me that my gifts were far more academic than operational, far more in leading small organizations than managing large ones, and that if God opened the door to ROTC it was the right door for me, for our family, and for the Army. By this time I think I had learned lesson 1, and was fully prepared for something else if God, through the system, sent us elsewhere. But He did not. It seems that at the time I was due for reassignment, Army ROTC was struggling. We needed square pegs in square holes to keep the programs alive at some of our schools, one of which was Wheaton College, a patriotic school but no doubt to some in the assignments office a somewhat weird one, an Evangelical Christian college. Through OCF I knew Dr. Hudson Armerding, Wheaton’s President, and asked if he would request me for the Professor of Military Science position opening up that summer. He did, and that was where I was assigned—perhaps at least in part because someone in MILPERCEN saw that here was an officer as weird as the school, and who just might be the right one to keep its program alive and growing.

Lesson 5 (from deciding to change the course of my career): *“Career management” is*

good, but not focused on rank or position; rather on serving where you can best serve.

Again, you know yourself best. Some, like my friend Pete (a committed Christian, by the way), are best suited to be on the most prestigious career track, and should most certainly pursue it, accepting both its challenges and rewards as the calling of the Lord in their lives. But others, like me, are more suited for a track that lies out of the mainstream, but that is nonetheless of importance to the overall mission of the military and the nation. As John Eldredge has written, "Don't ask what the world needs...ask what makes you come alive and do that...for the world needs you fully alive." (Wild at Heart, p. 200.) You serve the nation best by doing what you do best!

Of course, there may be times where "the system" will not assign you to those duties to which you feel most suited. In these instances I would suggest two reactions:

First, trust that God has nonetheless been your assignment officer and do the duty with a thankful attitude and to the best of your ability.

Second, if it still seems a poor fit, and appears to be more than just a short-term diversion from a generally more compatible career track, consider the possibility that God may be leading you to leave the military when your obligation is completed to pursue a different field of service.

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Going to Wheaton was a blessing to me and my family, and with the help of some great staff, we were able to revitalize the Wheaton ROTC program and get it moving forward. Sandra and I were also able to help others on the campus to see military service for Christians in a positive light, while doing some discipling and mentoring with students. I requested and was granted a fourth year in the job, assuming that I would not be picked up for battalion command and would begin heading towards retirement. To my surprise, I was selected for battalion command – but while welcome in one sense, this also caused some soul searching. I wasn't sure I either wanted or was well suited to go into the pressure cooker of command that I had observed as a staff officer at Fort Campbell. But after prayer, Sandra and I had peace that God had opened this door and He would give us what was needed to walk through it.

Though I did not request it, the command I was selected for was an infantry basic training battalion. The "system" says all commands are alike, but we all know that is not so and in the general pecking order a training battalion is not the equal of a battalion in a tactical division. But it was the perfect slot for me: It was a situation with a relatively predictable routine, involving inspiration of soldiers and training at the basic level, leadership of some of the Army's top professionals, and though there were crises, they were relatively rare and usually didn't come in clusters. It was, in short, a command in which I could use my particular gifts and thrive. I did well, and was selected for full colonel. And again, while serving the Army directly, Sandra and I were also able to serve it indirectly through OCF and the Protestant Women of the Chapel (PWOC) ministries.

Shortly after I took command, Chaplain (First Lieutenant) Richard Pace joined the battalion, his first Army assignment. Richard was a solid evangelical who, along with his very talented wife Brenda, became a good friend. I was able to encourage and facilitate Richard's ministry to our soldiers without stepping over the line professionally, and Sandra was able to show Brenda the

ropes as an Army wife. Brenda later became President of PWOC, and in our retirement we were blessed to serve under Colonel Richard Pace's ministry as chaplain at the Army War College. God is good!

Lessons—

6a: *Sometimes we make choices which appear to be career dead ends, but they lead to positive results.*

6b: *God is our assignment officer. When He opens a door, trust Him to lead you through it in the way you should go.*

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To my disappointment, my expected 30-month command (luxuriously long at the time) was cut a few months short when the commander of the Army's Training and Doctrine Command visited Fort Benning and met me on a range. Knowing me from cadet days and occasional subsequent contacts, General Richardson selected me to head up a newly-forming cell at Scott Air Force Base to coordinate development of future tactical airlift doctrine and systems. This led to nearly four years in an office with eight officers and one secretary, during which time we made often obscure, but nonetheless sometimes meaningful contributions to the fast-growing joint community. It was an assignment that used my thinking and writing skills well, was long-term rather than short-range in focus, and most of the time comparatively low pressure. (Shortly after we left, the cell was absorbed into the newly formed U.S. Transportation Command.) Also, it was a good family assignment and again a good place for OCF and chapel ministry, including teaching chapel Sunday school with a fine bunch of high-schoolers, one of our daughters among them.

Lesson 7: *Our Heavenly Father knows us and is active in our lives far more often than those times when we consciously know it.*

I knew nothing of this new cell and would most likely have not given a thought to being assigned there, but God knew, and He used General Richardson—who knew enough about me to know that I was a good fit—to place me in this very unique position.

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After over three years at Scott I was again due for reassignment. At this point I had 25 years in the Army and hoped to stay for 30. Once again seeking an assignment suited to my interests and gifts, I took advantage of the fact that a good OCF friend, who knew my academic talents, was Commandant of the Army War College (USAWC) in Carlisle, Pennsylvania. At his request I was assigned to the Distance Education (DDE) faculty at Carlisle. The general took some heat from some of his staff for this because I was "another OCFer" and not a War College graduate. My immediate boss signed me up for the DDE course, so for the next two years I had the unusual experience of writing papers as a War College DDE student, while simultaneously teaching and evaluating papers as a member of the DDE faculty. But once again I was a square peg in a square hole and was able to be among the most respected members of the faculty while completing my War College course work and maintaining involvement with OCF and the chapel.

Lesson 8: *I made the request, but God worked out the details. As lesson 1 had revealed,*

He was still my assignment officer.

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This looked like an excellent “final assignment.” I would try to stay five years at Carlisle and retire after 30 years service, or if that was not possible, stay three or four years and retire at 28 or 29.

But a problem arose. In the late 1980’s the Army was downsizing, requiring some reduction of the officer corps. Various incentives had been tried and some reduction in accessions had occurred. But it was also decided (rightly in my judgment) to make some reductions at the higher end of the officer ranks through the process of “Selective Early Retirement Boards” (SERBs). In a colonel-heavy post like Carlisle Barracks the SERB was bound to hit hard, and it did, causing a fair degree of anxiety and what I would term whining by those who somehow believed they had a “right” to stay in until 30 years, and were being unfairly treated by the profession to which they had given so much service. When I came into the SERB window I wrote the best letter I could explaining why I should be retained, and had good support from my supervisors. However, I knew that with such a heavy dose of academe in my background I was pretty vulnerable in comparison to other infantry officers who had been commanding at the O-6 level and serving on various high level and high pressure staffs. So when the word came around the College that the “following officers needed to report to the Commandant’s office” I was not surprised that I was among those called. I had been “selected” for early retirement, after 27 years of service. Sandra and I were both disappointed, but neither surprised nor in any way resentful. It was made comparatively easy in that I supported the necessity for a SERB and could understand why I was vulnerable, but I honestly believe that even had I felt that I should certainly not have been on that list, we would have accepted it as a decision not of the Army, but of our ultimate assignment officer, God. There was the anxiety of a job hunt and the disruption of an unexpected move, but we continually sought to “cast all our cares upon Him” and trusted Him to lead and provide. Which He did, leading me through some unexpected connections to a second career as Commandant of Cadets at Culver Military Academy, a job where I still wore a uniform and could put to good use my gifts and experience as an educator and leader. We spent ten challenging but happy and productive years there, our son gained the benefit of an outstanding private high school education at very generous faculty rates, and we were able to continue in ministry to peers and students (and Sandra to women through Bible Study Fellowship.)

Lesson 9: A career decision, right for you and for the military, will not always be rewarded in career terms. But, God’s hand is still upon you.

“Promotion [or non-promotion] cometh neither from the east nor the west but from the Lord...” (Psalm 75:6, King James Version). The career choices I had made earlier – to seek to serve where I could most probably be most effective – had in this case hurt me from the standpoint of professional advancement (or longevity) as an Army officer. But they were the right choices, for the right reasons, and our Lord was still my assignment officer.

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Conclusion

I will not belabor the reader with a conclusion that repeats the summary at the beginning of this

paper, and which I hope has been usefully illustrated by my personal odyssey. It is, needless to say, an incomplete odyssey. I am now in my late 60s, fully retired except for what I usually term some “odds and ends I do for pay.” My wife and I are both in reasonably good health, but realize that this will change, perhaps very soon. Our challenges and opportunities now include being friends and still in one sense parents to our adult children, grandparenting, until a couple of years ago caring for an aging parent, managing decreased financial resources, and being flexible and available to use our experience and gifts in service.

“Careerism” as such is no longer a temptation; barring something very unusual my career(s) are over. The comparable temptation, common at my stage of life, might be termed “the lure of self-gratification” – the siren song of so many of the advertisements in retirement oriented magazines, which proclaim: “You’ve worked hard. You’ve served your country. Now it is time to focus on serving yourself, taking it easy and doing only what you want to do.” That is not, I believe, the calling of the retired-Christian. We are still called to be servant-leaders, and often servant-servants, trusting God to open and close doors of opportunity, to give us the strength for that to which He calls us, and finding joy in serving and growing closer to Him who before too many years we will meet face to face. As Major General (Ret) Dave Hicks, former Army Chief of Chaplains, reminded our War College Chapel congregation recently, “There are no stopping places in the Christian life.”

As for “career management,” while the specific has changed, I think the principle still applies: Sandra and I still have many choices as to how to use our time and resources. And in making these choices, we are still blessed by the “Body Life” principle of generally seeking to focus in those areas where our particular gifts lie, while always trusting our Lord to lead us where He will.

It is absolutely clear that God has called you to a free life. Just make sure that you don't use this freedom as an excuse to do whatever you want to do and destroy your freedom. Rather, use your freedom to serve one another in love; that's how freedom grows. (Galatians 5:13, The Message)

Al Shine and his wife, Sandra, live in Carlisle, Pennsylvania, where they participate actively in the chapel programs of the U.S. Army War College.