

Leading in Gaps: Intentional Leadership During Times of Military Assignment Transitions

By Chaplain (Major) Peter Robinson and Chaplain (Captain) Marcus A. Marroquin

It was a Friday when I¹ arrived at my very first battalion as a chaplain. After ten years of education, ecclesiastical training, and completing the Chaplain Officer Basic Course, I was ecstatic to begin ministering to Soldiers. I met the executive officer, briefly met the battalion commander, and then settled into my office. On Monday at physical training (PT), I met a concerned company commander who had desperately been trying to get a hold of me. Despite all my excitement and ambition to do a good job, I had not started properly. I failed to communicate with key leaders immediately upon my arrival and did not provide basic contact information to leaders within my unit. To make matters worse, the battalion Commander came up to me after the first formation and asked, “Why weren’t they able to get a hold of you?” I made the crucial mistake of assuming I could just settle into my role. It was a relational obstacle I had to face right off the bat. That very morning, I placed a photo of myself and my contact information all around the battalion. I had decided that for my next assignment, I would actively explore ways to better assimilate into a new unit. Transition plans help leaders begin on the right path and open up ministry opportunities.

Chaplain transitions can lead to gaps in pastoral care. Within the Chaplain Corps, opportunities to conduct “left seat—right seat rides” with the outgoing chaplain are scarce. Chaplains may become absorbed in the fast-paced operational environment and form subjective views about their unit’s culture, leadership, and command climate. By adopting a phased approach and intentionally planning transitions for assignments, chaplains can enhance their effectiveness and gain a more accurate understanding of the overall context.

In this article on best practices for integrating into a new unit, we present a phased approach to starting a new assignment. Originally designed for command teams and drawing on our experience, we have adapted this approach for use by Unit Ministry Teams (UMTs).

Phase 1: Preparation

Chaplains must be intentional when it comes to their transition into a new assignment, a reality that requires preparation. The preparation phase is key for cultivating situational awareness and integrating with the unit to establish trust. And this all starts before the chaplain arrives.

Many Army leaders assigned to key developmental positions conduct a significant planning phase prior to coming to an organization. Commanders are selected as early as two years prior to taking command. On top of that, they attend pre-command courses at echelon to prepare them. Chaplains do not have that same level of notification nor access to a course intended to help them envision ministry in a new context.

First, to prepare for arrival, it is important to develop situational awareness of the organization. Background information such as task organizational charts, briefings, mission statements, and unit histories all provide valuable insights into the formal aspects of the organization. We recommend inbound chaplains reach out to the current supervisory UMT to gather information about the unit and their mission. We also suggest networking with colleagues and acquaintances to gather their knowledge

about the organization. The goal during this phase is to find valid and relevant information that helps develop a picture of the organization's cultural environment, leadership, command climate, and identifies potential areas where a new chaplain might make a meaningful impact.

Second, soft introductions are an incredible tool to communicate professionalism and open lines of communication. After my first assignment, my brigade chaplain and I talked about how an initial introduction to my next battalion could facilitate a transition. He helped me construct a professional email containing an attached biography and formal letter of introduction. This approach helped me establish good dialogue for a seamless transition. These emails may also include a request to talk on the phone, especially with the current executive officer and supervisory chaplain. This goes a long way to prepare the incoming chaplain for the new assignment. It also empowers the incoming chaplain to enter Phase 2: The First Day.

Phase 2: First Day

The first day marks a chaplain's entrance into their organization, which comes with plenty of threats and opportunities. What the chaplain does—and who they spend time with—on the first day will signal to their people what and who are important to the chaplain. For these reasons, the first day should primarily focus on initiating and gaining trust.

Arriving at a new unit requires intentional preparation. Michael Watkins, founder of Genesis Advisers and a corporate consultant, suggests that joining a new organization is akin to an organ

transplant, and the new employee is the new organ. If chaplains fail to thoughtfully adapt to the new situation, the organizational immune system may attack and reject them.² As welcome as most chaplains are at any unit, they still face challenges in transition. Without proper awareness of the situation, a chaplain's good intentions could be attacked by the unit's immune system. For example, attacks could come through marginalization. This is evident when an individual is not recognized within the unit, is not sought out as the primary resource for addressing Soldier concerns, is excluded from leadership consultations, and is ultimately not trusted.

A key task for any new chaplain is building and maintaining trust. As General Stanley McChrystal quotes: "Great teams consist of individuals who have learned to trust each other. Over time, they have discovered each other's strengths and weaknesses, enabling them to play as a coordinated whole."³ New chaplains should hit the ground running by building trust. Chaplains establish trust by purposefully spending time with their people, engaging with the organization's leaders, and reflecting on their interactions. A purposeful approach and reflection establish trust.

Impressions and assessments begin immediately, for both a new chaplain and for those they are meeting. We recommend a new chaplain prioritizes meeting with the Religious Affairs Specialist. This shows respect, a team approach, and enables the chaplain to begin to lay out and get feedback on the initial integration plan. How a chaplain honors that relationship signals to the Religious Affairs Specialist and the rest of the organization the value the chaplain places on enlisted leadership. A chaplain's ability to prioritize and empower their

Religious Affairs Specialist reflects how they value and integrate NCO leadership across the whole unit. When the Unit Ministry Team functions as a team, ministry multiplies. If a new chaplain is assigned to an installation where they in-process the installation prior to coming to their assigned unit, meeting with the Religious Affairs Specialist before the first day in the office can provide time for meetings to be set up for the first day ahead of time.

Other people new chaplains choose to meet on the first day should be focused on building key partnerships in the new unit. A good rule of thumb is that the people who know Soldiers best are the senior NCOs. For instance, at a TRADOC assignment, that may mean the Senior Drill Sergeants. For most other assignments, this means the first sergeants. Having a one-on-one with each first sergeant on the first day communicates that you prioritize soldier care and will be engaged with the Soldiers. An intentional plan from day one will set the chaplain up to enter the next phase: the Initial Assessment.

Phase 3: Initial Assessment

In *The First 90 Days*, Watkins suggests assessing and leading an organization is like preparing for a long sailing trip:

First, you need to be clear on whether your destination (the mission and goals) and your route (the strategy) are the right ones. Then you can figure out which boat you need (the structure), how to outfit it (the processes), and which mix of crew members is best (the skill bases). Throughout the journey, you keep an eye out for reefs that are not on the charts.⁴

This phase encompasses the first 30 days and prioritizes reflection and assessment. As tempting as it may be to speed up this phase, it takes time just like preparing for a long sailing trip. The more experience a chaplain has, the more tempting it is to quickly make changes based on past failures and successes. However, without fully understanding the operational environment and the personalities involved, we can find ourselves committing malpractice and losing credibility with our “educated” assumptions. By speeding through transition, chaplains may not see the reefs that can cause them to crash and sink. For instance, this might involve assuming that a Chaplain Moral Leadership Training that was effective in a previous unit will automatically work well in the new unit. However, it is essential to engage with the Religious Affairs Specialist and unit leadership to determine the most suitable processes for the new context.

The bulk of the work here involves face-to-face meetings with stakeholders. Stakeholders are the interconnected offices and people that make up the larger picture of how the organization functions. It is about understanding what values and priorities make up the whole organization. Meeting with and assessing each section and command’s leadership will help the chaplain have a better understanding of the whole organizational picture. Stakeholders can be both external and internal. Examples of internal stakeholders are the senior NCO population, the chaplain’s command team and leaders at one level down, as well as staff sections, special staff, Soldier and Family Readiness Groups, and Civilian staff. External stakeholders are UMT peers across the installation, contracted ministry coordinators, behavioral health,

military family life counselors, financial counselors, societies, and regimental associations, and even food banks. For instance, as a chaplain in the First Infantry Division, being a member of the Society of the First Infantry Division and taking the time to talk with their president has opened an increased understanding of the history and lineage of the First Infantry Division and has even helped to explain why the First Infantry Division has such a strong tie with its local community.

During the initial meetings with these stakeholders, a new chaplain needs to determine their priorities and how often they need to touch base with the stakeholders. Chaplains need to make sure they have a purpose in their meetings and start to understand the stakeholders’ impact on the Soldiers in the unit. For instance, my second assignment was an AIT battalion in a joint base environment with an Air Force Wing command. We were a tenant unit and the only Army battalion for one hundred and fifty-eight miles. Our stakeholders were distinct from our brigade, which was seven hundred miles away. I decided to break up the stakeholders by weeks. I dedicated the first week to the drill sergeant populations, senior chaplains on base, and my technical chain. In the second week, I met with the instructors and cadre. I dedicated the third week to the Air Force resources and offices. In the fourth week, I met with the community partners. Throughout the first month, I met continually with the battalion staff and battalion leadership.

The initial assessment is an incredible time for introductions and relationship building. New chaplains can build their unit’s credibility with every handshake and partnership they build. Many stakeholders may have wanted to come

by or be a part of the effort but have not gotten around to it. When this is done intentionally, chaplains can multiply their efforts in caring for people and advising their commander. With a solid knowledge base of the organization and the key stakeholders, the next phase of Organizational Alignment and Team Building will yield better results.

Phase 4: Organizational Alignment and Team Building

This phase is focused on alignment, team building, and nesting the UMT’s efforts with the unit and the commander’s intent. This phase will take around 30 days, concluding around the 60-day mark. This phase requires constant effort and reflection because the alignment and team-building phase of the transition model necessitates re-establishing our core competencies in the context of our units and clearly communicating our purpose to the team. This step is crucial to operationalizing religious support in any environment. By fostering alignment and team building, a chaplain establishes their leadership of both the UMT and their role as the commander’s advisor. This phase can be accomplished in six steps.

Step 1: Review and develop organizational alignment. How a chaplain assesses whether the UMT is organizationally aligned impacts what they can do for their people. The commander’s goals and instructions, along with the unit’s METL and its known or expected missions and objectives can help shape a chaplain’s vision. Examine how effectively the unit shares the overall vision from the top down. The degree of alignment required may vary based on the distance from the desired state. Chaplains can make needed

changes more easily if they are patient and flexible and can set the tone with their UMT. We recommend choosing a creative venue to take the team to talk about vision, mission, goals, and objectives. Chaplains need to talk to their people, learn the history of the team, programs, and missions, and dream about what they can do together.

Step 2: Establishing Key Milestones. Chaplains should be clear with their team and leadership about what they are learning and establish clear milestones. They should determine the resource requirements for goals and how feasible it would be to accomplish them as a team.

Step 3: Secure quick wins and short-term victories. Chaplains shouldn't underestimate the value of showing up on time and being prepared. Chaplains can secure quick wins, ranging from having computer access to acquiring resources that seemed inaccessible for the previous team.

Step 4: Consider discontinuing established rhythms. This phase does not include making changes to the battle rhythms or programs. Rather, it requires the UMT to lay the groundwork for why some things may need to change. Some established programs can assist the UMT in maintaining its presence and provide a framework to achieve rapid wins by upgrading existing processes. Chaplains may abandon programs that have lost their effectiveness. At the same time chaplains should be slow to eliminate programs and rhythms too early and jeopardize needed continuity.

Step 5: Build the team. We recommend chaplains spend time understanding their part in developing their subordinates and their personal and career goals.

This may be a time where chaplains evaluate if team members are in the right position or if there is bandwidth to make personnel changes.

Step 6: Create a sense of urgency. The UMT provides a unique and specific resource in any operational environment. Urgency reminds the team of that role. Chaplains can create urgency in three ways: by ensuring the UMT sticks to the essentials, i.e., providing religious support and advising the commander, by advocating for the needs of the unit and their families, and by staying true to their calling. As chaplains have these discussions, their vision for ministry in their new context will start to unfold into specific and measurable objectives.

A Reflection on Phases 1–4

After phase four, we recommend chaplains conclude their assessment and start actioning their vision for the rest of the time they serve in that unit. In addition to intentionally transitioning through each phase we suggest, a new chaplain will benefit from using Army systems and planning as well. For instance, spending time utilizing the Army Design Methodology during each phase could help to address and identify some new areas of priority and provide opportunities for creative strategy and processes. Prior to proceeding to Phase Five, new chaplains can help ensure the unit is aware of the unique contributions of the UMT.

Here is a crucial but overlooked point: chaplains need to go back to the basics, assess the condition of their main product, and make it excellent. If the main thing is not excellent, then no other factor will compensate for its ineffectiveness.

For the Army, the main thing is the ability to fight and win our nation's wars. For the UMT, it is our core competencies: "nurture the living, care for the wounded, and honor the fallen."⁵ We suggest chaplains maintain focus on their vision for the main thing, ministering to Soldiers in the darkest of hours. That leads us into Phase 5: Establish Culture and Ministry Rhythms.

Phase 5: Establish Culture and Ministry Rhythms

Culture and rhythms help guide the team, improve the health of the organization, and balance all the responsibilities of the team. As chaplains delve into the history and mission of the unit, it may seem that the organization has forgotten or lost its vision for the good work they have done and the opportunity to contribute to our nation's defense. New chaplains have an opportunity to reinvigorate the wider unit culture by utilizing existing slogans, key historical moments, or unique experiences in the unit (airborne operations, air assault operations, riding in tanks, etc.). We recommend incorporating these into the chaplain's vision for ministry. In this phase, new chaplains can also establish ministry rhythms. This might mean maintaining, adding, or removing existing meetings, programs, or daily practices. Chaplains may benefit from explicitly integrating the vision and mission into the reasons these rhythms are changing or staying the same. Culture and rhythms need to be regularly assessed, which leads to Phase 6: Sustaining.

Phase 6: Sustaining

Chaplains can reap the benefits of an intentional transition process in

phase six. This phase consists of two congruent efforts. The first is cultivating the systems and relationships created that help the UMT function effectively in the unit. The second is looking ahead to facilitate the next transition. Feedback is key for ongoing assessment. We suggest chaplains seek out feedback from their Religious Affairs Specialist, their leadership, other key figures in their organization, and their supervisory chaplain. Chaplains need not fear making changes as they go because an idea failed, or they didn't anticipate something in their initial assessment. Chaplains can align the change with the vision and mission and try again. Finally,

it is never too early to start preparing the organization for the next leader. If chaplains keep this in mind, it gives them a big-picture perspective that pays dividends to the UMTs, unit leadership, and Soldiers that follow in their footsteps.

Conclusion

In the Army, transitions occur constantly. Transition periods present risks but also offer valuable opportunities. When the UMT approaches transitions with intentionality, both the chaplain and the gaining unit stand to gain. Too often, chaplains approach transitions

with haste and surprise, as if they had no idea they were leaving or heading to a new assignment. While updated and thoughtful continuity books can be very helpful, they are not the only tool available for assignment transition. Above, we explored several ways to promote healthy transition and integration with a new unit. Approaching the transition with intentionality opens opportunities for ministry and care.



As an accompaniment to this article, Chaplain Marroquin developed a Chaplain Transition Handbook. It can be found using the following QR code.

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NOTES

1 Chaplain Marroquin.

2 Michael Watkins, *The First 90 Days: Proven Strategies for Getting Up to Speed Faster and Smarter* (Boston: Harvard Business Review, 2023).

3 Amy C. Edmondson, *Teaming: How Organizations*

Learn, Innovate, and Compete in the Knowledge Economy (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2012), 11 as quoted in Stanley McChrystal, Tatum Collins, David Silverman, and Chris Fussell, *Team of Teams: New Rules of Engagement for a Complex World* (London: Portfolio Penguin, 2015), 98.

4 Watkins, *First 90 Days*, 145.

5 Department of the Army, *Army Chaplain Corps Activities (AR 165-1)* (Washington, DC: Department of the Army, 2024), 2-4.