


Decolonising chaplaincy in the South African National Defence Force

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The author served as a military chaplain for the South African National Defence Force (SANDF), and this is where she learned that other religions are not acknowledged during morning parades. The chaplain had 5 min during the parade to read the word and pray. They make use of the Bible for these, which shows that Christianity is their religion of choice. The study is qualitative, with questionnaires used to collect data on soldiers' perspectives to ensure that the information collected is accurate and relevant. The SANDF employs chaplains from various religious denominations, mostly from the mainline churches, to provide spiritual support to soldiers and their dependents. In recent years, there has been an upsurge in the number of Africans who practise African spirituality and respect their ancestors. When spirituality is discussed in South Africa, it is usually expected to be in reference to Christians. When they employ chaplains in the SANDF, they assess which school of thought the organisation brings as well as the basis for that choice. This would mean addressing questions such as: Is the Reformed tradition suitable for everyone? Is Pentecostalism good enough? Charismatic?

Contribution: This article contributes to scholarly debates on military chaplaincy by critically examining the extent to which chaplaincy practices within the SANDF reflect the country's religious, cultural and spiritual diversity. Drawing on qualitative data and lived experience, the study highlights the tensions between historically inherited Christian chaplaincy frameworks and the pluralistic spiritual realities of contemporary SANDF members.

Keywords: chaplain; soldier; SANDF; tradition; spirituality; work; parade; religion; decolonisation.

Introduction

The code of conduct for uniformed personnel of the South African National Defence Force (SANDF) serves as a fundamental guideline that is essential to the morning parade across all military formations. This code is recited each morning to remind soldiers of the true essence of service, thereby reinforcing the principles, responsibilities and ethical standards that are expected of them. It specifies how they ought to treat others, how they should behave and how they are to exemplify the values of the SANDF. In this manner, it not only fosters discipline and professionalism but also enhances a collective sense of identity, purpose and commitment within the military community.

The code of conduct states that 'I will treat all people fairly and respect their rights and dignity at all times, regardless of race, ethnicity, gender, religion, culture, language or sexual orientation'; however, the management of diversity is a major theme when conducting pastoral care. The armed services have increased in diversity regarding race and gender, with all genders often deploying together both domestically and internationally. The way armed forces deal with diversity issues differs, as they are influenced by the political, cultural and ethnic influences emanating from broader society (Soeters & Van der Meulen 2007). The SANDF is considered diverse in religion, but it has proven to be difficult for chaplains, who are mostly Christian, to adapt accordingly. According to Knoetze (2021), in most parts of South Africa, when the term 'spirituality' is mentioned, it is believed to be a term only fit for Christians. Because of the restricted access to current military information, available sources are often limited or outdated. The qualitative methodology employed here helped mitigate this challenge by focusing on firsthand accounts and experiences.

According to the Department of Defence (DOD 2009), official and current denominational statistics for the SANDF Chaplain Service are not accessible to the public; historical and

secondary sources shed light on the lasting impact of Reformed churches, especially the Dutch Reformed Church, within the military chaplaincy. According to Masuku (2020), the SANDF Chaplain Service comprises approximately 160 full-time chaplains and about 250 reserve chaplains. While more recent official statistics are not publicly available, these figures provide a useful indication of the size and structure of the chaplaincy. It is currently reported that the chaplaincy consists of approximately 410 members, which includes about 160 full-time chaplains and 250 reserve chaplains, representing both permanent and part-time personnel who offer spiritual support across all branches of the SANDF. In essence, historically, during the South African Defence Force (SADF) period, the Dutch Reformed Church supplied the majority of chaplains, with estimates suggesting that roughly 74% of the chaplaincy originated from this denomination (DOD 2009). This predominance not only highlights the theological and institutional heritage of the Reformed tradition within the military but also demonstrates how colonial and apartheid-era frameworks influenced the religious makeup of the SANDF. The dominance of a single denomination has shaped the evolution of chaplaincy practices, moral guidance and pastoral care, instilling a specific theological perspective within the organisation. In essence, while the current denominational distribution is not publicly recorded, this historical background indicates that Reformed churches have had a significant and enduring influence on the SANDF Chaplain Service, moulding its ethos, traditions and the methods of providing spiritual support to personnel over the years. Grasping this context is essential, particularly when contemplating initiatives to enhance representation, embrace religious diversity and address the decolonisation of chaplaincy practices within the contemporary SANDF (DOD 2009).

This may cause divisiveness among individuals of various religious affiliations. The integration of Christianity inside the SANDF was essential, particularly for spiritual sustenance while they serve the nation both domestically and abroad. This raises enquiries on the tradition or school of thought the organisation would choose and the rationale behind that selection. Is the Reformed tradition sufficient for all individuals? Is the Pentecostal adequate? Charming? Numerous varieties of Christian churches exist, alongside other religious traditions such as Judaism, Buddhism and Islam. The majority of chaplains in the SANDF belong to the Reformed tradition. This may be influenced by the requirements for Chaplaincy in the SANDF, which will be discussed later in the study. The article argues that while significant transformation has occurred since 1994, challenges remain in translating inclusive policy commitments into everyday chaplaincy practice. By adopting a decolonial lens, the study demonstrates how revisiting historical chaplaincy practices and interrogating colonial theological residues can enhance the relevance, inclusivity and effectiveness of spiritual care for all SANDF members and their dependents. In doing so, the article offers practical and theoretical insights for reimagining chaplaincy as a contextually responsive and inclusive service within a diverse military institution.

Diversity within the Christian faith

In Christianity, some individuals like traditional churches, while others opt for Pentecostal congregations and various sorts of pastors. Practical theology actively empowers individuals to accept the variety within Christianity. In recent years, social media has witnessed a proliferation of hate speech, primarily because of individuals prioritising affiliation with certain groups over unity within the diverse body of Christ. Masuku (2020:5) contends that the issues associated with religious practices in the workplace cannot be overlooked. This may cause discomfort to other members whose religious beliefs oppose the practices of others. The objective of practical theology in this context is not to advocate for a certain religion, but rather to utilise the pastoral care inherent in all religions to foster healthy human relationships within society. Pastoral care aims to enhance interpersonal relationships while honouring an individual's faith, irrespective of its nature, with a foundational focus on God, without the carer renouncing their own beliefs.

The soldiers in the SANDF do not belong to one religion; even those who belong to the same religion do not come from the same doctrine or school of thought.

According to Dreyer (2017:3), in addition to denominational preferences, the diversity found within Christianity is also evident in theological focus, liturgical practices and cultural expressions of faith. In South Africa, certain Christian communities strongly adhere to prosperity theology, which emphasises material wealth and personal achievement, while others adopt liberation theology, which is based on resisting oppression and advocating for social justice. Additionally, some communities prioritise charismatic practices such as healing and prophecy, whereas more traditional denominations focus on sacraments and structured liturgies. In the SANDF, these variations can influence how soldiers receive pastoral care and understand the role of chaplaincy. Dreyer (2017:4) also states that a chaplain who approaches from a liberation theology viewpoint may emphasise justice, equality and reconciliation, while one influenced by prosperity or evangelical traditions may concentrate more on personal faith and resilience. The differences can help enhance spiritual care and may also lead to tensions if certain theological perspectives are afforded greater visibility or legitimacy than others. Consequently, Naidoo (2014:9) also adds that the chaplaincy faces the challenge of navigating these doctrinal differences in a manner that promotes inclusivity while ensuring the spiritual well-being of all soldiers, irrespective of their theological backgrounds.

According to Masuku (2020:8), another dimension of diversity within Christianity in the SANDF is found at the crossroads of faith, culture, language and identity. The Christian soldiers of South Africa originate from a diverse array of ethnic and cultural backgrounds, each contributing

unique forms of worship, prayer and music. The soldiers from rural African communities may derive profound significance from worship that integrates traditional instruments, indigenous languages and oral narratives, while others might be more accustomed to Western hymns, organ-led liturgies or modern praise bands. Masuku (2020:9) also adds that language can also serve as either a barrier or a bridge in worship, as soldiers may experience feelings of exclusion when services are held in an unfamiliar language. They might also feel a keen sense of affirmation when their native language and cultural traditions are acknowledged. The cultural dynamics enrich the expression of Christian faith, and they also underscore the potential for exclusion if a predominant cultural interpretation of Christianity overshadows others. This indicates that effective ministry cannot merely replicate a single tradition; it must embrace pluralism, cultural awareness and contextualisation. This approach would not only foster inclusivity but also enhance spiritual unity in a military setting where cohesion is vital for morale and collective identity (Naidoo 2014:5).

Brief background of chaplaincy in the South African National Defence Force

According to Bredenkamp and Wessels (2012:244), military chaplaincy originated in the Middle Ages in Europe as part of the Christian state enterprise, but the professional structure of military chaplaincy, as currently encountered in most countries, was established during the First World War (1914–1918). The inaugural national armed force of South Africa was founded in 1912 and was designated as the Union Defence Forces. Until 1916, military troops in South Africa predominantly had spiritual support from civilian clergy inside their congregations, as no statutory provision for chaplains existed. The formation of the SANDF in 1994 did not lead to the inception of a new chaplaincy; rather, it entailed the reorganisation and amalgamation of the pre-existing SADF Chaplain Service with chaplains from former liberation movements and homeland forces.

This integration represented a notable transition towards a multi-faith and more inclusive chaplaincy, embodying the democratic and decolonial aspirations of post-apartheid South Africa (DOD 2009; Masuku 2020). In 2018, the chaplaincy consisted of over 160 full-time chaplains representing various races, genders and those with impairments. Additionally, there are approximately 250 reserves or auxiliary chaplains. The SANDF chaplaincy, in conjunction with over 250 reserve or part-time chaplains, serves a force of roughly 73 844 personnel (Defence Web 2018). The requisite qualifications for appointment comprise Grade 12, a theology degree or an equivalent National Qualifications Framework (NQF) level 7 certificate and official ordination or its equivalent, as specified in the DOD Religious Policy (DOD 2009:14).

The qualification requirements make it impossible for ministers of the word who are not qualified to become chaplains. The SANDF dress policy was revised to allow members to wear certain religious adornments, for example, the Zulu custom of *Isiphandla*, the *Lakshimi* string, beards and moustaches for men, the fez or turban worn by men and the official mourning button or band (DOD 2002). In addition, a special leave dispensation was introduced that allows members up to 5 days of special responsibility leave to attend funerals (DOD 2003).

The African tradition of polygamy has been recognised alongside customary marriages. Life partners are acknowledged, regardless of whether they are of opposite or the same gender. This grants dependents the same benefits as Western marriages, including medical benefits. The current policy does not acknowledge the right to consult traditional healers in lieu of licensed medical practitioners, necessitating that individuals utilise regular leave rather than sick leave for such consultations (DOD 2003). This continues to be a contentious issue; nevertheless, throughout time, regulations and practices are gradually being modified to incorporate African traditions and cultural practices. In essence, many young Africans who have come to adopt a Westernised value system find themselves in conflict with their traditional culture, as they are pressurised to conform to traditional rituals such as circumcision, respect for elders, the role of traditional healers and so forth (DOD 2003).

The evolution of chaplaincy within the SANDF is inextricably linked to the extensive political, social and historical changes that have influenced South Africa (Dreyer 2017:12). In the apartheid period, the military chaplaincy was organised to mirror the prevailing socio-political structure, which favoured Western Christian traditions while often sidelining African spiritualities, indigenous religious customs and other minority faiths. In this time, chaplains primarily served white soldiers, offering spiritual guidance and moral support that conformed to the dominant ideological and cultural standards of the state. The integration of the SANDF in 1994, which merged former liberation armies with statutory forces, resulted in a new and highly diverse military demographic encompassing various religious, cultural and linguistic backgrounds (Masango & Mkhathini 2026:15). This diversity posed a significant challenge for chaplaincy, which needed to swiftly adapt to fulfil the spiritual and pastoral requirements of soldiers from a multitude of faiths, denominations and cultural contexts. In addition to delivering religious services, chaplains emerged as vital mediators in bridging historical divides, fostering unity and encouraging ethical behaviour within a force that mirrored the broader complexities of South African society. The transformation of chaplaincy became a fundamental aspect of the SANDF's post-apartheid mission, connecting spiritual care to nation-building, reconciliation and the establishment of an inclusive military culture that honours diversity in all its manifestations (Masango & Mkhathini 2016:17).

According to Naidoo (2014:6), in modern times, the function of chaplains within the SANDF has transformed to include not just spiritual guidance but also psychological support, ethical advice and social care, addressing the multifaceted challenges of military life. Soldiers encounter distinct stressors, such as deployment to conflict areas, exposure to trauma, extended separations from their families and the demands of upholding discipline and unity within hierarchical frameworks (Naidoo 2014:7). Chaplains are expected to serve as counsellors, advisers and moral anchors. They also offer care that encompasses the entire soldier physically, psychologically and spiritually. Furthermore, with the SANDF's increasing participation in regional peacekeeping missions and international partnerships, chaplains are progressively anticipated to partake in interfaith dialogue, cross-cultural understanding and conflict resolution in highly diverse and occasionally unstable settings.

This necessitates a flexible, culturally aware approach that honours African spiritualities, minority faiths and pluralistic practices while also respecting the Christian heritage of the chaplaincy. The changing requirements of chaplaincy further underscore the persistent need for institutional reform, professional growth and the decolonisation of spiritual care frameworks to guarantee that all soldiers feel acknowledged, valued and supported. In this manner, the SANDF chaplaincy functions not merely as a religious service but as a strategic tool for promoting cohesion, resilience and ethical integrity within a contemporary, multicultural defence force (Masuku 2020:11).

Theological foundations and colonial legacy

The theological underpinnings of chaplaincy within the SANDF are profoundly anchored in Christian doctrines that were introduced through colonialism, especially through European missionary activities and the formation of settler churches (DOD 2009). In the colonial and apartheid periods, Christian theology not only served as the prevailing religious paradigm within the military but also functioned as a moral and ideological instrument that justified the colonisation of African populations. Chaplaincy services in the military were intended to offer spiritual support to soldiers; however, this support was influenced by Eurocentric interpretations of the Christian faith (Masuku 2020). Theologies that were taught and practised by military chaplains mirrored the principles of European modernity, individualism, rationalism and a rigid separation between the sacred and the secular, contrasting sharply with the holistic, communal and integrative characteristics of numerous indigenous African spiritual perspectives (DOD 2009).

Chaplains frequently reinforced the notion that the Christian God, as depicted in European traditions, held superiority over African deities, spirits and ancestral

customs (Dreyer 2017). This established a spiritual hierarchy that marginalised African religious systems and bolstered perceptions of Western superiority, both culturally and theologically. This legacy has had enduring effects on the perception and practice of spirituality within the SANDF today. Drawing on the author's lived experience as well as qualitative interview data, this study found that, in practice, Christian scripture reading and prayer continue to form part of compulsory morning parades in several SANDF units. Participants reported that chaplains are typically allocated a brief period, often approximately 5 min, during which a scripture reading and Christian prayer are conducted.

While SANDF chaplaincy policy emphasises inclusivity and ethical reflection rather than confessional preaching, these findings indicate a disjuncture between policy intentions and everyday practice at the unit level. This has significant implications for soldiers who do not identify with Christianity but are nevertheless required to participate in these compulsory rituals.

After the official conclusion of apartheid, the structures and curricula of chaplaincy have remained the same, with the predominant mainline Christian denominations, especially Anglican, Methodist and Dutch Reformed traditions continuing to influence the military's theological landscape. African Traditional Religions and other non-Christian belief systems are still underrepresented or entirely absent from formal chaplaincy services, despite their prevalent practice among soldiers (DOD 2003).

The colonial theological framework has historically influenced a restricted perception of spiritual care within the SANDF Chaplain Service, where African beliefs such as ancestral veneration, spirit possession and communal rituals have frequently been pathologised or disregarded (Naidoo 2014). The theological foundations of chaplaincy within the SANDF are historically rooted in Christian doctrines introduced through colonial and missionary enterprises. During the apartheid era, these theological frameworks aligned closely with Eurocentric worldviews and institutional power.

Although significant transformation has occurred since 1994, including very few Muslim and Hindu chaplains, alongside policy reforms and increased religious representation, this study argues that colonial theological residues persist within everyday chaplaincy practices, symbols and compulsory rituals. Decolonisation is therefore understood not as a completed event, but as an ongoing process requiring continuous critical reflection and institutional self-examination.

This dual responsibility embodies the comprehensive nature of military pastoral care, which addresses not only moral and religious needs but also the mental well-being of soldiers. This results in the initiatives aimed at

decolonising chaplaincy needing to include a thorough investigation of these inherited theological foundations and a deliberate effort to incorporate African cosmologies and epistemologies alongside established practices in psychological support. In essence, achieving this necessitates a re-evaluation of the theological education and training of chaplains to ensure it more accurately reflects the spiritual diversity, cultural contexts and lived experiences of soldiers in a postcolonial and democratic South Africa, thereby aligning both spiritual and psychological support within a more inclusive framework (DOD 2003).

Boundaries and limitations for military chaplains

Masuku (2020:1) asserts that the military forces represent a highly heterogeneous realm, with individuals who adhere to several religions. This network comprises diverse professionals, including medical specialists, law enforcement officers, legal practitioners, psychologists, advocates and social workers. The professional categories within the SANDF exhibit a distinct representation for gender, colour and individuals with impairments. Primarily, they possess ministers of religion, delegated by their churches to serve them. Masuku (2020:2) asserts that throughout the Middle Ages, it was the duty of a chaplain to serve persons in the parish residing at a considerable distance from the parish church. It was intended to assist individuals who had been removed from their customary church settings and clergy. The ministry of chaplains has consistently been associated with controversy. Can they possess prophetic abilities akin to their civilian counterparts? The circumstances have altered today as there was dissent against their ministry during the apartheid era. Today, we discuss a populace's SANDF. The inquiry emphasises the potential for individuals to demonstrate prophetic attributes in a military setting.

It also highlights whether they are aligned with a just or unjust government. A varied population presents chaplains with a multitude of challenges. Beckford and Gilliat (2005:176) cite the United States Department of Justice (1195:3), which contends that addressing the challenges posed by diversity is an 'essential element' of correctional management, with chaplains leading the way in steering institutions towards 'a comprehensive emphasis on the improvement of cultural, ethical, and religious diversity matters'. Chaplains must display exceptional discretion, sensitivity and agility in balancing pastoral care with the crucial needs of unit cohesiveness, operational preparedness and institutional integrity. Dreyer (2017:15) argues that the constraints of military chaplaincy highlight the need for ongoing professional development, supportive policies and frameworks that enable chaplains to minister effectively in an inclusive manner, responsive to the complex realities of a modern, diverse military force.

Conflict among health professionals and chaplains

The SANDF chaplains' ministry reflects that of chaplains in other Allied forces, which includes responsibilities such as taking part in parades, visiting medical facilities, providing personal guidance, distributing literature and gifts, as well as composing letters (Masuku 2020; Moll 1984:25).

The Chaplain Service provides spiritual guidance to DOD personnel both globally and during deployments. This effort seeks to cultivate human capability that promotes spiritual, ethical and overall well-being (Dreyer 2017:6). It functions within a context of religious pluralism, recognising the transformative demands of the DOD. The author was employed at military hospitals characterised by ongoing disagreements among social workers, psychologists and chaplains. The facility experienced instances of discord among the personnel. This was mostly because of the lack of a clear definition of their services within the institution. To decolonise chaplaincy within the SANDF, it is essential to clarify roles within the interdisciplinary teams (Masuku 2020:7). There have been reported instances within the SANDF where chaplains advised patients to discontinue prescribed medical treatment in favour of prayer for healing. Such incidents are not reflected in official records accessible to civilians, as they occur informally within clinical and pastoral interactions. The author personally encountered similar situations during her tenure as a military chaplain, highlighting the complexity of boundaries between pastoral care and medical practice within military health settings.

These experiences were further corroborated during the interviews. One participant, a commissioned officer of the South African Military Health Services (SAMHS) (pseudonym used), recounted being advised by a military chaplain during hospital admission to rely on prayer rather than medical treatment. The participant recalled the chaplain stating: 'You need to pray harder, Captain. Medication will only hold you back. Stop taking the medication, and you will see the power of God in your life' (SAMHS, male).

These accounts underscore the importance of clearly defined professional boundaries between chaplaincy and healthcare services within the SANDF, particularly in a context where religious authority may exert significant influence over vulnerable patients.

When the physicians insisted that the patient continue medication, the patient declined and instead chose to rely on prayer as recommended by the chaplain. What would decolonisation entail at a military hospital? Would decolonisation manifest uniformly throughout all military divisions? The SANDF comprises four divisions: Army, Air Force, Navy, and Military Health (DOD 2009). The author conducted interviews with several members of the SANDF

to gather their insights on chaplaincy services inside the organisation. Some participants believed that chaplaincy does not accommodate all religions, thereby rendering it irrelevant for all soldiers (DOD 2002). One soldier enquired about the timeline for the military's recruitment of Sangomas. As argued by Captain Ndou during her interview, 'Chaplains are exclusively for Christians; when will they employ Sangomas for those of us who adhere to African spirituality?' (Captain Ndou, navy, female). This underscores the necessity to decolonise chaplaincy within the SANDF. The chaplains are only Roman Catholic, when will charismatic chaplains be employed for us? This comment was made by a soldier who believed that chaplaincy solely accommodates soldiers from the Reformed tradition, thereby failing to cater to the diversity within the organisation. As a result, discrimination occurs despite the SANDF's code of conduct forbidding such behaviour among uniformed troops. Soldiers delivered excellent observations. The chaplain has been quite helpful, especially during my mother's passing. According to Seth (2009:373), the 'Western knowledge system developed in Europe throughout the Renaissance and Enlightenment periods'. This structure was employed to strengthen the colonial administration and lend legitimacy to the colonial endeavour (Knoetze 2021):

The chaplain helped me a lot throughout deployment as I was struggling with being away from my family for such a long time, and the chaplain there gave me moral and spiritual support. (p. 12)

According to Knoetze (2021):

It is also true that the failure to include core cultural roles/values of Africa into the 'borrowed Western' theological education undermines the legitimacy essential for a contextual African theology. Realising that the decolonisation of theological curricula will take more than only a few alterations, this article takes a more practical and technical approach that does more than just amend the curricula to be more contextualised for Africa. (p. 2)

This study's call for the decolonisation of chaplaincy, in light of the SANDF, should not have surprised most South African ministers of the Word, as there has been a demand from ministers outside the Reformed tradition, who feel marginalised from chaplaincy because of its organisational nature.

Gender and decolonial perspectives in chaplaincy

The convergence of gender and decolonial viewpoints in chaplaincy within the SANDF uncovers entrenched patriarchal and colonial legacies that persistently influence the delivery and understanding of spiritual care (DOD 1996). Traditionally, military chaplaincy has been male-oriented, mirroring wider trends of exclusion in both religious and military spheres. The incorporation of women into chaplaincy positions within the SANDF has

progressed slowly and is frequently met with opposition, reflecting a hesitance to challenge established gender hierarchies. The SANDF chaplaincy has made notable progress in advancing women into senior leadership positions, including strategic command roles. These developments represent significant strides towards gender transformation within a historically male-dominated institution.

However, findings from this study suggest that female chaplains remain numerically underrepresented, particularly at unit and operational levels. Furthermore, patriarchal theological assumptions inherited from colonial Christian traditions continue to influence perceptions of spiritual authority and leadership. A decolonial gender perspective therefore requires attention not only to representation at senior levels but also to everyday practices, institutional culture and theological norms.

The theological underpinnings of SANDF chaplaincy are often rooted in conservative, Western Christian traditions that maintain strict gender binaries and delineate specific roles for people, favouring male leadership. This represents a perpetuation of colonial violence where both indigenous gender fluidities and the spiritual leadership roles historically occupied by women or non-binary individuals in African cultures were erased or invalidated under European religious frameworks (Knoetze 2021).

Decolonising chaplaincy through a gendered perspective entails more than merely increasing the representation of women chaplains; it necessitates a fundamental transformation in the understanding, teaching and embodiment of gender within spiritual care in the military (Masuku 2020:2). African indigenous cultures have historically acknowledged a variety of gender roles and conferred spiritual authority upon women and gender-nonconforming individuals, especially in the contexts of healing and ritual practices traditions that were often overlooked by missionary Christianity. Reclaiming these indigenous gendered spiritualities is essential for establishing a genuinely decolonial chaplaincy. This requires the SANDF to adopt a more inclusive and intersectional approach that confronts patriarchal theological interpretations and advocates for gender justice (DOD 2001). Such an approach includes reforming chaplaincy training programmes to incorporate feminist, womanist and queer theological viewpoints, as well as recognising and affirming the lived spiritual experiences of all personnel, irrespective of their gender identity. Moreover, chaplaincy should evolve into a space where matters such as sexual harassment, gender-based violence and discrimination are addressed not only in a pastoral manner but also prophetically, challenging structural inequalities present in both military and religious contexts. By doing so, chaplaincy can transform into a venue for healing and liberation, rather than one characterised by marginalisation and exclusion (Seth 2009:7).

Interviewees' profile: An overview of the author's interviewees

The research involved 20 participants selected from the SANDF. They were strategically chosen to reflect the organisation's structure, hierarchy and operational diversity. The participants were sourced from the Army, Air Force, Navy, and South African Military Health Service, ensuring representation from all four primary branches of the SANDF. In essence, to maintain confidentiality, the participants opted to remain anonymous, although they all agreed to the disclosure of their military ranks and branches. The sample included individuals from various hierarchical levels such as junior enlisted personnel, non-commissioned officers, junior or senior officers, as well as Warrant Officers of Class 1 and Class 2. This diverse composition enabled the study to investigate variations in experience and perception across the rank spectrum, gathering insights from those tasked with implementing organisational policies alongside those who interact directly with chaplaincy services in everyday military operations. The intentional inclusion of participants from these different levels underscores the study's objective to comprehend chaplaincy experiences from various viewpoints within the SANDF, covering both operational and leadership dimensions.

The participants comprised a well-balanced representation of gender, age and service experience. This helped showcase the diversity within the SANDF. The 20 participants included 12 male and 8 female individuals, which reflected the typical gender distribution present within the force. The ages varied from 20 years to over 50 years, encompassing both recent recruits and long-serving personnel with significant military experience. This diversity in age and length of service enabled the study to gather insights from individuals at various stages of their careers, illustrating how interactions with chaplaincy services and spiritual support may evolve over time. The participation of both junior and senior personnel offered valuable perspectives on how military hierarchy affects views on chaplaincy, discipline and ethical guidance. This helped provide a thorough understanding of the operational, cultural and organisational elements that influence the experiences of SANDF members.

The selection of participants took into account religious and cultural diversity, which is significant as it mirrors the wider spiritual landscape of the SANDF. In the selected target population, 10 of them identified as Christian, four adhered to African Traditional Religion, three were Muslim, two belonged to the Zion Christian Church (ZCC) and one considered themselves non-religious yet spiritually inclined. This diversity is essential for understanding the varying experiences of chaplaincy services based on faith orientation and cultural background. The participant profile represents a diverse cross-section of the SANDF, including various ranks,

branches, genders, ages and religious affiliations. This thorough approach lays a solid groundwork for analysing chaplaincy practices, inclusivity and the broader organisational dynamics of spiritual support within the SANDF.

Rethinking chaplaincy in the South African National Defence Force

The imperative to decolonise chaplaincy within the SANDF cannot be comprehensively grasped without considering the lived experiences and viewpoints of the individuals it aims to support, namely the soldiers and their communities (Masuku 2020). The military chaplaincy has been influenced by Christian and Eurocentric paradigms, frequently neglecting the rich array of cultural and spiritual traditions that define the identities of most SANDF personnel. From the perspective of the populace, chaplaincy ought to transcend being merely an externally imposed religious framework; it should align with their cultural values, healing customs and worldviews. Soldiers originating from African Traditional Religions, Islam and various other faiths often perceive themselves as overlooked within the existing system, which raises significant concerns regarding representation and inclusivity. The testimonies underscore the pressing necessity for a chaplaincy model that embodies the pluralistic nature of South African society and effectively addresses the psychological, moral and spiritual challenges they encounter while fulfilling their duties (DOD 2009). In keeping with ethical research standards, the identities of all participants were protected through the use of pseudonyms. No real names, service numbers or unit-specific identifiers are disclosed. Participants consented to the use of anonymised quotations for academic publication. One participant raised concerns regarding the Chaplain Services, arguing that they primarily cater to soldiers of the Christian faith:

'Attendance at the morning parade is compulsory for all uniformed members, during which the chaplain reads from the Bible and prays to the Christian God. As a traditional healer, I am required to participate in this ritual daily. While I respect their beliefs, I follow my own ancestral practices and therefore question why I must engage in a Western religious observance before commencing work.' (Staff Sergeant Nkosi, SAMHS, male)

In contrast, Warrant Officer Sithole expressed a positive view of the chaplaincy, highlighting its utility for soldiers of the Christian faith who may be unable to attend church services on Sundays. She emphasised that morning parades have long been an established military tradition and noted that obedience to orders, including participation in scripture reading and prayer, is an integral component of military discipline.

Other personnel suggested that the chaplain's brief 5-min scripture reading and prayer during the parade is unlikely to adversely affect soldiers of differing faiths and therefore should not be a matter of concern.

Conversely, Colonel Xhinti questioned the necessity of chaplaincy altogether, describing it as an inefficient use of resources. He argued that soldiers may practice their faith privately before reporting for duty and recommended that chaplains' involvement be limited to specific events, such as military funerals for individuals requesting Christian rites. Corporal Skhosana raises the concern that chaplaincy, if genuinely intended to support the spiritual well-being of all soldiers, should also include representatives from the ZCC and traditional healers, rather than serving only a specific religious group. The findings of this study revealed varying perspectives on the current chaplaincy services within the SANDF. Sixteen out of 20 participants indicated that the chaplaincy services lacked inclusivity, particularly in their representation of diverse spiritual traditions. Two participants maintained that there was no need for change, reasoning that individuals retained the freedom to practise their own forms of prayer privately. The remaining two participants expressed concern that increasing inclusivity might undermine discipline and order within the military, given that the institution is fundamentally structured around hierarchy and control. They further argued that African spirituality, being characteristically expressive and vocal, may conflict with the DOD's policies and expectations of uniformity in conduct. Participants expressed diverse and sometimes conflicting perspectives on chaplaincy practices. Several participants articulated discomfort with compulsory Christian rituals. One participant stated:

'Attendance at morning parade is compulsory, yet the chaplain reads from the Bible and prays to the Christian God. As someone who follows African spiritual practices, I feel compelled to participate in a belief system that is not my own.'
(Warrant Ngoveni, army, male)

Other participants viewed chaplaincy positively, particularly those identifying as Christian. A senior officer remarked:

'The chaplaincy has been helpful, especially during deployments when attending church is not possible.'
(Captain Ndou, navy, female)

These varied responses illustrate the ongoing tension between institutional cohesion, religious freedom and spiritual inclusivity within the SANDF chaplaincy.

These perspectives illustrate the ongoing debate regarding religious inclusivity, freedom of belief and the role of chaplaincy services within the SANDF.

According to Masuku (2020), listening to the community also highlights the expectation that chaplaincy should function as a link between soldiers and their families, as well as between the SANDF and the wider communities from which soldiers originate. Families and communities frequently turn to chaplains for support during crises, losses or conflicts; however, when chaplaincy is confined to limited theological traditions, its effectiveness is compromised (Dreyer 2017). The perspective of the people

underscores that a decolonised chaplaincy must incorporate African spiritual practices, accept various religious traditions and acknowledge indigenous knowledge systems as legitimate means of healing and support. In this manner, chaplaincy evolves from being merely a military role to becoming a platform that promotes belonging, cultural dignity and resilience (DOD 2003).

Conclusion

In conclusion, the process of decolonising chaplaincy within the SANDF necessitates a deliberate transition from Eurocentric theological frameworks to a more inclusive and contextually relevant spiritual paradigm. Chaplains are tasked not only with the role of spiritual leaders but also as catalysts for change who acknowledge and celebrate the various faith traditions and indigenous spiritual practices present among military personnel. This transformation involves the adoption of African perspectives, fostering interfaith collaboration and embracing the principles of Ubuntu to enhance overall well-being and unity within the ranks. The decolonisation of the SANDF chaplaincy will be achieved when institutional practices, training and policies are aligned with the authentic spiritual experiences of all members, rather than perpetuating the legacy of colonial and apartheid frameworks. This means that by reconceptualising chaplaincy as a domain of inclusivity, respect and shared humanity, the SANDF can exemplify a new model of spiritual care that fortifies both moral resilience and national cohesion.

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CRedit authorship contribution

Hundzukani P. Khosa-Nkatini: Conceptualisation, Data curation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Resources, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. The author confirms that this work is entirely their own, has reviewed the article, approved the final version for submission and publication, and takes full responsibility for the integrity of its findings.

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Data availability

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Disclaimer

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