

2016 ANONYMOUS CHAPLAIN SPOUSE SURVEY

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

THE STORY & HYPOTHESIS BEHIND THE SURVEY:

In 2010, I came across a research dissertation called “The Military Experience: Perceptions from Senior Military Officers’ Wives” by Dr. Henrietta McGowan¹ that found a correlation between increased symptoms of isolation and depression in spouses as their service member was promoted in rank. At one point, the research compared the feelings of many senior spouses to those of a pastor's spouse. In that moment, I realized that we, chaplain spouses, may have a “double whammy” of expectations and burdens that we carry.

In 2015, a pilot version of this survey was developed *by more than 20 other chaplain spouses* to see if these expectations or burdens existed and whether they felt isolated. Based on McGowan’s research, it also measured how our most "seasoned" spouses were doing and what their needs are. Chaplain spouses from *every branch and rank* were invited to answer questions on activities, volunteer roles, home and marriage life, concerns about emotional and mental health, and much more.

After the survey in 2015, I traveled to various installations as the 2015 AFI Military Spouse of the Year. I led Chaplains Spouse Roundtables, discussed the results of the survey, and talked with many of our most senior spouses. I found that discussions in safe circles validated much of the results in the 2015 pilot survey. I also found that processing both the burdens and joys of this lifestyle freed many up to continue in their ministry.

The 2016 survey used the 2015 pilot as a foundation as well as new questions aimed to find areas of need and improvement. Once completed, a Board of military spouses was brought together to help interpret the results of the survey and offer recommendations. The Board² consisted of spouses that have 5-35 years of military experience, vary in service branches, and also included another clinician and clinical researcher. Variety of experience and expertise offered as much non-biased recommendations as possible.

It is my intent and hope that the results of this survey will be used to develop ministry or resources to support the chaplain community. Based on the survey results and discussions with the Board, our community is resilient but in need of far more support.

Thank you,

Corie Weathers, LPC

1 McGowan, H. The Military Experience: Perceptions from Senior Military Officers’ Wives. Capella University, 2008.

2 Board Spouse Members and Branch: Corie Weathers LPC (Army), Roxanne Walker (Army), Rebecca Whitlock (Army), Claire Wood (Army), Sarah Chapman (Army), Dr. Ingrid Herrera-Yee (Army National Guard), Vickey Costin (Air Force), Dinah Dziolek, LPC (Airforce)

DEMOGRAPHICS

199 chaplain spouses were surveyed from November 1 to December 31, 2016. Spouses were pulled initially from two Facebook groups of over 700 chaplain spouses of various branches of service. Invitations to take the survey were distributed through social media groups, email, newsletters, in person coffee groups, chaplain spouse distribution lists (if given permission), and through the Army Chaplain Corps Newsletter. The survey was available through a provided link accessible through computer and mobile devices. All participants were asked to verify that they were a chaplain spouse. Due to the anonymity of the survey, it was not possible to verify further the participants or follow-up.

- The average number of deployments: 2-3.
- Popular age bracket: 35-54yrs
- 99% Female
- 75% Stay at home (11% work full time)
- 51% Ranked O-3 (Captain)
- 95% Active Duty
- 81% Army

OVERALL CONCLUSIONS:

RESILIENCE/SELF-CARE:

- The chaplain spouse community results are very much in line with issues and thoughts coming from the general military spouse community. Research from [Blue Star Families](#) reports career, volunteering, and burnout as top concerns. It was noted by the Board that a key difference is that chaplain spouses refer to a foundation of purpose and calling in their efforts to be involved with their chaplain service member. Despite struggling with similar issues, chaplain spouses exhibit strength and fulfillment.
- Identifying resources of self-care is extremely important for every installation. Spouses would benefit from mentors encouraging self-care and provide local resources to help.
- Adults and children are more likely to enjoy activities if they feel a sense of control and personal choice. Whether obligation is perceived or realistic, having the choice of where to worship or volunteer brings self-motivation and energy. Removing pressure and messaging to chaplain families the ability to choose could increase engagement and improve overall attitudes of chaplain activities and programming.
- Could burnout be more associated with day-to-day activities, trainings, family interactions rather than deployments. Many families implied that deployment is sometimes easier than when the family is together and highly active in ministry.
- It is a reasonable conclusion that chaplain families experience replenishment from time away with family and safe community. Therefore, encouraging opportunities for families to take advantage of

resources, activities, and opportunities that invest in them as a family is the best way to encourage self-care. It is possible that most will see ministry activities as an opportunity to serve rather than a place to receive. A safe conclusion is that replenishment can be found in safe, close community that does not require giving or over investment.

- Many people requested the idea of sabbaticals or respite for chaplain families. Finding opportunities for vacations or sabbaticals away from giving to others should be considered and made available.

MINISTRY TEAM MINDED-NESS:

- A vast majority of spouses enjoy participating in activities or ministry that utilizes them and their chaplain as a team. This could mean that spouses would feel less obligated to participate if the activity provides a sense of purpose to the spouse. Providing additional training (e.g. Strong Bonds and Family Life) that equips the spouse could result in more chaplain-marriage teams leading similar training events and thereby opportunities to fulfill a sense of purpose.

PERCEPTION:

- As many of the questions were written to assess burnout or issues that chaplain spouses would not otherwise feel comfortable to share, it is worth asking how much reported is self-perception or reality. In other words, if a chaplain spouse feels a sense of obligation to volunteer in certain roles, is this coming from an actual obligation that exists outside of him/herself or a sense of obligation that they have created internally.
- Complaints from the survey and seen in open feedback (according to the Board) are traditional issues and complaints seen over the last 20 years (i.e. Mentoring, improvements to installation chapel services, expectations of spouse's involvement). This either shows that the themes presented are valid concerns that need to be addressed through mentoring or are issues that are commonly seen throughout the journey of a chaplain family.
- Traditional understanding of ministry, family roles, and partnering in ministry can influence and lead to feelings of obligation toward involvement for spouses. This is important for each spouse to be able to identify in their own life as they manage their level of involvement in chaplain ministry.

MENTORING AND EDUCATION:

- Mentors and superiors can help message that the activities and ministry that currently exists are also available to chaplain families to receive support themselves.
- More education for chaplain families on the mission of the Chaplain Corps, chapel ministry, how to best support their chaplain, and the stages of the chaplain career is needed to better inform, set healthy expectations, and prepare them for seasons of ministry. Initial mentoring in the Chaplain Officer Basic Leadership Course should include some of this general education and expectations.
- Spouses asked for sponsors at least in the first assignments, if not thereafter, in order to assimilate faster into the community. It is recommended that mentoring during the first assignment is crucial for setting expectations, offering support, and education.
- After reviewing the data and open feedback comments, the Board noted the results seemed split between spouses wanting more mentoring vs. wanting to be left alone. Therefore, it is recommended

that conversations with local families will be important to determining the usefulness of mentoring at each location.

QUESTIONS THAT ARISE:

- Is the stay at home number high due to the number that would like to work but cannot find employment?
- Question was not asked “Do you wish to work?”
- Is it possible that access to more of our male chaplain spouses were limited due to the low turnout of male spouses in coffee groups and activities?

The full sized 2016 Anonymous Survey Chaplain Spouse report includes the following

- Graphs and detailed data from the survey
- Open ended questions submitted by participants
- Key questions from the results for further study
- Conclusions and recommendations for serving chaplain families
- Resources currently available for chaplain families

For more information or to obtain a copy of the report, please contact

Corie Weathers, LPC- corie@corieweathers.com

All requests for the full report must be submitted in writing including use the report/data clearly stated.