

Unit ministry teams focus on diversity and resiliency at annual conference

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HEIDELBERG, Germany -- What do you get when you mix a priest, a rabbi, an imam, and a chaplain together, and then stir in a bit of multi-national flavor?

You get the 2010 Religious Support Operations Leadership Training conference held here Sept. 20-30 for [U.S. Army in Europe chaplains and chaplain assistants](#) from Germany, Italy and the Netherlands.

This year's conference, rich in diversity, gave participants the opportunity to meet and learn different customs and practices from military chaplains of various faiths, and to exchange ideas with military chaplains from [Estonia](#) and the [United Kingdom](#).

"Diversity is important aspect of our training for several reasons," said USAREUR [Chaplain \(Col.\) Ray Bailey](#). "As the Army becomes more diverse and more varied, we try to replicate that in the chaplaincy. We all have different spiritual journeys and practices, we're in different geographical locations, and we're exposed to different cultures. It's essential that we broaden our experiences, so we are empowered to better serve the different needs of our Soldiers and their families.

"This is an ideal time for chaplains and chaplain assistants to dialog and learn from each other. It's a rare opportunity when we have so many diverse groups represented in one setting, allowing everyone to build relationships and freely exchange ideas," he said.



Lieutenant Col. Taavi Laanepere, chief of chaplains, Estonia Defense Forces, discusses his experiences in providing religious support to his country's military members with U.S. Army chaplains and chaplain assistants at the 2010 Religious Support Operations Leadership Training conference Sept. 20-30 in Garmisch, Germany. Laanepere attended the conference as part of continuing efforts to strengthen alliances and friendships between USAREUR and its allies. (U.S. Army photo by Keith Wright)

Lieutenant Col. Taavi Laanepere, chief of chaplains, Estonia Defense Forces, said he appreciated the opportunity to meet and share ideas with the various members of the Army chaplaincy. "Estonia is a young country, and we have a young chaplaincy. We don't have the experience the U.S. Army has," he said, "but it is comforting to know that our problems are not unique."

He added that while he certainly learned a lot from his American counterparts, he thought that it was beneficial for them as well to learn about Estonia and the cultural differences. "We are in the same fight and there may be a time that U.S. Army chaplains may have to support the religious needs of (the) Estonia military forces."

The Reverend Dr. David Coulter, principal, [Armed Forces Chaplaincy Centre](#) in the United Kingdom, said he agreed that it was important for different nations to learn about the other's religious support and applications for their respective militaries. "We have British and American Soldiers serving side-by-side, and therefore we have chaplains serving closely together. Our service members are suffering the same stressors and traumas. We have British and American Soldiers attending each other's services in Afghanistan and Iraq," he said. "We can certainly learn from each other, as we have the same goal—to help our war fighters cope with the stresses of combat, deployments, and also to help their families."

Not only should chaplains and chaplain assistants learn about diversity in multinational cultures, it's also important for them to learn about the religious diversity within their ranks, according to Bailey. He said that this conference gave them the opportunity to learn about the different faiths and the resources available to them to support that particular faith in their communities.

As the only imam in theater, this was an excellent opportunity for Maj. Khallid Shabazz to share his Muslim faith and practices with others. "I'm new to USAREUR so not everyone may be aware that I'm available to help them support the religious needs of any Muslim Soldiers in their communities. I can't be everywhere at once, but I can let them know I'm certainly a resource and can help them develop a plan they can implement as a means to support their Muslim Soldiers," said Shabazz. "I can also learn from them as they relate the challenges they face in their efforts to support those Soldiers' needs."

While the tenets and practices are definitely different, Shabazz said, the goal is the same for all faiths—to make Soldiers feel that they do matter, and the

Army supports them in their beliefs.

Besides educating the unit ministry teams on diversity and ways to broaden their minds and skill sets, the training serves another important purpose, Bailey said. "This is their time to rebuild, reflect and renew," he said. "Not only do they learn about **building resiliency**, they actually put it into practice at this conference. After taking this time for themselves, they leave here with a fresh perspective, and go back better prepared to serve their communities."

Caregivers often become so focused on helping their Soldiers and families deal with the stresses that it can take a toll on their own well-being, according to **Dr. Robert Wicks**, professor from Loyola University Maryland. In his presentation on building resiliency, Wicks, a published psychologist with expertise in **preventing secondary stress**, emphasized that caregivers need to take time for themselves or they will eventually find themselves emotionally drained and unable to care for those they want to support.

"I could truly relate to what Dr. Wicks was saying," said Maj. Kevin Sears, garrison chaplain from Garmisch. "With my schedule, I don't always have the time to do all the things I want to do, like take time out for myself, let alone learn more about religious diversity within the chaplaincy or within different cultures. This conference forces me to take that time, and I know it only makes me better for having done so," he said.