



HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

Faith in the Forces and Religious Diversity

Prepared by:

Dr. Joanne Benham Rennick, Wilfrid Laurier University



Joanne Yuasa, the first Buddhist chaplain in the Canadian Armed Forces, stands in front of the chapel of the multifaith Spiritual Fitness Centre at Canadian Forces Base Kingston.

Photo Courtesy of
Victoria University in the
University of Toronto.

Historical Overview

Faith and religion have always been part of life in the Canadian military. In the past, Christianity—especially Protestant and Catholic traditions—shaped many of the values and customs in military life. But as Canada has become more diverse, so has its military. Today, people from many different backgrounds serve in the Canadian Forces. The military also supports those who are spiritual or not religious.

Early Religious Influence

In the past, religion was closely tied to Canadian military life. The values of duty, sacrifice, and service were often linked to religious teachings. Most members of the military were Christian, and rules, traditions, and leadership reflected that.

During the First World War, Christian clergy joined the military to support soldiers. Of the more than 400 chaplains who served overseas, more than 350 were from Protestant denominations. These included a Baptist minister who served in the No. 2 Construction Battalion, a segregated unit composed of Black non-commissioned members and mostly white officers; and an Anglican Métis minister from Western Canada. There were no permanent Jewish chaplains, but rabbis visited the soldiers, who could also attend local synagogues. The remaining chaplains were Catholic or Eastern Orthodox.

Together, these religious leaders held worship services, offered counselling, and performed religious ceremonies at funerals. They also helped with everyday tasks, like writing letters for soldiers or speaking up for their needs. Prayers and Christian services were common before battles and during gatherings.

By the Second World War, religion had become a regular part of Canadian military life, with 137 Protestant and 162 Roman Catholic clergymen employed in full-time roles. Although more non-Christians were joining the military, it took time for their religious and spiritual needs to be accommodated.



In this photo Kevin Junor is on a training exercise in Petawawa, Ontario. To learn more about how his military and spiritual life are connected, visit the *In Their Own Voices* online exhibition and listen to his clip.

Photo courtesy of Kevin Junor.

A More Diverse Canada

As the religious beliefs of Canada's population changed through immigration and shifting values, the military changed too. More people began arriving from non-Christian backgrounds, including Jewish, Muslim, Sikh, Hindu, and Buddhist communities. At the same time, more Canadians were moving away from organized religion. Indigenous Peoples of Canada have always served in the military, but their spiritual practices were often overlooked in the past.

One important change was the expansion of the Chaplaincy Branch, which provides religious and spiritual care to military personnel. In 1981,

Rev. Georgina Kling became the first woman Protestant chaplain to join the branch. The next year, pastoral associate Huguette Roy, became the first female Roman Catholic chaplain. This branch now also includes chaplains from different religious and cultural backgrounds. In 2003, Captain Suleyman Demiray became the first Muslim chaplain. Today, chaplains come from Christian, Jewish, Muslim, Indigenous, Buddhist, and other faith traditions. They serve in both the Regular and Reserve Forces and often work with civilian religious groups. This makes it easier for all service members to get the support they need—spiritually, emotionally, and morally.

Improving Support and Accommodations

The military has also worked to better support religious practices. Since the early 2000s, official military ceremonies such as the consecration of the National Military Cemetery, have included leaders from the Buddhist, Christian, First Nations, Hindu, Jewish, Muslim, and Sikh traditions. In 2005, the Chaplain Branch created a more inclusive badge and introduced a Muslim and Jewish version. In 2006, the Christian chapel at Canadian Forces Base Halifax was expanded to include a multifaith worship space called "The Gathering Place." In 2007, Canadian Forces Base Shilo established "The Faith Centre" to meet the needs of non-Christian groups on the base. It also houses an Indigenous "Circle of Unity Lodge," providing sweat lodge ceremonies and other services.

In 2022, Marie-Claire Khadij became the first humanist chaplain in recognition of the growing number of people who are spiritual but not religious. Today, members can wear symbols of their faith, like turbans and beards for Sikhs, hijabs and looser-fitting uniforms for Muslim women, and traditional long braids for Indigenous members. They can receive special meals, such as Kosher, Halal, or vegetarian options, and take time for prayer and religious holidays when possible.

Chaplains help make sure these rights are respected and can connect members to spiritual leaders outside the military if needed.

Faith, Values, and Military Life Today

Today, the Canadian Forces understand that faith and spirituality mean different things to different people. For some, religion is a source of strength and guidance. For others, personal values are more important than religious beliefs.

Chaplains still offer religious support, but they also help with emotional and moral concerns for all members, regardless of belief. The military has also created rules to prevent discrimination based on religion—or on not having a religion.

Looking Ahead

As Canada changes, so will its military. Faith and religious diversity remain important for making sure all service members feel respected, supported, and valued—for who they are and what they believe.