

A Muslim Is About to Minister to the Spiritual Needs of 14,000 Soldiers

Later this year, U.S. Army Lt. Col. Khallid Shabazz will become the nation's first division-level chaplain—responsible for the spiritual well-being of 14,000 soldiers of the 7th Infantry Division at Joint Base Lewis-McCord in Washington state—who is Muslim.

Most of those soldiers he will be responsible for ministering to are Christians.

Just how out of the ordinary would this be? According to *Military Times*, although there are about 8,000 Muslims in the military—constituting about one-quarter of one percent of the nation's armed forces—there are just five Muslim chaplains in the Army and 10 total in all of the branches. The newspaper also published a little background about the chaplain:

Michael Barnes, a devout Christian raised in Louisiana, converted to Islam and took the name Khallid Shabazz. He said he felt a deep connection with the tenets of Islam, such as the absence of clerical hierarchy and the focus on charity.

Shabazz's conversion to Islam initially did not go over well with his family. Now, they tease him about praying on time and they make him a special gumbo—minus the pork.

Shabazz also emphasizes that such gestures must go both ways.

"I do still go to church with my family—that's an important part of reaching across the aisle," he said. "It would be improper for me to disrespect something that instilled in me

so much of who I am.”

Shabazz has now served 26 years in the Army, including 18 years as a chaplain. Over the years, he has counseled scores of soldiers, the majority of which have sought assistance for alcoholism and relationship problems. Some have refused to work with Shabazz because of his Muslim faith, but Shabazz says it doesn't bother him, and that he lives by the chaplain's motto of “perform or provide.”

But even if Shabazz is a former Christian, how can a predominantly Christian community of soldiers be led by a non-Christian chaplain? It's an issue rarely explored by theologians, but it would seem fraught with spiritual peril for everyone involved. {eoa}