Commemorating the Four Chaplains

Jew, Protestant, Catholic: America realizing its diversity

Guide for Programming

Courtesy of the Chapel of the Four Chaplains
Introduction

The Four Chaplains, also referred to as the “Immortal Chaplains” or the “Dorchester Chaplains,” were four United States Army chaplains who gave their lives to save other civilian and military personnel as the troop ship U.S. Army Transport (USAT) Dorchester sank on Feb. 3, 1943, during World War II. They helped other soldiers board lifeboats and gave up their own life jackets when the supply ran out. The chaplains joined arms, said prayers, and sang hymns as they went down with the ship.

This event was the catalyst for Americans to embrace interfaith understanding. Until the Dorchester, there was no mention in print of Catholics, Protestants and Jews working together in this manner, especially in prayer. It was a transformational moment for America, the first time all three denominations were recognized by the mainstream population as serving together and with common purpose.

Many communities participate in events on or near Four Chaplains Day (Feb. 3) as a way of remembering the sacrifice of these men and to honor their legacy. The following are suggestions for programs, lessons, and discussions on the legacy of the Four Chaplains. As survivors of the USAT Dorchester began recounting their experience, the actions of the chaplains in the face of grave danger stood out. Each chaplain made the decision to help a fellow soldier, not asking about his religion or beliefs, leaving the world with the message of “Interfaith in Action,” the line included on the stamp commemorating the chaplains. These programs and discussion topics are meant to guide a community in exploring that legacy.
Background Information

Who Were the Four Chaplains?
The relatively new chaplains all held the rank of first lieutenant. They included a Methodist minister, Rev. George L. Fox; a Rabbi Alexander D. Goode, of the Reform movement; a Roman Catholic priest, Rev. John P. Washington; and Reformed Church in America minister, Rev. Clark V. Poling. Their backgrounds, personalities, and faiths were different, although Goode, Poling and Washington had all served as leaders in the Boy Scouts of America. They met at the Army Chaplains School at Harvard University, where they prepared for assignments in the European theater, sailing on board USAT Dorchester to report to their new assignments.

The Story
USAT Dorchester left New York on Jan. 23, 1943, en route to Greenland, carrying the four chaplains and approximately 900 others, as part of a convoy of three ships.

The ship’s captain, Hans J. Danielsen, had been alerted that Coast Guard sonar had detected a submarine. Because German U-boats were monitoring sea lanes and had attacked and sunk ships earlier during the war, Captain Danielsen had the ship’s crew on a state of high alert even before he received that information, ordering the men to sleep in their clothing and keep their life jackets on. Many soldiers sleeping deep in the ship’s hold disregarded the order because of the engine’s heat. Others ignored it because the life jackets were uncomfortable.

During the early morning hours of Feb. 3, 1943, at 12:55 a.m., the German submarine U-223 off Newfoundland in the North Atlantic torpedoed the vessel, which knocked out the Dorchester’s electrical system, leaving the ship dark. Panic set in among the men on board, many of them trapped below decks. The chaplains sought to calm the men and organize an orderly evacuation of the ship, and helped guide wounded men to safety.
As I swam away from the ship, I looked back. The flares had lighted everything. The bow came up high and she slid under. The last thing I saw, the four chaplains were up there praying for the safety of the men. They had done everything they could. I did not see them again. They themselves did not have a chance without their life jackets.

—Grady Clark, survivor

One witness, Pvt. William B. Bednar, found himself floating in oil-smeared water surrounded by dead bodies and debris. “I could hear men crying, pleading, praying,” Bednar recalls. “I could also hear the chaplains preaching courage. Their voices were the only thing that kept me going.”

Another sailor, Petty Officer John J. Mahoney, tried to reenter his cabin but Rabbi Goode stopped him. Mahoney, concerned about the cold Arctic air, explained he had forgotten his gloves.

“Never mind,” Goode responded. “I have two pairs.” The rabbi then gave the petty officer his own gloves. In retrospect, Mahoney realized that Rabbi Goode was not conveniently carrying two pairs of gloves, and that the rabbi had decided not to leave the Dorchester.

As life jackets were passed out, the supply ran out before each man had one. The chaplains removed their own life jackets and gave them to others. They helped as many men as they could into lifeboats, and then linked arms and, saying prayers and singing hymns, went down with the ship.

According to some reports, survivors could hear different languages mixed in the prayers of the chaplains, including Jewish prayers in Hebrew and Catholic prayers in Latin.

Some 230 of the 904 men aboard the ship were rescued. Life jackets offered little protection from hypothermia, which killed most men in the water. The water temperature was 34 °F (1 °C) and the air temperature was 36 °F (2 °C). By the time additional rescue ships arrived, “hundreds of dead bodies were seen floating on the water, kept up by their life jackets.”
Commemorating the Four Chaplains

Awards
On Dec. 19, 1944, all four chaplains were posthumously awarded the Purple Heart and the Distinguished Service Cross.

Congress also attempted to confer the Medal of Honor on each of the four chaplains, but the stringent requirements for that medal required heroism performed “under fire,” and the bravery and ultimate sacrifice of these men did not technically qualify, since their actions took place after the torpedo attack. Therefore, members of Congress decided to authorize a special medal intended to have the same weight and importance as the Medal of Honor. This award, the Four Chaplains’ Medal, was approved by a unanimous act of Congress on July 14, 1960, through Public law 86-656 of the 86th Congress. The medals were presented posthumously to the next of kin of each of the four chaplains by Secretary of the Army Wilber M. Brucker at Ft. Myer, Virginia on Jan. 18, 1961.

Remembering the Four Chaplains

Four Chaplains Day
In 1988, Feb. 3 was established by a unanimous act of Congress as an annual “Four Chaplains Day.” Some state or city officials commemorate the day with official proclamations, sometimes including the order that flags fly at half-staff in memory of the fallen chaplains.

Commemorative Stamp
The chaplains were honored with a commemorative stamp issued in 1948, and designed by Louis Schwimmer, the head of the Art Department of the New York branch of the U.S. Post Office Department (now called the USPS). This stamp is highly unusual, because until 2011, U.S. stamps were not normally issued in honor of someone other than a president of the United States until at least 10 years after his or her death.

Chapel of Four Chaplains
The Chapel of the Four Chaplains was dedicated on Feb. 3, 1951, by President Harry S. Truman to honor these chaplains of different faiths in the basement of Grace Baptist church in Philadelphia. The Chapel of the Four Chaplains is currently located in Philadelphia, Pa., part of the Navy yard, after years of searching for a permanent location.

In his 1951 dedication speech, the president said, “This interfaith shrine... will stand through long generations to teach Americans that as men can die heroically as brothers so should they live together in mutual faith and goodwill.”
Programming Ideas

Memorial Service Commemorating Four Chaplains Day

This service, held on or close to Feb. 3, is often a multi-faith one, designed and led by clergy throughout a community. It is a time for religious groups to come together and remember the chaplains who placed the lives of others, regardless of religion, before their own. The service can take place at a different location each year, demonstrating cooperation between faith groups. It may also be an opportunity to honor those in the community who work toward interfaith understanding.

When setting the space for the ceremony, many groups have items that symbolize the four men who died. Four candles, a picture of each chaplain, or four easels each holding a life vest to symbolize the ones worn and removed by each chaplain can serve as such symbols.

A sample ceremony can be found below. Ceremonies can be adapted to reflect the community.

1. **Posting of Colors** – This is performed by a color guard. The term “colors” refers to the flag of the United States, as well as flags for each branch of service – Army, Navy, Air Force, Marines and Coast Guard, used for ceremonial events. For information on contacting military color guards for this ceremony, please see the resources section (page 11).

2. **Pledge of Allegiance and National Anthem**

3. **Opening remarks** – If this ceremony is taking place as an interfaith program, the clergy person “hosting” the ceremony that year can deliver these remarks.

4. **Present the story of the four chaplains** – Ask one or two people to read an abbreviated version of the story. The version included in this guide can be used.

5. **Featured speaker or honoree** – This person may be a leader in the community on interfaith understanding or someone who promotes interfaith work on a national level.

6. **Recognition of the four chaplains** – If possible, each chaplain can be represented by a clergy person from that chaplain’s faith group: Catholic, Protestant, and Jewish. The selfless act of the chaplains handing over their life vests to others can be reenacted, with each clergy person silently taking a life vest and putting it on another person.
7. **Closing** – It is appropriate to end the ceremony with a closing benediction or prayer, given by another clergy person that reflects the interfaith nature of the program. The ceremony ends with the retiring of the colors by the color guard. The prayer and any closing remarks should happen before the colors are paraded out of the room.

**Interfaith Dialogue Program**

The Four Chaplains demonstrated that in times of crisis, it is important to come together and help others, regardless of their religious background. Communities can hold a program encouraging dialogue and planning for how they handle communal tragedy. Using the example set by the Four Chaplains as a starting point, community faith leaders can discuss how places of worship, religious schools, lay leadership and clergy can work together in difficult times to support the community.

The provided discussion topics can serve as a starting point for a panel, but each community should decide the goal of the discussion – whether that is to open lines of communication between faith groups, to continue an ongoing relationship, or address a specific issue in the community.

**Identifying “Unsung Heroes” in Community**

A multi-age program can be developed that teaches children and teens about recognizing and acknowledging people in the community who are “unsung heroes” such as caregivers, medical staff, teachers, religious community lay leaders, etc.

Students would identify and interview these people in the weeks leading up to the program, invite them to the program, which may include a small ceremony of recognition, a brief narrative on the Four Chaplains and why these people are being recognized at this time.

**Learning about Military Chaplains and Chaplaincy**

Invite military chaplains to your community to speak about their experiences. Contact JWB Jewish Chaplains Council, jwb@jcca.org, for more information on connecting with chaplains.

Other guests may include current military personnel and veterans to speak about their experiences with chaplains or how they experienced their faith while in the military.
Text study
The texts included here are segments of larger texts. Use these segments as a way to start a conversation about the work of a chaplain in times of danger and the way chaplains may use prayer to help others.

“They were swifter than eagles, they were stronger than lions.”
(II Samuel 1:23)

This section of the verse is from a longer eulogy for Saul and Jonathan, who died in battle. This verse is also on the Jewish Chaplains Memorial at Arlington National Cemetery. Why are the images of eagles and lions used when talking about those who lost their lives in battle? Saul and Jonathan were actively engaged in battle, but chaplains are non-combatants (do not engage in battle). How does the verse resonate for chaplains?

“Magnified and sanctified is God’s great name in the world created according to God’s will.”
(Mourner’s Kaddish)

The Mourner’s Kaddish, a prayer said by someone in mourning or commemorating the death of a loved one, does not explicitly mention death or dying. Instead, the prayer establishes a relationship between God and people who are looking for comfort and reassurance. How does this message of reassurance connect with the acts of the four chaplains?
Start a Discussion
These topics and questions can be used with groups of varying sizes or panel discussions. The topics are ones that are often used when discussing the Four Chaplains.

**Heroism**
*How do we define “hero” in today’s world?*
We often list athletes or entrepreneurs as our heroes. How do we differentiate between admiration for a person’s talents or achievements and heroism?
*How can faith inspire acts of heroism?*

**Interfaith in Action**
*What are similarities in the faith groups in your community?*
What are some recent programs or projects where different faith groups worked together?
*What are ways your community engages with people of other faiths?*

**Role of Chaplains and Clergy**
*How can faith comfort a person in a time of crisis?*
What parts of your faith do you turn to in difficult times?
*How does your faith inspire you to reach out to others?*
While the Dorchester was sinking, why do you think the soldiers turned to the chaplains? Why do their actions stand out from those of others aboard the ship?
Jewish Chaplains Memorial at Arlington National Cemetery

Chaplains Hill at Arlington National Cemetery commemorates the lives and sacrifices of chaplains dating back to the First World War. In 1926, chaplains who served in World War I dedicated the Chaplains Monument to 23 chaplains who died in that war. A memorial to Protestant Chaplains who died in World Wars I and II was dedicated in 1981 and a monument to Catholic Chaplains who died in World War II, Korea, and Vietnam was dedicated in 1989.

Since 1917, 14 Jewish chaplains have died while serving our country, yet no memorial existed to honor them, like the ones recognizing their Christian counterparts. JWB took the lead, and with the help of other organizations, spearheaded the effort to create such a memorial. In an almost unprecedented legislative success, JWB pushed through bills in both houses of Congress to create such a memorial, which passed unanimously and virtually simultaneously. On Oct. 24, 2012 the monument honoring the 14 Jewish chaplains who died in the service of the United States was formally dedicated. We are honored to have been a leader in the effort to dedicate a memorial to fallen Jewish chaplains at Arlington National Cemetery.
Resources

*The Four Chaplains: Sacrifice at Sea* (Documentary, 2004) available on YouTube

*No Greater Love: The Four Chaplains and the Sinking of the Dorchester* (Documentary, available through [americanveteranscenter.org/radio](http://americanveteranscenter.org/radio))

*No Greater Glory: The Immortal Four Chaplains and the Sinking of the Dorchester in World War II*

Dan Kurzman (Random House paperback edition, 2005)

Four Chaplains Memorial Foundation [fourchaplains.org](http://fourchaplains.org)

JWB Jewish Chaplains Council [jcca.org/jwb](http://jcca.org/jwb)

A Color Guard, Honor Guard, military bands, and speakers may be requested for events. If your JCC is located near a large military base, contact the public affairs officer for that base. JCCs can also contact the public affairs office for the National Guard for their state.
JWB Jewish Chaplains Council
Serving Jews Who Serve

a signature program of

JCC Association of North America

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Connect with Us
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JWB Jewish Chaplains Council

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