

Baptist chaplain in Kuwait seeks conversation-starters

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By George Henson

Staff Writer

KUWAIT—A Texas Baptist chaplain in Kuwait is looking homeward for help in his ministry to soldiers far from home.

Rick Brunson, former pastor of Friendship Baptist Church in Weatherford, serves as chaplain for the Task Force 1st Battalion 6th Infantry Regiment.

Brunson, who was a pastor 13 years in Texas, Louisiana and Florida, said he approaches the troops in his battalion much as he did his congregations.

“I never approach a soldier by beating him over the head with a Bible. I find out his needs and minister accordingly,” Brunson said in an e-mail interview.

Meeting those needs requires some stateside assistance. When he was transported to Kuwait, space was at a premium with no room for excess baggage. Also, he was unsure what resources would be at his disposal when he arrived. “We hoped for the moon but mostly got sand—lots and lots of sand,” he said.

Consequently, soldiers need cough lozenges and eye drops. Baby wipes-showers often are not available-also come in handy, along with facial tissue, hand sanitizer and personal toiletry items, he noted.

Soldiers also enjoy snack items in individual packages-anything from chips to candy to jerky, he added. Soldiers lack any means to cook individual meals, so uncooked food cannot be used.

Many soldiers have DVD players or a laptop for playing movies, so any kind of DVD entertainment is appreciated, Brunson said. Books and magazines also are requested.

“We have a small store here, but supplies are often limited, and lines can be extremely long,” he explained. “A few weeks ago, we had an additional 20,000 soldiers in camp. We were waiting in lines for hours for everything from meals to making purchases at the PX. Everyone did their best, but supplies did not meet the demand.”

All the items requested come under the military heading of morale, welfare and recreation resources. While these giveaways help Brunson open the door for conversation, they are in short supply.

“I have had a great success with my soldiers as I distribute morale items to them. They are much more open and accepting of the ministry I provide because I'm scratching where they itch,” Brunson said.

“When I hand out items to the soldiers, some will reply by saying, 'Thanks, Chappy!' Others will ask, 'Hey, Chappy, got a minute?' Those are the opportunities I seek.”

Those intimate conversations are vastly different than public prayers Brunson often is called on to deliver in interfaith settings.

“I use discretion when I offer public prayers, because there are so many

faith groups present. I usually close my public prayers with 'the name of our Lord and Shepherd.' I have too much reverence for the name of Jesus to use it as a battering ram to prove a point," he said.

"When I pray with soldiers on a personal level, everything is different. I always ask if I can pray for the soldier. In my six years as a chaplain, I've only been told 'no' once.

"To non-Christians I always explain that I will be praying to my God, and his name is Jesus. Then I ask permission to pray to my God for them. So far, I have never been told no."

Wiccans, atheists, Native American shamans and followers of other faiths readily have accepted prayers in Jesus' name, he noted.

"On more than one occasion, I have had commanders with no religious faith to ask me to pray for their soldiers before going on missions or exercises. That only happens by loving soldiers in Jesus' name instead of trying to shove his name down their throats," Brunson said.

Tangible results are beginning to be seen. "When I came to my battalion, very few of my soldiers attended any church service. Now I lead two contemporary services each Sunday and at times preach at a third service. My soldiers are embracing the gospel, and others are becoming more open to lead their buddies to the Lord," Brunson said.

Brunson offered recent examples of lives changed by the gospel, such as a soldier who approached him, asking to talk. The soldier had been getting into trouble a lot-nothing big, but enough to get him unwanted attention from his superiors. The 30-year-old soldier hadn't really accomplished much with his life, and when Brunson asked about his plans for the future, he said he didn't have any plans.

"I shared my call experience and the education required to become a

pastor/chaplain in order to get him to understand the need to set big goals and then see them happen through small increments," Brunson said.

"When I finished my story, the soldier replied, 'I've been running from God for six years. The Lord called me into ministry then, and I've done everything possible to mess up my life in order to avoid what he wanted me to do. Your story is my story, and I know what I need to do.'"

The soldier rededicated his life to Christ and called to tell his wife. "She was ecstatic," Brunson said. "She was ready to leave him because of his constant problems. Now, their marriage has a new life as they will both begin a new life."

Brunson also recalled a staff sergeant who previously had not expressed a need for his ministry. "He told me he watched his dad die a number of years ago. He begged God to spare his dad's life, but the prayer was not answered. At that point, he blamed/cursed God and became a very angry person. He is a great soldier and leader, but his family life has suffered greatly," Brunson said.

"Since his father's death, the soldier has been through two marriages, numerous other rocky relationships, an attempted suicide, and other attempts to kill himself through alcohol and binge drinking. "Less than an hour ago, the soldier accepted Jesus as his Savior and Lord. He now sees God as a wounded healer who will help him through his pain instead of the source of the pain.

"God is making a difference, one soldier at a time."

To send Brunson items to assist in his ministry, mail them to Chaplain (Captain) Rick Brunson, TF 1-6 Infantry, HHC, 1-6 INF, APO AE 09930.