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Religious and Spiritual Care in the Slovenian Armed Forces: A Scoping Literature Review

Religiozna in duhovna oskrba v Slovenski vojski: pregled obsega literature

Abstract: Religious and spiritual care of the Armed Forces has been known since time immemorial. In modern times, ongoing wars and conflicts emphasise the importance of the development and readiness of support systems that armies around the world have. In light of that, a scoping literature review¹ was prepared to examine the current state of the provision of religious and spiritual care in the Slovenian Armed Forces (SAF): to determine research already conducted on religious and spiritual care within the SAF, to identify practices, feedback, and needs regarding spiritual support for SAF members, and, through the findings and recommendations for the future, to ensure the effectiveness and quality of religious and spiritual care in the SAF.

Keywords: Slovenian Armed Forces (SAF), literature review, welfare support, spiritual care, religious care, pastoral care, military chaplains, pastoral assistants

Povzetek: Verska in duhovna oskrba oboroženih sil je znana od vekomaj. V sodobnem času nenehne vojne in spopadi poudarjajo pomen razvoja in pripravljenosti podpornih sistemov, ki jih imajo vojske po vsem svetu. V luči tega je bil pripravljen pregled literature, s katerim smo želeli preučiti stanje na področju zagotavljanja verske in duhovne oskrbe v Slovenski vojski (SV): ugotoviti že opravljene raziskave o verski in duhovni oskrbi v SV, opredeliti prakse, povratne informacije in potrebe glede duhovne podpore pripadnikom SV, z ugotovitvami in priporočili za prihodnost pa zagotoviti učinkovitost in kakovost verske in duhovne oskrbe v SV.

Ključne besede: Slovenska vojska (SV), pregled literature, celostna oskrba, duhovna oskrba, religiozna oskrba, pastoralna oskrba, vojaški kaplani, pastoralni asistenti

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1. Introduction

Current ongoing wars have highlighted the importance of the national Armed Forces and their internal support systems that need to keep up with the times with new developments and strategic advantages. (Brožič 2024, 1) This does not include only preparations for such and similar interventions but also in the sense of having an appropriate strategic advantage in the modern theatre of war. One of the fundamental forms of support that cannot be overlooked is the spiritual and religious care of the military personnel. Armed forces are not considered complete unless a representative of religion accompanies them, a practice which has been known since time immemorial (Krug 1978, 1): priests have been present in the armies of all great civilisations (e.g. Greece, Roman Empire, Egypt, Persia), through medieval times, up until today (VVIK 2010, 15; Mladenović 2012, 4).

1.1 Spiritual Needs in the Military in the Modern Context

Examining the modern context, the Western World has been often described as “secular” or “pluralist” in terms of religion and spirituality. (Best et al. 2024, 290). In the last decades, secularisation has also become acknowledged among defence forces around the globe. The Christian religious affiliation of defence forces personnel has led many countries around the world to question the legitimacy of the chaplaincy service. According to Layson et al. (2022, 1157), the view that the chaplaincy service should be terminated and other, non-religious models put forward, has often been expressed, even among NATO members (e.g. Estonia) (ERR 2021).

Despite different argumentations, we can recognise several models and approaches to spiritual and religious care that can be explored within the contemporary military context:

- a. Chaplaincy model: The chaplaincy is often seen as a pillar of spiritual support in defence forces as it is the most common approach for providing religious and spiritual care to military personnel. Their service corresponds with the WHO’s “spiritual care intervention plan” including spiritual support, spiritual rituals and assessment, counselling, guidance and education as well as other allied health spiritual care interventions. (Layson et al. 2022, 1158)
- b. Holistic/humanist/non-religious spiritual care: Some military units have adopted a more inclusive approach to cover multi-faith chaplaincy and non-religious, humanist/holistic approaches that provide support and comfort to military personnel. Through these means, “pastoral care itself works under a broad framework to provide support to the inner world of individuals from many worldview models” (Styles 2024, 66).
- c. Peer support networks: Some studies have highlighted the role of peer networks (PSPs) in providing spiritual care and moral support. These informal support systems, where service members support each other spiritually and mentally, have been shown to be effective, particularly in the absence of formal chaplaincy ser-

vices or when soldiers feel more comfortable seeking help from their peers. (Brown 2010; Pfeiffer et al. 2012)

Today, chaplains and/or pastoral assistants² are tasked not only with offering religious support (facilitating access to religious services, prayer, meditation, and other spiritual practices that can enhance resilience) but also with addressing broader aspects of spiritual well-being, including emotional (helping service members cope with the psychological toll of military service, including deployment, combat, and separation from family) and psychological resilience (providing a framework for dealing with the ethical dilemmas and moral injuries that may arise during combat or wartime, helping individuals find purpose and meaning in their roles as soldiers, especially in difficult or traumatic situations) as a consequence of a growing awareness of the mental health challenges in the military, such as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), moral injury, and the psychological effects of combat. (Smith-MacDonald et al. 2018)

It is important to point out that

“the association between positive spirituality/religious beliefs and wellbeing is clearly documented in the scientific literature. Research has identified the benefits of maintaining spiritual and religious wellbeing to support physical, mental, and social health. These include stress reduction, significantly lower rates of depression and reduced risk of dying by suicide, lower rates of substance abuse, improved adjustment to disability, and higher rates of overall wellbeing, meaning and purpose, resilience and hope.” (Best et al. 2024, 290)

1.2 Religious and Spiritual Care in the Slovenian Armed Forces

The first attempts to establish spiritual and pastoral care in the Slovenian Armed Forces (abbreviated as SAF) date back to the 1990s when the first steps were taken towards the spiritual care of military personnel and the establishment of a Military Vicariate (Slov. *Vojaški vikariat Slovenske vojske*, hereinafter VVIK) (VVIK 2005, 29–31; Uradni list RS, no. 36/92). In September and October 2000, two agreements were signed: firstly, the “Agreement between the Slovenian Bishops’ Conference and the Government of the Republic of Slovenia on spiritual care for military personnel in the SAF” (2000), and secondly, the “Agreement between the Government of the Republic of Slovenia and the Evangelical Church” (2000). After that, spiritual care started to gradually progress with appointed chaplains and pastoral assistants.

In 2002, Article 52 of the Defence Act (Uradni list RS, no. 47/2002) was amended to state that “a military person shall have the right to religious spiritual care during military service. The organisation of religious spiritual care and the manner in which the right to such care is exercised shall be determined by the Minister.”

² Pastoral assistants are sometimes also known as religious affairs specialists or pastoral associates.

In 2003, the first “Regulations on the organisation of religious spiritual care in Armed Forces” came into effect (Uradni list RS, no. 36/2003). In 2007, Article 22 of the Freedom of Religion Act (Uradni list RS, no. 14/07) ensured that “members of the Slovenian Armed Forces have the right to religious and spiritual care during military service in accordance with the regulations on military service and national defence.”

Three years later, the “Directive on the operation of the Military Chaplaincy in the Commands, Units and Institutes of the SAF” (no. 804-36/2010-10) was issued (Jakopič 2020, 109).

In 2023, the Slovenian Armed Forces Service Act (Uradni list RS, no. 40/23) was amended. The Act lays down the principles of military service, regulates the manner in which the tasks of the Slovenian Armed Forces are performed, the basic relations in the performance of military service, the special rights, obligations and responsibilities of members of the Slovenian Armed Forces during military service, and the overall care of members of the Slovenian Armed Forces, including spiritual care (Articles 22 and 83).

Military chaplains and pastoral assistants are trained according to NATO standards, which are divided into three parts: physical abilities, military training, and academic training, and ensure that the religious personnel are prepared for any possible situation (VVIK 2005, 79).

In the 25 years of its operation, the mission of the SAF Military Vicariate has been to (Jakopič 2020, 109–110; Kocjančič 2021a, 169–176):

- provide spiritual, ethical, and moral support to SAF members and their family members while ensuring dignity and protection for every member.
- participate in the training of SAF members before departure to international operations and missions (IOM), providing spiritual and pastoral care while on IOMs and after their return from IOM.
- provide liturgical services and participate in other commemoration ceremonies.
- provide training to chaplains and pastoral assistants on the national and international levels.
- participate in veteran-organised events and hold services to commemorate deceased members of the SAF.
- cooperate in humanitarian activities.

1.3 Purpose and Aims

Historical overviews of the development of spiritual care in the armed forces have been, and still are, the most frequently presented studies in Slovenia, as well as abroad. In Slovenia, these either provide short general overviews of the development of spiritual care (Plut 2002) or are specifically linked to the historical period and the Slovenian space (Šimac 2022; 2024); some treatises go beyond borders and present the story of individual priests – military chaplains (2020).

The topic of religious and spiritual care in the armed forces in the contemporary era has not received much attention in Slovenia so far, especially not from a

scientific point of view. This, of course, implies a lack of literature in this field, as Klemen Kocjančič pointed out in 2021 (Kocjančič 2021b, 104), since only a few researchers have so far addressed the topic. The opposite can be said of the situation abroad, where the topic of spiritual care of members of the armed forces is becoming more and more relevant, a fact which is also supported by the growing number of scientific publications. The mentioned trend is especially marked among NATO member countries since NATO STO has been placing more and more importance on the spiritual dimension of military health and resilience in recent years. (America's Navy 2023; NATO STO [s. a.]; CCEE [s. a.])

The lack of studies makes it unclear what kind of information on the topic is available in the Slovenian literature, particularly on the questions of what the religious and spiritual care needs of the SAF members are, how are they addressed, and what kind of feedback is given by SAF members. For these reasons, we decided to conduct a scoping review of the available literature to systematically map the research done in this area, to determine the current status of religious and spiritual care in the Slovenian Armed Forces, and to identify any existing gaps and needs to provide further guidelines for much-needed research in the field. The following research question was formulated: *What is the current state of research on religious and spiritual care within the SAF, and what are the identified practices, feedback, and needs regarding spiritual support for SAF members?*

2. Methods

For this study, we applied the PRISMA-ScR extension for scoping reviews, published in 2018 (Tricco et al. 2018). The review followed Arksey and O'Malley's methodological framework for scoping studies, published in 2005 (Arksey et al. 2005), using the five described stages: a) identifying the research question, b) identifying relevant studies, c) study selection, d) charting and collating, and e) summarising and reporting the results (22).

2.1 Identifying the Research Question

Besides identifying the main research question, additional focus-guided questions were formed:

- What are the specific religious and spiritual support services currently offered to SAF personnel?
- What impact does spiritual care have on the mental well-being, morale, and readiness of SAF personnel?
- What feedback have SAF members provided about the availability and accessibility of religious services or spiritual support?
- What are the main challenges faced by the SAF in delivering effective religious and spiritual care to its personnel? Are there any gaps in the current spiritual care provisions, and what needs are currently unmet?

2.2 Identifying Relevant Studies, Study Selection and Charting the Data

Since the analysis is focused on the situation in Slovenia, the main database used to retrieve material was the Slovenian National Library Information System COBISS. Regarding inclusion/exclusion, no criteria were placed on year or type; however, inclusion criteria were put on language (Slovenian or English). Following a full scoping review, articles and other resources (literature, peer-reviewed literature, newspaper/magazine articles, video/audio clips, webpages, etc.) were included in this review. However, we were aware that due to inadequate phrasing, there might be existing material that is not included in the COBISS database or that was not found with the keywords and key phrases used.

The search query consisted of keywords and key phrases including the terms “spiritual care,” “pastoral care,” “military vicariate,” “military chaplain,” “military vicar,” “holistic spiritual care,” “humanist spiritual care,” “religious needs,” “spiritual support,” “religious diversity,” “pastoral assistant,” “research,” and “mental well-being” in Slovenian and English. These terms were referenced with the term “Slovenian Armed Forces” using the Boolean operator “AND” (see Tables 1).

| Key Words with Boolean Operator | Key Words with Boolean Operator |
|--|--|
| Duhovna oskrba AND Slovenska vojska | Spiritual care AND Slovenian Armed Forces |
| Pastoralna oskrba AND Slovenska vojska | Pastoral care AND Slovenian Armed Forces |
| Vojaški vikariat AND Slovenska vojska | Military vicariate AND Slovenian Armed Forces |
| Vojaški kaplan AND Slovenska vojska | Military chaplain AND Slovenian Armed Forces |
| Vojaški vikar AND Slovenska vojska | Military vicar AND Slovenian Armed Forces |
| Pastoralni asistent AND Slovenska vojska | Pastoral assistant AND Slovenian Armed Forces |
| Humanistična duhovna oskrba AND Slovenska vojska | Humanist spiritual care AND Slovenian Armed Forces |
| Holistična duhovna oskrba AND Slovenska vojska | Holistic spiritual care AND Slovenian Armed Forces |
| Verske potrebe AND Slovenska vojska | Religious needs AND Slovenian Armed Forces |
| Duhovna podpora AND Slovenska vojska | Spiritual support AND Slovenian Armed Forces |
| Verska raznolikost AND Slovenska vojska | Religious diversity AND Slovenian Armed Forces |
| Raziskava AND Slovenska vojska | Research AND Slovenian Armed Forces |
| Duševno zdravje AND Slovenska vojska | Mental well-being AND Slovenian Armed Forces |

Table 1: Searched keywords and key phrases using a Boolean operator in Slovenian and English.

The research was conducted on 15 January 2025 with implementing criteria in the COBISS database. The initial search resulted in 3239 records. The results were imported into EndNote for further work. After duplicates were removed, 1795 results were screened. Based on the screened title, key words, and abstract, only

72 records fit our criteria. Full texts were obtained for eligibility for our study. A total of 22 records were eventually included in our review. The data of the records (author, year, title) were then applied. Results fell into four categories based on the focus-guided questions: practices and structures of religious and spiritual care, moral and ethical support, feedback of SAF members on availability and accessibility, and challenges and needs (see Appendix).



Table 2: Study selection procedure.

3. Results

3.1 Characteristics

The final number of relevant publications was 22 (for details see Appendix). All 22 bibliographic units are available in Slovenian. Four different bibliographic types of records are identified based on COBISS' divisions: theses (n=14), books (n=3), book sections (n=2), and journal articles (n=3). Surprisingly, the theses present 64% of the reviewed material. The results were provided with qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods. Most of the retrieved material is more than five years old.

3.2 Current Practices and Structures of Religious and Spiritual Care in the SAF

The reviewed literature mostly provides similar information on the topic (Plut 2002; Debeljak 2004; Cvetežar 2013; Pregelj 2017; Štemberger 2007; Šebalj 2010a; Bregar 2009; Veselič 2009; VVIK 2005; 2010). As mentioned above, the VVIK follows the chaplaincy model of providing spiritual care to SAF members. The pro-

vision of religious and spiritual care depends on the given circumstances. The methods of implementation are therefore tied to the circumstances, time, and place – peacetime or wartime. (Plut 2002, 236–237)

In peacetime, four categories of receivers can be determined: soldiers, officers, civil employees, and members' families. This, of course, implies service to two general categories: a) military and civilian personnel of the denomination that is represented in the VVIK, and b) military and civilian personnel who do not belong to define their worldview or creed. The ministry of military chaplains and pastoral assistants is thus primarily focused on proclaiming the Gospel, thus helping to preserve the soldier's faith, values, and life. On the other hand, it also provides spiritual support to non-Christian traditions and the non-religious. (Plut 2002, 237–238; Urbanč 2011, 155)

The content of the work takes a strong interdisciplinary direction. "This is not so much a matter of purely religious provision as of embracing the individual in all his or her breadth, wholeness, uniqueness, otherness, and capacity." (Urbanč 2011, 155) The main work consists primarily of the celebration of Holy Mass, the proclamation of faith, and the administration of the sacraments to members of the Christian Churches (Roman Catholic and the Evangelical Church of the Augsburg Confession), while to others they provide contact with the representative of their religion. "Religious personnel are in the area where the member is torn between his conscience, the execution of his mission, and the goals of his family life. This is the uniqueness of the mission and service of the religious personnel among the members." (Urbanč 2011, 156) This is why part of the VVIK's work is organising workshops with spiritual and moral content and creating contacts with families of SAF members (Plut 2002, 239–240; 242).

In wartime, pastoral care is centred on military personnel. Chaplains celebrate Mass and administer the sacraments, offer conversation and confession, assist medical staff, and accompany the wounded. They offer support to the dying and administer the sacraments. In some cases, it is also the religious staff who arrange for the writing of wills. (Plut 2002, 257–259)

Peacekeeping represents an intermediate point between peacetime and wartime. During IOM, SAF members and their family members are cared for by VVIK personnel. The care provided by the religious personnel begins before departure with the training of the departing servicemen on the religion and culture of the area to which they are being deployed. Special attention is paid to the family members who stay at home providing them with consultations and other activities that strengthen the bond and help to ensure its ties during the deployment. (Čolić 2011, 23; Mladenović 2012, i–xxxii)

The flow of information between VVIK staff ensures that shortcomings are addressed, that awareness of co-responsibility is raised, and that care is taken for service members in IOM since the return to the civil environment can present a very stressful situation for members and their families. (Urbanč 2011, 158–159; Čolić 2011, 26)

3.3 Impact of Religious and Spiritual Care on SAF Members Regarding Moral and Ethical Support

Mental well-being and ethical support are provided by different support services of the SAF as a part of welfare support. Spiritual and psychological activity is at the very core, ensuring the strength and resilience of members. (Cverlin 2011, 20; Bregar 2009, 11; Butala 2011, 22; Cvetežar 2013, 54) As for spiritual care, the SAF also provides psychological support to its members in “ensuring the capability and readiness of the Force to fulfil its mission in the national and international military environment. Psychological activity is important both in support of command and in ensuring the performance of the Force.” (Šebalj 2010b, 112)

Spiritual care is most closely related to the ethical and moral value of the dignity of every human being, which must be respected and protected in all circumstances, even when the use of force is permitted. This is why a special field of activity of the staff of the Military Vicariate is providing ethical and moral awareness to SAF members based on the international military and humanitarian laws and ethical principles that underline their work. (VVIK 2010, 10–11) Of course, religious and spiritual care have a huge impact on the moral and ethical support as well as on personal growth, which SAF members (both men and women) have experienced themselves. At the same time, the moral credibility of religious personnel is an effective instrument for instilling and deepening patriotism among SAF members. (Urbanč 2011, 160) The Vicariate’s staff provides trainees with an appreciation of the social, spiritual, ethical, and moral challenges in the military. (Kračun 2007, 40; 43; VVIK 2005, 81; Plut 2002, 264)

Interestingly, Anzeljc (2010, 59) notes that soldiers would prefer to go to a psychologist, or a superior, in a difficult situation, and only last to a chaplain or pastoral assistant. The reasons they give for this are that they trust a professional who is experienced, qualified, and better known. The pastoral worker is considered to be too close to the denomination and not sufficiently qualified to deal with problems. This confirms the idea that the presence of the chaplains and pastoral assistants at home is not as noticeable in comparison with IOM. (Šebalj 2010b, 120; 124)

This finding contradicts the feedback from the soldiers who have participated in IOM (see Juvan et al. 2010). In the situations of distress that soldiers encounter in IOM, chaplains and pastoral assistants are a great moral support in overcoming personal hardship and loneliness, and in talking about homesickness. They are available for moral and ethical support before departure and after arrival with special attention paid to families. (Čolić 2012, 20–22) Soldiers report that they try to resolve their difficulties on their own, and, if possible, they do not turn to a psychologist. Unlike chaplains, psychologists are obliged to record everything in the soldier’s file, while chaplains are bound to confidentiality. (26) IOM are a place of greater self-awareness and awareness of one’s own faith, which is why more sacraments of initiation (baptism, confirmation) are often administered in peace-keeping operations. (Bregar 2009, 78; Čolić 2012, 20) Religious rituals, meditation,

and prayer create a spiritual bond with comrades and families. This provides them with a feeling of comfort and, on a spiritual level, compensates at least a little for absence, while concerning IOM it “can help to facilitate the successful, safe and, consequently, facilitated execution of the mission” (Muršič Klenar 2024, 142).

Prayer is particularly emphasised as a form of “mental exercise” as it helps soldiers internalise the mission with the values and virtues that are important for providing a safe and quality outcome of the mission. On the other hand, it is emphasised that prayer also has a strong communitarian aspect since IOM members make stronger connections with their peers and with their home communities. Prayer can therefore be seen as a strong supportive element of IOM. (Muršič Klenar 2024, 146; Kračun 2007, 41)

Juvan et al. also point out that

“in the course of several years of research on SAF participation in peace-keeping operations, the most problematic issue has been the psychological support of the unit and its members in missions. Indeed, the situation and ratings of psychological support have slightly improved compared to the findings from the first years of the survey, which means that some progress has been made in this area. At the same time, the nature of the work of the psychological service and the purpose of its work in the mission must be taken into account. There may be dissatisfaction on the part of the contingent members if they are not aware of the real purpose of the psychologists’ presence, which is not necessarily to support the members, but primarily to assess their condition and advise the commanding staff.” (Juvan et al. 2010, 204)

Regarding the mental well-being of SAF members, it is important to address the suicides and suicide attempts that are in general a consequence of social isolation and social disorders, which serving in the Armed Forces entails. The SAF has recorded several suicides and suicide attempts throughout the years (Cverlin 2011, 30–35), though the last available data on the situation in Slovenia is more than 15 years old. From the data obtained, suicides among soldiers do not stand out from the Slovenian average, as psychological examinations are carried out regularly. Besides military psychologists who represent the main turning point in such situations, chaplains are also sometimes faced with dealing with suicide attempts. (45)

3.4 Feedback from SAF Members on the Availability and Accessibility of Religious Services or Spiritual Support

Over the years, feedback from SAF members has been provided through research interviews and surveys, most of them small-scale. The exception is the research carried out among contingents deployed for SFOR, KFOR and UNIFIL II (Juvan et al. 2010), four units of the General Staff of the SAF (Kračun 2007), and three battalions of the 1st Brigade of the SAF (Šebalj 2010b), where more than 200 SAF members were surveyed.

3.4.1 Regarding Military Vicariate and its Staff

In a survey carried out in April 2007 among 238 respondents on the awareness of spiritual care in the Slovenian Armed Forces, the majority (65%) of respondents answered “yes.” Most of them had been introduced to it at their workplace or through a supervisor. Most of the respondents were already familiar with a military chaplain or pastoral assistant, and most were involved with chaplains of the Roman Catholic Church. (Kračun 2007, 35; 37–38)

In terms of organised activities, the majority of respondents attended organised lectures (41%) or Holy Mass (35%). Many soldiers rated their cooperation with the Vicariate as very good, emphasising that the staff are approachable and act in the service of the Slovenian Armed Forces (89%). (39–40)

The majority of the SAF medical unit personnel interviewed had met a pastoral assistant through their workplace, on missions, or through the use of the services of a military vicariate. Most of the staff members have a good knowledge of the work of the pastoral service. (Anzeljc 2010, 57) Pastoral assistants are highly sought after in missions because they “offer personal contacts and moral support, to talk and advise in difficult situations, because they are calmer...” (Anzeljc 2010, 59)

3.4.2 Regarding IOM

In a large-scale survey (n=3062) and interviews (n=276) involving different contingents of the Slovenian Armed Forces that participated in IOMs, a decrease in trust in psychological services and an increase in trust in spiritual care was observed in all participating contingents. Only one of the contingents showed a different trend (increased trust in the psychological service). However, soldiers showed strong agreement throughout that both the military psychologist and the military chaplain should always be available on a mission (Juvan et al. 2010, 198), as the chaplains themselves attest, this is the only way to establish genuine trust between the soldiers and the pastoral staff. (Bregar 2009, 79)

The presence of the military vicar and chaplains was very well received by the participants. Despite different levels of religiosity among soldiers, it had no influence on the performance ratings of the military clergy: the priest and his activities were well received by religious and non-religious army personnel and grew through the ongoing mission. (Urbanč 2011, 159–160) “This is proof that the activities of military priests in the SAF have managed to go beyond religious service and have led members to see them as persons they can trust, understand, and will help, rather than as harbingers of religion.” (Juvan et al. 2010, 204)

In the survey on welfare support of SAF members, Šebalj (2010b) also surveyed satisfaction with spiritual care among soldiers participating in IOMs. The results of the evaluation of religious spiritual care were very high, with 61% of the respondents giving a rating of 4 or 5 to statement 5. This shows a very clear objective and well-organised approach to religious spiritual care since the number does not reflect only active believers but the whole participating population. (124)

Soldiers report well-organised religious services in IOM, which are complemented by meditation classes and other organised programmes. For non-Catholic and non-Evangelical members, the Vicariate provides contacts with representatives of other religions and excursions to Orthodox churches and mosques. (Šebalj 2010b, 124; Pregelj 2017, 436; Čolić 2012, 25) "Most military chaplains are known for their unobtrusive interaction with members, various initiatives such as charity campaigns or the organisation of choirs, which have earned their trust irrespective of their religious beliefs." (Šebalj 2010b, 124) Chaplains and pastoral assistants try to mitigate the arrival from the mission by organising one-to-one meetings before the arrival home to help them integrate back into the civilian environment. (Čolić 2012, 26)

3.5 Challenges and Needs of Religious and Spiritual Care to SAF Personnel

In the reviewed literature, the most common challenge was organisational. Most of the literature highlighted the shortage of staff in the Military Vicariate in the pastoral care of the Roman Catholic Church, especially given the lack of personnel concerning the number of peacekeeping missions in which the Slovenian Armed Forces are involved. The missions are mostly carried out by pastoral assistants, while chaplains are in short supply and only partially present in the missions. (Anzeljc 2010, 62; Plut 2002, 288) Next to that, additional reinforcements would enable additional lectures on ethics, which is seen as a common need among personnel. There are already lectures on the topic, but they would like to provide more to sharpen the moral sense and self-control in interdisciplinary relations with physicians, psychologists, and different religious personnel. (Bregar 2009, 73)

The staff of the SAF Military Vicariate also highlighted "the lack of an ecclesiastical-legal structure that would constitute a Military Ordinariate and facilitate the work, mission and organisation of the Military Vicariate." (Anzeljc 2010, 62) The establishment of a Military Ordinariate is also one of the cornerstones of the Vision for the Future of chaplains and pastoral workers, which is a matter of agreement between the Government of the Republic of Slovenia and the Holy See. (Anzeljc 2010, 64; Plut 2002, 280–281)

Concerning ecumenical efforts, some religious communities recall the strict respect for the equal rights of all religious communities. Based on the data of a survey conducted in 2002, to which less than half of the then-registered religious communities responded (13 out of 29 of them), it can be concluded that their inclusion in religious spiritual care for military personnel is not a priority for them. Danijel (2002, 109) sees the reason for this in the small size of the religious communities, which cover only a narrow range of people.

For many of them (85% of respondents) it was acceptable to have a Catholic or Evangelical priest act as a coordinator with other religious communities, and they saw the introduction of the RDOV project as a step forward in the process of democracy. This means that they did not see the need to enforce the agreement

for the spiritual care of military personnel with their religious community. Other Christian denominations (Orthodox, Baptist, Adventist) and the Islamic community are exceptionally represented with a desire to conclude such an agreement (70% of respondents). (108–109)

Kapušin (2009, 81) also presented a potential need for civil-military cooperation in the SAF regarding the welfare support of SAF members. Spiritual and religious care was presented as one of the fields where the civil environment could be more commonly included in the provision.

Kračun (2007, 24; 29–30) also pointed out the always problematic topic of inclusion/exclusion of the Church (religion) in the national military (and police) ranks, which was treated extremely negatively in some newspapers. The other problematic topic is the funding of spiritual care in national institutions of which the armed forces are a part.

4. Discussion

Regarding legal and organisational structures, it was often pointed out that there is a desire to establish a military ordinariate. Today, all major NATO and non-NATO members with a majority Catholic population have in general established a military ordinariate³ (e.g. France, Croatia, Austria, Germany, UK, USA, Chile, etc.) (Čepar 2010; 2014). The legal basis for the establishment of such ordinariate in Slovenia already exists, that is the “Agreement” between Slovenia and the Holy See signed in 2001.

However, discussions for its creation have been ongoing for years and have not yet borne fruit since the religion-state relation is a problematic topic in Slovenia. As Andrejč et al. (2017) pointed out, “the chaplaincy’s future is shaped by the fact that this [Slovenia] is a post-Communist state with a historically Catholic majority affected by a vibrant conflict over secular-religious relationships, a conflict evoked in regular debate between the politically dominant parties of the Left and Right.” Chaplaincy staff are therefore constantly affected, trying to support the diversity among SAF members that is constantly placed on chaplaincy by the polarisation. (39)

Some political parties expressed strong opposition to the current model of providing religious and spiritual care or the establishment of an ordinariate with the argument that “at the very least, we believe that it is necessary to reopen the question of strict respect for the separation of state and church, even for the current model of spiritual care provided by curates – priests of the Catholic Church and civil servants in the service of the Slovenian Armed Forces (SAF).” (Levica 2016)

Those statements, especially concerning the military chaplaincy model, could be supported by the findings of Anzeljc (2010). However, it is important to point out that most military personnel (on the national and international level) do not

³ Interestingly, as a predominantly non-Catholic country, Bosnia and Herzegovina established a military ordinariate in 2010. (Bishops’ Conference of Bosnia and Herzegovina 2025)

always seek help from religious personnel in peacetime / periods of not being exposed to stress or experiencing struggles.

On the other hand, in wartime, seeking help from a chaplain or pastoral assistant is very high. This fact is also supported by the research conducted in many countries, with several records noting that "utilization of chaplaincy services was higher amongst those who experience more serious distress. /.../ In addition to the reasons soldiers sought help from a chaplain, 29.9% reported high levels of combat exposure, 50.8% screened positive for depression, 39.1% had probable PTSD, and 26.6% screened positive for generalized anxiety disorder." (Layson et al. 2022, 1167–1168)

"Utilization of chaplaincy is 'universally viewed' as being critical to wellbeing, especially so for those in the closest proximity to danger. While claiming chaplaincy is 'universally viewed' as being critical may be over stating the case, nevertheless 90.8% of military medical staff in one group agreed that the work of the chaplain is mission essential. /.../ Trust, and therefore utilization, is a result of chaplains maintaining their nonjudgmental, positive attitude, and not 'preaching' or moralising. /.../ Chaplains were not only personally valued by military personnel, but also the resources that chaplains provided were viewed positively by other health professionals. For example, research amongst clinical medical staff at a military hospital reported that 90.8% of respondents agreed chaplains were mission essential, 88.8% agreed that chaplain availability to provide spiritual guidance and emotional comfort was important, and 85.2% agreed that the chaplain/pastoral care service is best qualified to treat spiritual/moral injuries." (Layson et al. 2022, 1168; 1171)

This fact is also confirmed by research conducted among deployed SAF members (Juvan et al. 2010), emphasising that the number of chaplains (and military psychologists) should be increased, especially during IOMs, where they should always be present all the time during missions. As Plut (2002, 288) pointed out, NATO members are working towards each battalion having its own chaplain since some duties may be carried out by pastoral assistants, but some services are, of course, exclusively reserved for the chaplain. "The unwritten standard in the NATO alliance is that there is one priest and his assistant in each battalion, or for every 600 members. In the Slovenian Armed Forces, the staff of the Military Vicariate is assigned to an individual brigade-sized unit." (Mladenović 2012, 23)

Going back to the existing question about chaplaincy as a primary model of religious and spiritual care in the SAF, an international cross-study conducted in 2018 showed very positive results in regard to the military chaplaincy model. Comparing large-scale studies (the number of participants ranged from 2000 up to 22,000), the study concluded that "while further research is needed to identify personnel perspectives, particularly outside of the U.S. context, this scoping review affirms that despite a reduction in religiosity in Western society, there is

little evidence that low religiosity forms a significant barrier to utilizing chaplaincy services, but rather, if chaplaincy were limited or failed to be maintained, it would leave a significant gap in staff wellbeing services.” (Layson et al. 2022, 1176–1177)

“There has always been, and continues to be, personnel within military forces having spiritual/religious affiliations and or beliefs, and despite the fact that those of non-religious beliefs have available the support of non-religious professions (e.g., social workers, psychologists). Person-centred holistic care includes the provision of spiritual care for personnel if and when they feel they need it. Accordingly, one could argue that omitting the provision of spiritual care in a secular setting reduces equity and diversity for people of with S/R convictions. Maintaining religious chaplains provides a balance of care that ensures the holistic well-being of all defence members.” (Layson et al. 2022, 1157)

Regarding the provision of holistic/non-religious support to military personnel, the most frequently suggested recommendation was to integrate chaplaincy services with the broader health programmes of military organisations in terms of “coordinated treatment” “collaborative intervention,” or “collaborative and integrative care” and “the combination of the expertise of chaplains / pastoral counsellors and mental health professionals” (Layson et al. 2022, 1175). In Slovenian terms, that could mean collaborating with psychologists, philosophers, and ethics experts, some of which are already covered by the ZSSloV-B law.

At this point, researchers suggest a biopsychosocial-spiritual (BPSS) model (e.g. the Canadian Model of Occupational Performance and Engagement) “that views the biological, psychological, social, and spiritual dimensions as distinct, yet interconnected and inseparable” (Smith-MacDonald et al. 2018).

To conclude, religious and spiritual care of the armed forces ensures the fulfilment of the fundamental human right set down in Article 18 of the “Declaration of Human Rights.” A citizen can be deprived of this right only in extreme conditions. (UDHR, Article 29) “In the armies of democratic countries, which are based on the rule of law, democracy and respect for fundamental human rights for all, the spiritual care of soldiers is modified and organised into military structures.” (Mladenović 2012, 5) This is also protected by the Geneva Conventions, Article 9 of which states that: “The provisions of the present Convention constitute no obstacle to the humanitarian activities which the International Committee of the Red Cross or any other impartial humanitarian organization may, subject to the consent of the Parties to the conflict concerned, undertake for the protection of wounded and sick, medical personnel and chaplains, and for their relief.”⁴ (GC I., Article 9)

⁴ “The term ‘chaplains’ refers to ‘chaplains attached to the armed forces’ covered by Article 24 and, where applicable, to religious personnel working on the basis of Article 26 or 27.” (GC I, Article 9, Commentary of 2016)

In regard to moral, ethical and psychological support, an important contemporary area involving military chaplains is moral injury, "in which chaplains are often a preferred source of support over mental health providers for military personnel. MI is an increasingly recognised syndrome which can affect serving and retired personnel and often manifests as spiritual and existential distress." (Layson et al. 2022, 1161)

Armed forces around the world (e.g. in Canada) have already introduced so-called Mental Health Chaplains (MHCs)⁵ that offer spiritual and religious expertise, and present a complimentary skill set to service members and interdisciplinary teams.

"With an emphasis on the spiritual domain, MHCs are predominantly focused on S/R processes (e.g., struggles, questions, wounds), barriers that may delimit or impede overall success, as well as S/R resources and practices that can facilitate recovery and resilience. MHCs also use S/R practices (e.g., prayer, meditation, rituals), explore issues of meaning and purpose, work through S/R and existential questions, address fractured worldviews, core beliefs, and relationships, and facilitate movement toward recovery, reconciliation, and restoration. Addressing the spiritual domain in this way not only helps to address and heal specific spiritual wounds but encourages service members to engage in healthy S/R practices and processes that enable them to reach their personal potential." (Smith-MacDonald et al. 2018)

Further, as the understanding of the impact of moral injury increases, so too will the need to utilise faith-based chaplains to address religious and existential distress, as well as a loss of meaning, as current studies showed (e.g. Carey et al. 2016). "There is perhaps no need that more invites the potential for collaborative, integrative care between mental health providers and chaplains than moral injury." (Layson et al. 2022, 1175)

Concerning religious equality, ecumenical challenges pointed out by Danijel (2002) were resolved by Article 22 of the Freedom of Religion Act (2007) that ensures that every soldier has right to religious spiritual care during military service (Kocjančič 2021a, 174).

Regarding civilian-military cooperation, in more recent research, Kocjančič (2021a) especially pointed out the work chaplains and pastoral assistants perform in different aspects of providing welfare support to SAF members at home and on IOM, and to their children, partners, and whole families (172–173). That partly satisfies the needs proposed by Kapušin (2009). Nonetheless, Kocjančič points out that:

⁵ Mental Health Chaplains (MCHs) "provide, upon request, spiritual and pastoral care to every service user, staff member, carer, and visitor, irrespective of a person's spirituality, faith, or beliefs." (NHS Greater Manchester Mental Health 2025) All currently serving chaplains in the SAF could also be described as MCHs.

“Slovenian military priests in the field of civilian-military cooperation in Slovenia and abroad raises a number of questions, the answer to which would be independent and in-depth research carried out on the impact of military priests on the civilian population at home and abroad, the opinions of the civilian population on the activities of military priests, the forms of cooperation between the military vicariate and the governmental and non-governmental organisations in Slovenia and abroad, the role of the military vicariate in the service of the overall care of servicemen, etc.” (Kocjančič 2021a, 177)

4.1 Recommendations for Future Research

Until now, mostly small-scale research studies have been conducted sporadically over the past decades on SAF members, religious and spiritual care, and their relationship with the VVIK. This calls for bigger and more in-depth research of the topic we addressed in the article. Regular feedback on the religious and spiritual care of SAF members should be provided to communicate their needs or satisfaction levels, resulting in an understanding of the effectiveness and reach of spiritual support services within the military. The same goes for the staff working in the VVIK to ensure the quality and effectiveness of their work on the highest possible level.

Regarding the models and approaches to pastoral care in the SAF, the current approach should be reviewed for possible improvements, if any, since the users report high satisfaction levels. Concerning religious plurality, the possibility of introducing a holistic approach besides a psychologist should be debriefed among SAF members. The same applies for the peer-to-peer approach, which could potentially provide a great addition to the welfare support systems, especially after retirement from active military service. Regarding ecumenism and interfaith dialogue, it would be interesting to see the current feedback from the religious communities and to explore what they think the soldiers / their faithful need. This would present a good comparison to the already-known results provided by Danijel (2002).

Regarding welfare support civil-military cooperation, as Kocjančič (2021a) already pointed out, another large-scale study could be conducted to provide feedback on the topic, which would certainly contribute to filling the existing gap.

Concerning Slovenia in the international military perspective, it would be useful to compare Slovenia's religious and spiritual provision with that of the rest of the Balkan countries and with NATO members similar to Slovenia in terms of population, historical situation, and length of NATO membership (e.g. Estonia, Finland). Such a study would give a deeper and more general insight into religious and spiritual care challenges and needs in the contemporary era and, on the other side, emphasise the exchange of good practices and ways to ensure the high quality and effectiveness of support services.

5. Conclusion

In our article, we reviewed how the SAF is ensuring religious and spiritual care among its members, how mental well-being and moral questions are addressed, what the feedback on the topic is, and what the main concerns and needs in relation to religious and spiritual care are. However, research conducted so far has always been small-scale, rarely providing any focused or detailed information. Besides that, we should emphasise that the research carried out so far is outdated, with results more than five years old.

Generally speaking, the research conducted until now has shown that satisfaction levels are high, from the providers as well as from users. Of course, over the years different challenges and needs have emerged that were or are being solved, while the consideration of others is awaited in the future.

Nevertheless, this calls for new research on the topic, if possible large-scale and including as many different subjects as possible. With recommendations for future research, we have tried to provide possible starting points, in the hope of filling the considerable gap the topic has in Slovenian academia and on the other hand, practical guidelines for those directly included in the SAF's support systems. Only in that way, can we ensure the successful, safe and, consequently, facilitated execution of any task SAF members are asked to perform.

Abbreviations

CCEE – Consilium Conferentiarum Episcoporum Europae.

GC I. – Convention (I) for the Amelioration of the Condition of the Wounded and Sick in Armed Forces in the Field. Geneva, 12 August 1949.

IOM(s) – International Operations and Mission(s).

KFOR – NATO's Kosovo Force.

MHC(s) – Mental Health Chaplain(s).

MI – Moral Injury.

NATO STO – NATO Science and Technology Organization.

RDOV – Religious Spiritual Care for Military Personnel [Religiozna duhovna oskrba vojaških oseb].

S/R – Spiritual/Religious.

SAF – Slovenian Armed Forces.

SFOR – NATO's Stabilization Force.

UDHR – Universal Declaration of Human Rights 1948.

UNIFIL II – United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon II.

VVIK – SAF Military Vicariate [Vojaški vikariat Slovenske vojske].

ZSSloV-B – Slovenian Armed Forces Service Act 2023 [Zakon o službi v Slovenski vojski]. 2023.

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Appendix: Included literature with comparison based on focus-guided questions.

| Author | Year | Title | Practices and Structures of Religious and Spiritual Care | Moral and Ethical Support | Feedback from SAF Members on Availability and Accessibility | Challenges and Needs |
|--|------|---|--|---------------------------|---|----------------------|
| Anzeljc, Petra | 2010 | Pastorala v Slovenski vojski | • | • | • | • |
| Bregar, Karmen | 2009 | Duhovna oskrba v Slovenski vojski | • | • | | • |
| Butala, Mojca | 2011 | Posttravmatski stresni sindrom pri udeležencih vojaških misij | | • | | |
| Cverlin, Lucijan | 2011 | Samomori med policisti - primerja- va z vojak | • | • | | |
| Cvetežar, Barbara | 2013 | Sodelovanje pripadnikov Slovenske vojske na mirovni misiji v Maliju | • | • | | |
| Čolić, Romana | 2011 | Duhovna oskrba vojakov na mirov- nih operacijah | • | • | • | |
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