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VESPIIA

FUTURE FRONTLINES

STRATEGY PAPERS FOR AUSTRALIAN HEROES' WELLBEING
A Unified Approach to Chaplaincy in Service



Future Frontlines: Strategy Papers for Australian Heroes' Well-being #4

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ABOUT UWA DSI

The Defence and Security Institute (DSI) is an initiative by The University of Western Australia (UWA). Hosted at UWA, the DSI unifies and focuses UWA's expertise in defence and security research, engagement, and education. Defence and security provide the foundation of our nation's sovereignty. In an era of rapidly evolving geopolitics, this critical area of national policy sits at the forefront of government and public debates.

The DSI plays a central role in helping to develop Australia's sovereign defence capabilities in WA by working with local, state, and federal governments, industry and business, research institutions and the community to help generate solutions towards a peaceful, prosperous and secure Australia and Indo-Pacific region.

ABOUT VESPIIA

The Veterans, Emergency Services & Police Industry Institute of Australia (VESPIIA) stands as the pioneering professional body in Australia, uniquely crafted to champion the tireless efforts of those who support the backbone of our nation—Veterans, Emergency Services, Police, and their families. Serving as a dedicated bastion of support, VESPIIA provides initiatives designed to uplift the organisations, committed staff, and selfless volunteers who tirelessly deliver essential support and programs to the heroes in our communities.

More than a professional body, VESPIIA represents a continuum of service, recognising that supporting those who, in turn, support our service communities is an ongoing commitment. As the institute propels forward, it remains steadfast in its dedication to creating an ecosystem where the supporters of our nation's defenders receive the backing, they need to carry out their noble work effectively and with unwavering commitment. VESPIIA, at its core, is an instrumental force in fortifying the foundation of gratitude, support, and excellence upon which our service communities thrive.

ABOUT THE FRONTLINE FUTURES PAPERS

'Future Frontlines: Papers for Australian Heroes' Well-being' is a series dedicated to advancing the well-being and resilience of our nation's veterans and first responders. In these papers, we explore cutting-edge research and innovative strategies designed to address the unique challenges faced by those who have served and continue to serve on the frontlines.

Our mission is to provide a platform for knowledge sharing, collaboration, and advocacy to ensure that the heroes who protect our communities receive the support and care they deserve. We are committed to fostering a culture of understanding and empowerment, helping our heroes thrive beyond their courageous service to our nation.

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The Future Frontlines Papers are written and edited by Shannon Hennessy, CEO of VESPIIA. Shannon has worked across ex-service organisations, defence industry, WA State Government, and WA State Parliament since 2017. Shannon's career has focused on enhancing the well-being of veterans and their families through innovative psychosocial programming and community-building initiatives. Her work also reflects a profound commitment to recognising and addressing the shared needs of defence and first response personnel and their families.

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INTRODUCTION

Chaplains play a vital but often undervalued role across Australia's defence, emergency services, veteran, and first responder communities.

Whether embedded in operational teams or supporting from the community, chaplains respond to some of the most personal and complex moments in people's lives—supporting grief, trauma, moral injury, transition, and crisis. Yet across sectors, chaplaincy remains fragmented, misunderstood, and inconsistently supported.

On 22 July 2025, VESPIIA hosted a round table in Perth to begin addressing these issues. Titled *Cadre of Padres: A Unified Approach to Chaplaincy in Service*, the session brought together chaplains, agency leaders, denominational bodies, trainers, and sector stakeholders to explore the current state of chaplaincy, identify challenges, and start building toward a more connected, recognised, and well-supported future.

Participants shared a clear and consistent message: chaplaincy work matters, but those doing it are too often working in isolation, without a shared framework, without peer support, and without recognition from the systems around them. There is no central point of connection, no shared language, and no coordinated professional development or advocacy efforts to support the diversity of chaplaincy in service settings. Many chaplains—whether ordained or lay, professional or volunteer—find themselves navigating complex environments with little structural or institutional support.

Importantly, the challenges facing chaplains are not unique to defence or emergency services. Similar issues arise in civilian settings, where lay chaplains—such as those supporting local sporting clubs, schools, or community programs—are often the first point of contact for people in distress, including veterans and their families. These chaplains may not be formally trained, ordained, or connected to a professional structure.

They may be offering a listening ear without an understanding of confidentiality, mandatory reporting, or the ethical boundaries of care. While *Cadre of Padres* will focus primarily on chaplains in service-related contexts, the initiative recognises that many civilian chaplains are providing support

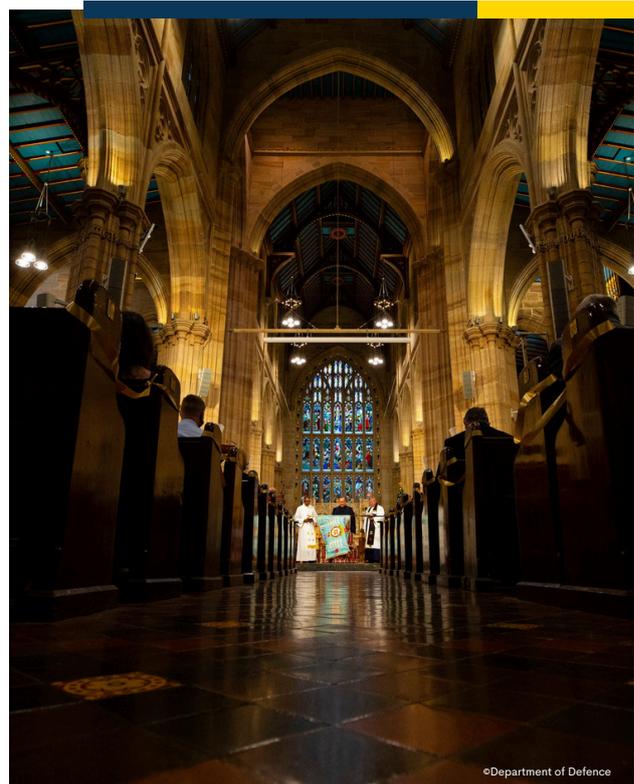
to the same communities, and must also be equipped to do so safely and effectively.

In response, VESPIIA will establish *Cadre of Padres* as a national network for chaplains working in service contexts. This initiative will focus on connection, practice development, and sector-wide coordination, informed by the insights gathered through this round table and shaped through ongoing consultation. The network will not attempt to replace denominational structures or existing programs—but rather serve as a point of collaboration, resource-sharing, visibility, and shared advocacy across sectors.

VESPIIA's role will be to support, not dictate. The *Cadre* will be led by the sector, and shaped by those doing the work. Our commitment is to a by-chaplains-for-chaplains model.

The July round table was just the beginning. Additional round tables and consultations will be held to test ideas, build consensus, and make sure that the tools, resources and frameworks developed are practical, inclusive, and grounded in the real work chaplains are doing every day.

This paper summarises the themes and insights that emerged from the inaugural discussion. It also sets out a series of recommendations and next steps, and outlines the structure and intent behind the *Cadre of Padres* network as it takes shape.



Chaplain Gayan Thamel, Chaplain David Deal and Principal Air Chaplain Kevin Russell, CSC (from left) bless the Squadron Standard during a replacement and laying up ceremony at St Andrews Cathedral in Sydney, New South Wales.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Cadre of Padres: A Unified Approach to Chaplaincy in Service

Chaplains play a vital role across Australia's defence, emergency services, veteran and first responder communities—offering spiritual and emotional care in moments of crisis, trauma, transition, and recovery. Yet across sectors, chaplaincy remains fragmented, inconsistently supported, and poorly understood.

In July 2025, VESPIIA convened a national round table to explore these issues and begin designing a more coordinated, visible, and supported future for chaplaincy in service contexts. Participants included chaplains, denominational bodies, service agencies, educators, and community leaders from across Australia.

WHAT WE HEARD

- Chaplaincy roles are often unclear—leading to confusion, role drift, and lack of recognition
- Existing training and supervision options are limited, siloed, or inconsistent
- Many chaplains work in isolation, with little access to peer support or professional development
- Civilian chaplains are increasingly supporting veterans and service families—often without adequate preparation or connection
- There is no single point of coordination, visibility, or advocacy for the chaplaincy workforce

WHAT WE'RE DOING

VESPIIA will establish the Cadre of Padres as a national network for chaplains working in service and adjacent civilian settings. This initiative will:

- Create opportunities for connection, collaboration, and sector-informed professional development
- Amplify existing training and support structures, and help fill gaps where needed
- Facilitate peer supervision and national networking
- Develop shared practice tools and public-facing resources
- Advocate for chaplaincy inclusion in workforce, policy, and wellbeing planning

A WA-based pilot will be launched in late 2025, supported by a national subcommittee drawn from across sectors.

WHY IT MATTERS

Chaplains are often the first—and sometimes the only—source of support for individuals and families navigating service-related trauma and transition. But those doing this work also need support. The Cadre of Padres is about ensuring chaplains aren't left to carry that weight alone.

This work will only succeed if it is built by the sector, for the sector. VESPIIA's role is to coordinate, connect, and advocate—not to control.



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Royal Australian Navy padre Chaplain Simote Finau opens a coconut while visiting his childhood village on Fotuha'a Island, Tonga, during Operation Tonga Assist 2022.

Royal Australian Navy Chaplain James Sutherland takes a moment to reflect on Remembrance Day 2024 on HMAS Adelaide.



CURRENT STATE OF CHAPLAINCY IN SERVICE SETTINGS

Chaplains working in defence, veteran, emergency services, and police contexts operate in complex, high-stakes environments. They are present in moments of trauma, loss, crisis, and transition—providing spiritual and emotional support to personnel and their families when it matters most. Yet despite the depth of this work, there is no consistent structure underpinning chaplaincy across sectors.

At the round table, participants described a wide range of chaplaincy models. Some are employed full-time within police or military services; others are commissioned by churches to serve in hospitals, corrections, or with ex-service organisations. Some are volunteers attached to local brigades or clubs. Many operate solo—without peers, supervision, or a clear line of accountability.

This inconsistency creates confusion, both within and beyond the chaplaincy community. There is no shared language to describe what chaplains do, no agreed scope of practice, and no minimum standard of training. As a result, chaplains can be underutilised, mislabelled, or placed in roles with unrealistic or unclear expectations.

One example raised was the term “chaplain” being applied to a range of roles—from ordained ministers with postgraduate qualifications and endorsed positions in defence, to volunteers offering informal support through a church or club.

A veteran or family member in distress may speak to either, without knowing the difference. That has implications—not just for the quality of support provided, but for confidentiality, boundaries, reporting responsibilities, and professional protections.

These challenges are not unique to uniformed service settings. In civilian contexts—such as sporting clubs, local schools, or community programs

— chaplains are often the first point of contact for someone in need. Some are lay volunteers with a passion for helping; others have theological training but no supervision or organisational backing.

It is not uncommon for these civilian chaplains to support current or former service personnel, sometimes without recognising the complexity of what they're responding to.



Jewish Rabbi Chaplain, Flight Lieutenant Yossi Friedman, reads the opening prayer at the Centenary of the Royal Air Force (RAF) and the 97th anniversary of the formation of the Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF).

“Chaplain is a loaded term.”

This simple observation from one round table participant captured a key tension running through the discussion. The word chaplain means different things to different people—within institutions, within communities, and even within chaplaincy itself.

For some, it carries weight, recognition and clarity. For others, it raises questions about training, authority, and legitimacy.

Without a shared understanding of what a chaplain is—or isn't—it becomes harder to advocate for the role, deliver consistent support, or maintain public confidence in the work chaplains do.

CHALLENGES AND NEEDS

The round table identified a consistent set of challenges facing chaplains across both service and civilian contexts. While the settings, structures, and sending bodies may differ, the underlying issues were strikingly similar—pointing to a sector doing critical, relational work without the structure, recognition, or coordinated support needed to do it well, sustainably, or safely.

Chaplains are carrying complex responsibilities in roles that are often poorly defined, misunderstood, or undervalued. Without consistent training pathways, access to supervision, or sector-wide visibility, many chaplains are left to navigate high-stakes environments with little formal support—placing strain not only on the chaplain, but on those they serve.

2. FRAGMENTED STRUCTURES AND DISCONNECTED PRACTICE

There is no central body coordinating chaplaincy across sectors. Most chaplains work under the oversight of a single employer or sending body, with limited visibility of who else is working nearby or in parallel spaces. Civilian chaplains—such as those supporting local clubs, community centres or volunteer services—may have no connection to peers or access to training relevant to the people they are supporting, including veterans and first responders.

This fragmentation leads to duplication, missed opportunities for collaboration, and inconsistent experiences for those seeking support.



Air Force chaplain Miljan Popovic recites a prayer during the Bomber Command commemoration ceremony held at RAAF Base Amberley, Queensland.

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1. LACK OF RECOGNITION AND ROLE CLARITY

There is no shared understanding of what a chaplain is, what they do, or how they differ from other support roles. This confusion exists within agencies, faith bodies, and the broader public. Some chaplains are formally trained, professionally supervised, and commissioned through structured pathways.

Others are lay volunteers providing informal support in their communities. These differences are often invisible to those receiving care, who may assume all chaplains carry the same qualifications and responsibilities.

This lack of clarity affects everything from recruitment and training to how chaplains are introduced into workplaces or activated in critical incidents. It also places chaplains at risk of being misunderstood, misused, or placed in roles that exceed their scope.

3. INCONSISTENT TRAINING AND STANDARDS

Training pathways vary widely, from postgraduate theological qualifications to short vocational courses or internal inductions. There is no agreed baseline of knowledge or practice, and no shared definition of what "qualified" looks like.

As a result, chaplains may be operating under vastly different assumptions about confidentiality, duty of care, mandatory reporting, or referral pathways.

This inconsistency places a burden on the chaplain, and creates risk for the organisations and individuals they serve. Without minimum expectations, there is no way to ensure quality, accountability or safety across settings.

4. LIMITED SUPERVISION AND PROFESSIONAL SUPPORT

Many chaplains—particularly those in solo roles or regional areas—lack access to regular professional supervision or peer support. Some receive denominational oversight; others rely on informal pastoral networks. Where support exists, it is uneven and often reliant on goodwill rather than embedded organisational practice. This can lead to burnout, isolation, and reduced capacity to reflect critically on ethical or complex situations.

Just as chaplains are tasked with holding space for others, we must also ensure they have structures in place that protect their own wellbeing—emotionally, ethically, and professionally.

5. ABSENCE OF SECTOR ADVOCACY AND REPRESENTATION

There is no national voice representing the needs of chaplains across service and community settings. This absence means chaplaincy is rarely included in strategic planning, workforce development, or funding discussions. Where advocacy does occur, it tends to be piecemeal and confined within denominations or agency-specific contexts.

As a result, the role is undervalued, and opportunities to strengthen its impact are missed.

Australian Army Chaplain, Major Gary Pope from the 3rd Brigade Headquarters, delivers a field service to soldiers at Townsville Field Training Area, Queensland on Exercise Talisman Sabre, 25 July 2021



“Walking through the door of compassion.”

One participant described chaplaincy as the act of walking through the door of compassion—being willing to show up, stay present, and respond to need without judgment or agenda. It’s not always about having answers, but about making space. In crisis, in silence, in grief or in hope, chaplains step into moments that others often avoid.

This phrase became a quiet theme of the round table. It speaks to the relational heart of the work—and to the need for structures that protect, support, and sustain those doing it.



Royal Australian Navy Imam, Mogamat Majidih Essa leads a prayer for members of the TNI AL at a local mosque in Surabaya Indonesia during Exercise Indo-Pacific Endeavour 2023.

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OPPORTUNITIES FOR COLLABORATION

Despite the challenges identified, the round table revealed strong common ground and a clear appetite for collaboration across the chaplaincy sector. Participants expressed a shared desire to retain the diversity and relational strength of chaplaincy, while building the scaffolding needed to support it more effectively. This is not about central control, but about national coordination where it counts: training, connection, recognition, and advocacy.

1. ESTABLISHMENT OF A NATIONAL NETWORK – CADRE OF PADRES

There was overwhelming support for the creation of a national network—hosted by VESPIIA—to connect chaplains working in service and adjacent community contexts. This network, Cadre of Padres, would create space for collaboration, peer support, resource-sharing, and professional development. It would not duplicate what denominations already do, but instead link chaplains across sectors who face common operational realities.

Participants stressed that the network must include lay and professional chaplains, those working in formal service roles and those in civilian organisations who are supporting the same communities. Inclusion of culturally and linguistically diverse, non-Christian, and non-ordained practitioners was identified as essential from the outset.

2. SHARED PRACTICE AND LANGUAGE

The Cadre could help develop a shared language around chaplaincy, including a flexible but consistent definition of scope, core competencies, and ethical boundaries. This would provide a reference point for agencies, churches, and individuals without forcing uniformity.

Having a common frame would also assist in managing expectations, setting boundaries, and advocating for recognition of chaplaincy as a skilled and accountable practice.

3. COORDINATED TRAINING AND PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Participants supported the development of professional learning opportunities that respond to the realities of frontline chaplaincy—across service and community settings. Rather than duplicating theological or denominational pathways, there was strong interest in sector-relevant training focused on practical themes such as trauma, grief, ethics, cultural competence, and navigating institutional systems.

While existing training opportunities are limited, a few small-scale programs and supervision models do exist—often developed locally or within single organisations. As with many parts of the chaplaincy landscape, these initiatives are often siloed, disconnected, or not widely known.

In line with VESPIIA's broader approach, any new training and development efforts under the Cadre of Padres will begin by mapping and amplifying what already exists. Where opportunities are already in place, we will work to raise awareness and strengthen access.

Where gaps are clear, VESPIIA will collaborate with practitioners and sector partners to co-design responses—starting with a WA-based pilot to test formats, content, and relevance.

The focus will be on coordination, not centralisation—ensuring chaplains across different contexts can access training that reflects the complexity and importance of their work.

Any future training or peer support model developed through the Cadre of Padres must not only build skills, but also sustain those delivering care. Participants noted that chaplaincy often involves sitting with others in grief, trauma, moral distress or crisis—work that takes a cumulative toll. Supporting the supporters means making wellbeing an embedded priority, not a personal responsibility.

4. COMMUNICATION AND SECTOR VISIBILITY

There was strong interest in developing materials to raise the profile of chaplaincy—within agencies, the public, and faith-based organisations. Participants suggested creating simple explainer tools, publishing case studies, and using storytelling to highlight the work of chaplains in different settings.

The Future Frontlines publication series is proposed as an ideal platform for this, helping to shift perceptions, correct misconceptions, and demonstrate the breadth of the chaplaincy workforce.

5. REPRESENTATION AND ADVOCACY

There is currently no national body focused specifically on the needs of chaplains working in defence, emergency services, veterans, or first responder contexts.

Existing peak bodies such as Spiritual Care Australia and Chaplaincy Australia play important roles in setting standards, providing training, and supporting chaplains across healthcare, community, education, and institutional settings. However, these organisations do not primarily focus on service-specific chaplaincy and may not capture the operational, ethical, or systemic challenges unique to those working with uniformed personnel.

Round table participants supported VESPIIA stepping into a connector role—not to replicate what already

exists, but to coordinate engagement between service chaplaincy and the broader pastoral care and spiritual care ecosystem. This includes working alongside training institutions, denominational endorsers, and national bodies to identify where existing programs and frameworks may already serve the needs of chaplains, and where there are clear gaps to be addressed.

By bringing a service-lens to existing structures, VESPIIA can help amplify under-utilised programs, raise awareness of chaplaincy needs within service planning, and ensure service chaplains are not left out of broader sector conversations.

Where existing programs don't meet frontline needs, VESPIIA will work collaboratively—with chaplains at the centre—to co-develop practical, targeted responses.



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Army Chaplain Rabbi Captain David Gutnick and Victoria Police Senior Police Chaplain Drew Mellor meet for the first time at a roadside community meeting as a civilian convoy prepares to leave Mallacoota, Victoria for Eden NSW.

"Stories over statistics."

This phrase, shared during the round table, captured the heart of the conversation. While data has its place, participants agreed that the value of chaplaincy is most powerfully understood through lived experience.

The quiet presence at a hospital bed, the conversation after a critical incident, the unseen support offered in the background—these are moments that don't show up in spreadsheets.

If chaplaincy is to be recognised and supported, the stories of those doing the work—and those supported by it—must be heard, shared, and taken seriously.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Australian Army padre Chaplain Matthew Hall from 11th/28th Battalion, Royal Western Australia Regiment, leads the military procession towards St George's Cathedral in Perth, WA, ahead of the state funeral service for Mr Arthur Leggett, OAM.



*Chaplains carry the unseen weight of service.
What we build must carry them in return.*

Based on the insights gathered at the inaugural Cadre of Padres round table, the following ten recommendations are proposed to guide the establishment and development of a national chaplaincy network.

These are not fixed directives, but starting points for sector-led collaboration.

GOVERNANCE AND COORDINATION

Establish a Cadre of Padres subcommittee

VESPIIA will raise a subcommittee of chaplains and sector leaders to guide the development of the Cadre, inform professional development priorities, and surface policy issues affecting chaplaincy practice.

Engage stakeholders across service and civilian sectors

Facilitate intentional engagement with denominational leaders, service agencies, and community-based chaplaincy providers (across all faiths and regions) to map current activity and build a broad-based network.

Position VESPIIA as a connector and coordinator

VESPIIA will act as a neutral intermediary between service and civilian chaplaincy organisations—helping bodies find each other, share knowledge, and collaborate without duplicating or overriding existing structures.

PRACTICE DEVELOPMENT AND SUPPORT

Explore shared standards of practice for service chaplaincy

Begin scoping what a common baseline of chaplaincy practice could look like—recognising the differences between lay and ordained chaplains, and between faith traditions and service contexts.

Design and deliver professional development opportunities

Develop and pilot a WA-based training and supervision offering focused on key service-relevant competencies (e.g. trauma, ethics, grief, moral injury). Use feedback to plan future offerings and national roll out.

Raise and support a national peer supervision network

Identify existing supervision models and establish pathways for chaplains (particularly in isolated or solo roles) to access regular, affordable, and sector-informed peer supervision.

VISIBILITY AND SECTOR RECOGNITION

Deliver a public-facing education campaign

Create simple, accessible materials that explain chaplaincy in clear terms—highlighting the different levels of chaplaincy, how it works, and what people can expect when engaging with a chaplain.

Support agencies to raise the profile of chaplaincy

Work with employers, volunteer networks, and service organisations to help them understand chaplaincy's scope, benefits, and ethical parameters. This could include in-house briefings, fact sheets, and co-branded guidance.

Open the Future Frontlines publication series to chaplains

Provide a space for chaplains to share stories and reflections on their work through VESPIIA's Future Frontlines papers—centred on lived experience, complexity, and care.

Facilitate regular networking opportunities

Schedule ongoing in-person and virtual events for chaplains to build connection across regions and sectors, with options for informal catch-ups, themed discussions, or PD-integrated meetups.

NEXT STEPS

Following the round table, VESPIIA will begin formal work to establish the Cadre of Padres as a national network for chaplaincy in service contexts.

The aim is to build connection, clarity, and coordinated support—without overriding the diversity and autonomy that make chaplaincy unique.

Over the coming months, VESPIIA will:

- Call for expressions of interest to join a national Cadre of Padres subcommittee, with representation across service settings, denominations, and geographic areas
- Map existing networks, providers and training bodies to identify points of alignment, duplication, and opportunity
- Design a pilot professional development and supervision program in WA, with a view to trialling tools and formats that could scale or be adapted locally
- Develop and distribute simple explainer materials to help agencies, the public, and chaplaincy-adjacent roles better understand what chaplaincy is and why it matters
- Invite chaplaincy submissions to an upcoming Future Frontlines publication focused on practice in context
- Host further round tables and check-ins to ensure continued input and testing as the Cadre develops

Updates and invitations will be shared directly with attendees and through VESPIIA's member and partner networks.



Australian Army padre Chaplain Christopher Bowditch leads 12th/40th Battalion, Royal Tasmania Regiment, soldiers carry the remains of World War I veteran Private Edward Ruffels during the reinterment ceremony at Hobart War Cemetery in Tasmania on Thursday

CONCLUSION

This round table was the first formal step toward building something many chaplains have long needed but rarely had the space or support to ask for: a connected, coordinated, and visible national chaplaincy network. The Cadre of Padres is not about prescribing how chaplaincy should be done. It's about recognising that chaplaincy is already being done—quietly, faithfully, in hundreds of contexts across the country—and asking what's needed to do it more safely, sustainably, and effectively.

Across the discussion, participants reflected a common experience: of working in isolation, navigating complex demands, often without supervision, peer connection, or recognition. There was a shared frustration at the lack of clarity around what chaplains do, the confusion between ordained and lay roles, and the absence of a baseline to support ethical and effective practice. These issues are not new, and they're not limited to any one agency, sector or faith tradition. But they are increasingly unsustainable.

The Cadre of Padres aims to respond by building structure around the edges—not control, but support. It will exist to connect chaplains to one another, offer practical development opportunities, and advocate for the role of chaplaincy where decisions are being made. It will also help those outside chaplaincy—such as employers, government bodies, and community partners—understand what chaplains are trained to do, and what they should not be expected to carry alone.

This initiative won't work if it becomes overly centralised or detached from the realities of practice. That's why VESPIIA is committed to a by-chaplains-for-chaplains approach. The subcommittee will lead the shape of the network. Future development will be tested through pilots.

The stories, challenges, and needs of practitioners will remain at the centre.

The work doesn't stop here. This paper is a starting point. The next phase will involve deeper consultation, resource development, and testing the model in practice. But what's already clear is that the willingness exists. The need is there. And the chaplaincy sector is ready for something better.

The Cadre must not only build coordination and visibility, but also contribute to the long-term wellbeing of those in chaplaincy roles. It is not enough to recognise the value of chaplains—we must also recognise the weight they carry, and ensure they are not left to carry it alone.

VESPIIA extends its sincere thanks to all who contributed to the round table discussion—chaplains, trainers, denominational representatives, agency leaders, and community faith workers—for your time, insight, and honesty.

Your voices have shaped the direction of this work, and we look forward to continuing the journey together.

Australian Army Padre Chaplain Isaac Khan from 6th Brigade delivers an opening Prayer at the Vietnam Veterans' Commemorative Service held at Anzac Square in Brisbane, Queensland.





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