

Original Forum on the Military Chaplaincy Position Paper adapted for use in the online sign-on letter viewable at - <http://forumonthemilitarychaplaincy.org/resources/time-to-embrace-a-chaplaincy-for-all-the-troops/>

Time to Embrace a Chaplaincy for All the Troops

The nation's capacity to embrace fully and resolutely the concept of religious liberty, and the constitutional right of every American to freely exercise their beliefs, is being tested. Some claim the United States is a Judeo-Christian country, and as such, they diminish people of other faiths, or no faith at all. Emergent faith communities in the military are properly seeking recognition. Many of these communities not only include but celebrate gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender service members. Humanists and Wiccans seek to join Buddhists, Hindus and other minority groups seeking recognition and representation in our military. Not surprisingly, the military services are the primary testing ground, simply because most patriotic Americans believe we all have a duty to secure liberty and justice for the guardians of our freedom. Some will retreat predictably to a well-worn and mindless adage, complaining that the military is being exploited for social engineering and experimentation, never stopping to think of the service members who should be the primary beneficiaries of these hard won and blood soaked constitutional liberties.

Several years ago, the Co-chair of the Forum on the Military Chaplaincy was standing in line in uniform waiting to be checked out of the Post Exchange. The gentleman behind him, who appeared to be retired military, said, "Chaplain, what do you think about bringing these Muslim chaplains into this man's Army." Chaplain Dodd answered, "That's what free exercise of religion is all about, and I will welcome them." The man shrugged and voiced his disapproval, and the chaplain simply replied, "Well you know, if the Muslim chaplain is not allowed to minister to his troops, then we might as well shut the military chaplaincy down, because none of us would have the right to be here either." The cash register saved the day, and Dodd was on his way.

It just never occurred to this retiree that the military chaplaincy walks a thin and fragile line between church and state, securing the free exercise of religion for all of America's service members while avoiding undue entanglement of church and state. Military chaplains exist for the sake of their service members, not the other way around. Every service member has a constitutional right to the free and unfettered exercise of their religious beliefs, without regard to dominant theologies, orthodox doctrines, or privileged status.

Objecting to the new challenges faced by today's chaplains, recent outcries from religious traditionalists and privileged classes have been loud and persistent, both in and outside of the military. The presence of gays, lesbians and bisexuals in chapel services and family support activities strains the capacity of some chaplains to carry out their sworn duty to "perform or provide" spiritual care. The growing visibility and

demands of Humanist troops for the appointment of chaplains who can nurture and support them further strains the sensibilities of many conservative chaplains. With their growing discomfort and inability to care for a diverse and altogether unfamiliar clientele, some conservative chaplains have threatened to leave the military. Recognizing their gifts and skills might be more useful in some other area of ministry, this might actually be the most honorable course of action. Apparently, only two of these chaplains have resigned their commissions and returned to civilian ministry where they are free to minister exclusively among those who share their religious beliefs.

The Forum on the Military Chaplaincy strongly supports the recruitment and retention of highly qualified, clinically trained chaplains who are representative of and committed to a chaplaincy reflecting a broad and inclusive range of interfaith, multicultural and diverse life experiences. This inclusive outreach extends to chaplains representing the gay, lesbian and bisexual communities of faith, as well as those of minority beliefs, including Humanists. They, too, are valued members of our country's military and must be embraced fully. Our soldiers, sailors, Marines, airmen, and coastguardsmen deserve nothing less!

Professor Kurt Fredrickson of Fuller Theological Seminary said it best, "In the end, chaplains are very important, and if Humanist chaplains meet a need for our military, this concept must be embraced." Kurt Fredrickson, Associate Dean for Doctor of Ministry and Continuing Education, and Assistant Professor of Pastoral Ministry, Fuller Theological Seminary. (<http://www.religionnews.com/2013/07/22/humanists-want-a-military-chaplain-to-call-their-own/>)

To that, we simply say AMEN!