

'Pathways to Military Chaplaincy'

An Invitation to Theologically Centrist and Left-of-Center Seminaries, Schools of Theology, and Divinity Schools

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INTRODUCTION

For three reasons, theologically centrist and left-of-center Christian seminaries, theological schools, and divinity schools are significantly less invested than are their more conservative peer institutions in U.S. military chaplaincies. First, in the years following the Vietnam war, while many evangelical Christians renewed their commitment to evangelize individual military personnel and some evangelicals championed muscular U.S. exceptionalism in world affairs, many Christians in mainline denominations questioned the morality of military life and assailed the nation's hegemonic aspirations. Among the results of this theological and political divergence were reduced engagement by centrist and left-of-center schools and ascendant conservative influence within the chaplaincies. Conversion to an all-volunteer military further attenuated the links between liberal Christians and the chaplaincies, and the predominance of theological and social conservatives within the Chaplain Corps continues today.

Second, since the 1970's, centrist and left-of-center theological institutions have pursued feminist and liberationist lines of inquiry that deepen Christian criticisms of the military's hierarchical and gendered structure and its key role in projecting U.S. national power globally. Critical thinking about the intersection of gender, sexuality, race, and power stands at the curricular forefront of many centrist and left-of-center schools, but gets much less attention in the military. Many theological faculty members at liberal schools view the military as a sociologically powerful and monolithic institution where little critical thinking of any kind occurs – let alone, critical thinking that seeks to transform human relationships to make them more just. The prevalence of sexual violence and the (only just recently-lifted) ban on gays, lesbians, and bisexuals stand out as particularly objectionable in this regard.

Third, theologically centrist and left-of-center seminaries, theological schools, and divinity schools are markedly less invested than their conservative peer institutions in the military chaplaincies because they are not connected with current military chaplains who could better inform them of current debates within the chaplaincies – in which liberal theological voices might make a difference, and to which left-leaning schools might contribute. The macro-level disengagement of mainline Christian denominations from military chaplaincies has disconnected them from micro-level relationships with the chaplains themselves. Disengagement has become a self-reinforcing dynamic that hampers the ability of liberal theological institutions to hear

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stories of resistance and conscience within the military and perpetuates an outdated understanding of how U.S. military chaplaincies function.

We invite likeminded institutions to join us in critical and constructive conversations on four main topics: demographics of support for military chaplaincies, parameters for ministry in the military, religious and moral diversity, and training for students who are exploring military chaplaincies. We believe that such collegial support is critical for the future of military chaplaincies. These ongoing conversations will help bring faculty, administrators, denominational polities, and students up-to-date on the current practices of military chaplains, and persuade civilian stakeholders that with diligent effort *their* values and material commitments can help shape the future of our nation's military chaplaincies.

DEMOGRAPHICS OF SUPPORT FOR U.S. MILITARY CHAPLAINCIES

We encourage theologically centrist and left-of-center seminaries, theological schools, and divinity schools to critically engage rather than dismiss or ignore U.S. military chaplaincies as valid settings for faithful witness to the world. Liberal disengagement from civic arenas does nothing to change either the tenor or substance of public policy. Conservative theological voices have long been the loudest within military chaplaincies. Reactionary responses from left-leaning Christians are counter-productive. Our nation's military chaplaincies would benefit from rich and well-nuanced input from a broader swath of centrist and left-of-center theologies. Seminaries, theological schools, and divinity schools are best positioned to strengthen military chaplaincies.

U.S. military chaplaincies are at a crossroad. The bedrock rationale for the existence of chaplaincies is to provide for the free exercise of religion by rank-and-file military personnel. For the first time in their history, a significant contingent of endorsers and chaplains has recanted its professional responsibility to care for all personnel. Gays, lesbians, and bisexuals are entitled to all military benefits, including services provided through the chaplaincies. Chaplains *volunteer* for military careers of just such service. Unfortunately, some theologically and socially conservative Christian groups now cast themselves as victims of coercion and invert pastoral priorities: they insist that the military protect their religiously motivated refusal to serve all personnel. The chaplaincies are at serious risk of becoming strongholds of religiously defended discrimination rather than generous religious and moral service.

At this historic crossroad, theologically centrist and left-of-center Christians can make a strategically effective investment in our nation's military chaplaincies. Many conservative seminaries view the Chaplain Corps primarily as a vehicle for Christian evangelization within the military and as an active front for wider culture wars. By contrast, mainline liberal constituencies, faced with rapidly declining national memberships, and seemingly stuck in Vietnam-era concerns about military abuse of power, make the contribution of able ministers to military chaplaincies a matter of little to no priority. Not all centrist and left-of-center Christians believe that same-sex relationships can be as much faithful expressions of love as heterosexual ones; but nearly all of these Christians reject legal, social, and political discrimination on the basis

of sexual orientation. The question of justice for gay, lesbian, and bisexual military personnel may be the catalyst for renewed, broad engagement with the chaplaincies by less conservative Christians.

We believe that the current crisis about justice for gay, lesbian, and bisexual military personnel brings to light a host of more general problems with military chaplaincies that stem in part from the dominance of theologically conservative Christian constituencies. Unduly narrowed by their emphasis on proselytization, very few conservative seminaries require their students to take courses in any of the following:

- Multi-cultural and interreligious understanding
- Spiritually-integrated counseling that interfaces with behavioral health
- Protection of conscience
- Moral injury
- Ethical use of institutional power
- Critical thinking on social and military issues
- Theory and practice of leadership

Because the majority of today's active duty chaplains are trained by conservative seminaries, the effect on the Chaplain Corps of these training gaps is an overall weakening of the pastoral competencies that are the core of chaplaincy responsibilities in the military. Military commanders are now privately complaining to us that chaplains come to them poorly prepared and woefully inadequate to provide meaningful leadership within the military.

While we think centrist and left-leaning theological institutions are wise to be wary of co-optation by the military, we believe that the U.S. military has significantly expanded room for the exercise of many of the values that theologically centrist and left-of-center seminaries share. With the repeal of 'Don't Ask, Don't Tell' and judicial rulings against DOMA, the U.S. military is poised to leap forward on a range of issues about equal workplace benefits and status for lesbian, gay, and bi-sexual personnel. The U.S. military is the world's most religiously diverse organization, and has long been a site for advanced theoretical and practical work on religious inclusivity and pluralism. Since the post-Vietnam War conversion to an all-volunteer force, the military has also placed increasing value on the continuing education of its personnel and sharpened its attention to intercultural and cross-culture engagement – including the roles of U.S. chaplains in interreligious relations overseas.

The time for change is now. The dominance of theologically and socially conservative Christians in our military chaplaincies is a national liability. A decade and a half of continuous war has ravaged our country politically, economically, and morally – in ways that we are only beginning to understand. Military chaplaincies hold an important place within the military's structure and are capable of becoming a powerful source of humanizing attitudes and practices within it. It is time for theologically centrist and left-of-center Christians to work intentionally to shift prevalent demographics of support for military chaplaincies, so that chaplaincies can repair their weakened capacities for pastoral ministry and provide clear-sighted, critically constructive, compassionate, and professional leadership within the armed forces.

PARAMETERS FOR MINISTRY IN MILITARY CHAPLAINCIES

We believe that there are compelling reasons to continue the military chaplaincies as integral components of the military. Not all faculty members and administrators at theologically centrist and left-of-center seminaries and schools believe that our nation's armed forces should have chaplains who are *uniformed military officers*. However, alternatives present formidable problems. What civilian contract chaplains might gain, in the way of greater independence from the military's institutional authority, would come at the cost of credibility and solidarity with the troops. The stronger step of abolishing government-paid chaplains of any kind would obviate legal concerns about violations of the Establishment Clause, but fail the nation's obligation to provide for the free exercise of religion by military personnel.

Assuming that chaplains as uniformed military officers are still the most effective way for the nation to meet its legal obligations and honor the religious and moral priorities of civilian communities, and building on the conviction (however attenuated) of mainline Christian denominations that military chaplaincies are in fact valid extensions of their civilian ministries, there is a pressing need for military, civilian, and academic stakeholders to articulate clear parameters for ministry in the armed forces. These parameters must reflect legal, social, and religious inputs, and be attuned to the military's unique organizational structure and distinctive mission.

We believe that theologically centrist and left-of-center seminaries, theological schools, and divinity schools are better positioned than their more conservative counterparts to train effective ministers for our 21st Century military. Partisan and parochial attitudes are liabilities, not advantages, to the U.S. military. Today's military needs chaplains whose spirituality is not only rooted in particular historical traditions but also genuinely encouraging of diverse faiths and practices in others. Excellent military chaplains show intercultural competence and work creatively and joyfully, rather than reluctantly, with a plurality of religious, racial, gender, sexual orientation, socio-economic, and educational values and experiences. The ability to embrace complex theological, religious, and moral thinking and negotiate multiple loyalties and divergent expectations is crucial. And to be trustworthy in confidential and privileged communication, chaplains must be self-reflexive, critical thinkers, with compassion for all.

These parameters for effective ministry can be particularly well-supported by centrist and left-of-center theological institutions, whose values, theological orientations, and interdisciplinary curricula form students to be leaders in pluralistic settings. Military chaplains must know how to:

- Provide reentry and resilience training
- Exercise visionary leadership in the design of military protocols and directives

- Broker fairly and effectively the conflicts that arise from implementation of new policies
- Clearly articulate their work to multiple audiences (including churches, general publics, civilian ‘endorsers,’ and academics)
- Handle their own and others’ mistakes and limitations with grace, tact, and compassion

It is centrist and left-leaning schools, and not conservative ones, that best foster such skills.

RELIGIOUS AND MORAL DIVERSITY IN MILITARY CHAPLAINCIES

Whereas all stakeholders agree that diversity in the Chaplain Corps is desirable, they disagree about what kinds of civilian communities should be represented in the chaplaincies, and about how chaplains should conduct themselves relative to colleagues and military personnel whose religious and moral commitments differ significantly from their own. How these agreements can be leveraged and these disagreements managed to the good of all are questions crucial to the success of military chaplaincies in the 21st Century. We call for clearer guidelines and expectations for the behavior of military chaplains in a religiously and morally plural environment and for chaplain hiring practices that better reflect these expectations.

Guidelines and expectations for military chaplains need to be strengthened and in some cases differently enforced. This will require that individual chaplains reaffirm their commitment to working in a pluralistic environment, and that chaplain endorsers earnestly require it. We also believe that the larger professional associations of endorsers should review the codes of ethics they jointly devise and by which they promise to conduct their military ministries. As employer, the military has a unique responsibility to articulate and enforce standards of behavior for its chaplains. We call upon the military to move prudently and decisively to devise enforceable guidelines for the workplace behavior of its chaplains.

The current position of theologically conservative endorsers, who forbid their chaplains to serve gay, lesbian, and bisexual military personnel in military-sponsored marriage retreats and to participate in jointly-led services with chaplaincy colleagues who are themselves gay, lesbian, or bisexual or who affirm same-sex relationships, is not only unprofessional, but discriminatory. We endorse the inclusion of *sexual orientation* and *gender identity* as protected classes within the military, and we applaud the Department of Defense for including sexual orientation in its 2014 *Human Goals Charter*. This Charter aligns military chaplaincies with significant changes in U.S. society and jurisprudence and mirrors professional standards already established at hospitals, corporations, and militaries of allied nations. We urge the military to honor the values of the Charter by including sexual orientation in its Equal Opportunity policies and related administrative and disciplinary procedures.

We believe that Christian endorsers and chaplains have a responsibility to bring greater religious and moral diversity to the membership of U.S. military chaplaincies. The U.S. military is the world's most religiously diverse organization. The membership of our nation's military chaplaincies should more adequately reflect that diversity. In addition to ensuring core services that are withheld from gay, lesbian, and bisexual personnel by some theologically and socially conservative chaplains, a larger and more vocal contingent of centrist and left-of-center chaplains could open the door to excluded or minoritized traditions within the chaplaincies.

We call upon the military to increase the religious and moral diversity of its chaplaincies. We urge the military to hire its first humanist and Wiccan chaplains. Inclusion of marginalized traditions within the chaplaincies is a legal, social, religious, and ethical imperative. We ask the military to eliminate extra waiver requirements for civilian groups that wish to put forward their first chaplaincy candidate. These requirements for first-time 'endorsers' hinder the entrance of chaplains from minority traditions. A review of eligibility requirements for chaplaincy candidates is also in order, as is greater transparency about the criteria used to select from a pool of comparably qualified candidates. A more diverse Chaplain Corps will strengthen the religious and moral diversity of the armed forces and significantly broaden its civilian support.

TRAINING STUDENTS WHO ARE EXPLORING MILITARY CHAPLAINCY

We call for a comprehensive and critical re-design of chaplaincy training programs in seminaries, schools of theology, and divinity schools. Training students well for ministry in military contexts can be more complex than preparing them for jobs in civilian communities. In addition to choices about which academic disciplines should contribute to such an education, and in what ways, those who teach in chaplaincy training programs must identify, negotiate, and balance values and skills prioritized by multiple stakeholders.

Among the core values we wish to highlight for those exploring military chaplaincy are:

- Respect for religious and moral diversity
- Respect for freedom of conscience
- Respect for human rights
- Commitment to responsible use of power
- Intention to do no harm

We believe that professional chaplains need a range of values and skills of self-care, and that seminaries, schools of theology, and divinity schools should promote these values and teach these skills. The military context presents especially acute needs for self-care in such areas as:

- Physical and mental fitness

- Resilience and agility
- Sexual health and boundaries
- Values and habits of respect

Informed and disciplined self-care lies at the foundation of the military chaplain's effort to provide care to others.

We believe that effective military chaplaincy depends not only on relevant values and good intentions but also context-specific skills that theologically centrist and left-of-center training programs can and should develop in their students. Students who are exploring service as military chaplains must acquire the capacity to:

- Help others to think through moral and spiritual struggles
- Help others to recognize and deal with trauma and its effects
- Identify and address moral injury
- Respond to sexual violence
- Lead within a complex and sociologically powerful institution
- Move effectively and critically through military culture
- Promote accountability structures
- Interact effectively in intercultural settings
- Mobilize institutional resources in ways timely and appropriate

Given the distinctive age demographics of military personnel, students wishing to explore military ministries should give focused attention to learning about the needs of young adults.

We encourage programs that reflect, refine, and promote the values and skills that students need in order to be excellent chaplains in today's U.S. military. Clinical Pastoral Education (CPE) experience is a longstanding component of many seminary degree programs, and we believe it is especially useful for training students for ministry in pluralistic and frequently trauma-related military contexts. We urge seminaries, theological schools and divinity schools to establish field education sites within or related to the military, and to take the initiative in locating excellent military chaplain supervisors. We also strongly recommend that theologically centrist and left-of-center institutions familiarize themselves with the military's own chaplain candidate programs and student resources.

Curricula presently in place at seminaries, theological schools, and divinity schools tend to rely on outdated models and assumptions about ministry in the military. These should be critically reviewed and imaginatively redesigned to reflect the realities of contemporary military life. In addition to classical parish or congregational training within denominational systems, candidates for military chaplaincy need courses on topics such as 'War, Ethics, and Religion,' 'Grief, Trauma, Loss, and Recovery,' 'Ministry in Religiously Pluralistic Settings,' 'Theodicy,' 'Sexuality,' 'Ministry to Military Families,' and 'The Experience of War.' Financial well-being within the military context is another increasingly important topic for chaplains.

Effective training for students who are exploring military chaplaincy will require both a revitalization of existing degree programs, a willingness to explore new instructional avenues and technologies, and a greater level of cooperation between seminaries, schools of theology, and divinity schools. Chaplaincy training programs can be established as elective concentrations within the M.Div. degree or as certificate programs. Teaching modules of varied length and online course components may be helpful. Special attention to military-relevant internships, CPE, and field placements will be important. Closer coordination between endorsers and schools will improve the visibility of chaplaincy careers and help to refine programs. We call on schools to strengthen informal and formal networks for endorsers, schools, and military contacts. Boston School of Theology, Brite Divinity School, and Iliff School of Theology are three institutions that are particularly well positioned to promote such synergies.

A CALL TO PUBLIC ACTION

We call upon all theologically centrist and left-of-center seminaries, theological schools, and divinity schools to combine their programmatic and curricular revisions with strategic actions that increase engagement with military chaplaincies in wider academic and social circles. Faculty and administrators at theological institutions should become more adept at connecting with media outlets in order to publicize their commitment to training candidates for military chaplaincies and to gain a more prominent voice in public discussions about religion in the military. Toward this end, we will convene strategic meetings for theologically centrist and left-of-center institutions and endorsers and educate faculty, administrators, and students about the challenge and promise of military chaplaincies.

We believe that military chaplaincies are a solemn national responsibility and should be a faithful expression of our respective religious and moral traditions. We pledge our critical attention and creative energies to re-vitalizing U.S. military chaplaincies for the 21st Century.