

## **What is the Church's Role in a Time of War?**

### **Background**

I would like to begin by sharing some personal background that may help you understand the context from which I speak. I served 27 years as a chaplain in the United States Navy. For twenty-three of those years I was on active duty. I began my active service as the war in Vietnam was ending, and I retired from the Navy before the current wars in Iraq and Afghanistan began.

I consider myself very fortunate because I never had to experience combat. But during my years as a chaplain, and most recently during the ten years I served as Minister for Government and Professional Chaplaincies for the United Church of Christ, I have cared for those who have gone to war.

The United Church of Christ currently has 43 chaplains serving in the various branches of the Armed Forces, and 25 of our clergy serve as chaplains to veterans. Many of our military chaplains have had at least one deployment to Iraq or Afghanistan, and some have had multiple deployments. They have experienced first-hand the horrors of war. They and their families have endured the same separations and fears and hardships as other military families. And many of them have come home with symptoms of post-traumatic stress. It has been an honor to care for them and their families.

For me, the question of what is the church's role in a time of war, and how shall we minister to veterans and their families, is not an intellectual exercise. It is a matter of the heart.

So, with this understanding, let me begin.

### **The Challenge**

Jesus was once approached by representatives of the Pharisees and the Herodians, who asked Jesus this question: "Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?" Jesus asked them to bring him a coin. He took the coin and said, "Whose head is this, and whose title?" They answered, "The emperor's." Jesus responded, "Then give to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's."

I think this story illustrates very well one of the most important issues that has confronted the Church from its beginning until now: the matter of determining what belongs to Caesar—in other words, to the State—and what belongs to God. To be quite frank, there have been many times over the years when we Christians haven't gotten this right.

As citizens we want to do our civic duty, but this should never be at the cost of surrendering to Caesar the things that rightfully belong to God. This is critically important, especially in a time of potential or actual conflict.

So what is the Church's role, and ours, in a time of war? What, in God's name, should we demand from our government? And what care do we need to provide to those who participate in the conflicts?

### **The Church's Role Prior to War Beginning**

Before a war ever begins, when the rhetoric becomes heated, enemies are identified, and the drums of war begin to beat, the Church must be vigilant. This is a time for us to be a witness for sanity. We must demand that our national leaders tell us the truth. We must demand that their reasons for taking us to war are just, and that going to war is indeed a last resort.

When a war is fought for reasons that are just and because there really is no alternative, it is still regrettable. But when we are led into a war because of greed or a lust for power, it is immoral and reprehensible.

The United States' involvement in the war in Vietnam was questionable from the very beginning. Were the American people told the truth about why this war was necessary? Were our actions justified? Was it worth all the destruction and the loss of life? Did we really accomplish anything? My personal opinion is "No" on all counts.

The United States entered that war in earnest in August, 1964. At the outset, the American people were told that our involvement would be very limited in both scope and duration. And in those days, we still believed what we were told.

By the time the war ended in 1975, more than 58,000 American service members had been killed, and 300,000 were wounded. The Vietnamese lost well over a million people. And we are still living with the legacy of that war today. Our veterans continue to die from exposure to agent orange, addictions, and other diseases. To date, more than 60,000 Vietnam veterans have committed suicide. And many of the homeless people living on our nation's streets are Vietnam veterans.

I wonder how things might have been different if the churches of America had risen up and demanded that the truth be told before we entered into that war? How many lives might have been spared, both Vietnamese and American, if our churches had demanded a quicker end to the conflict? The United Church of Christ was one of the first denominations to do so.

And what about our situation now, a quarter century later? When Al-Qaeda attacked the United States on September 11, 2001, Americans' sense of security was shattered. There were many who were eager to reprise this attack. None were more eager to do so than President George W. Bush and Vice President Richard Cheney.

We were told that this was to be a short and easy war, a war we could win and be welcomed as liberators by the people of Iraq and Afghanistan. We were going to go in,

overthrow Saddam Hussein, get rid of the Taliban and al-Qaeda,, set up democracies, and improve the lives of the people. Needless to say, things haven't quite gone as planned.

Whether the war in Afghanistan was necessary is debatable. However, the truth about the war in Iraq is that it was a war of choice, not a necessary war. And all of the high sounding things we were going to accomplish weren't the real reasons for our being there. We now know that this war was fought because of our need, our lust, for cheap oil to sustain our way of life.

It is difficult enough to go to war when the cause is just and war is the only option. Going to war based on a lie is immoral.

The Church's prophetic role *before a war begins* is to make its voice heard, to demand that those in power be truthful with us. It is up to us to question not only whether going to war is justified; but also to ask whether war is necessary. Will it be worth all the carnage, destruction, and potential loss of our moral foundations?

### **The Church's Role During War**

*I believe the Church has three primary roles during war.* First, we must demand that our leaders and our forces uphold civilized standards of morality as the war is fought. Second, we need to ensure that our nation's ultimate goal is the establishment of a just and lasting peace. And third, we are morally bound to care for those who do the fighting on our behalf.

When the United States was attacked by Al Qaeda, many countries offered their sympathies and support. But much of that support evaporated when we chose to go to war with Iraq. It was further diminished when we abandoned some of our own professed moral standards as the war has been prosecuted. For example, we say we abide by the Geneva Conventions and we don't torture prisoners. Yet we have used water boarding on some prisoners, and we have sent others to countries that have no qualms about the use of torture. On the other hand, when one of our troops is captured, we demand that they be treated humanely. Obviously, there is a moral disconnect here.

One of the things I often observed as a chaplain is that troops will follow the standards set by those in authority over them. That is why it is extremely important that our civilian and military leaders be held accountable for the way they conduct the war. If our leaders let it be known that it is acceptable to regard the enemy as sub-human, to abuse or torture prisoners or to commit crimes against civilians, it is tantamount to giving our troops permission to do these things. Our troops are trained to observe higher standards of conduct and to obey rules of engagement, but these standards must be exemplified by our leaders and enforced if they are to have any meaning.

Today's battlefields are often the streets of towns or villages, or what looks to be a peaceful countryside. And it is often very difficult to know who is the enemy and who is not. The enemy doesn't wear a uniform, and the enemy could be a man, woman or child.

The person approaching a soldier with a smile on his or her face could be friendly, or they could be wearing a suicide vest under their garments. If a soldier makes a mistake in judging the intentions of the person, he or she and their fellow soldiers could die. On the other hand, an innocent civilian could be killed. Many soldiers live with deep regrets because of having made the wrong split-second decision in this kind of situation.

War, by its very nature, is hell. In the heat of battle terrible, inhumane things are done. But there is a huge difference between making mistakes that have dire consequences and intentionally doing what is immoral and inhumane. As a society we cannot afford to gloss over or cover up events like the abuse of prisoners in Abu Ghraib prison, the killing of obviously innocent civilians, or rapes committed by soldiers. These are the actions of a few who “go rogue,” but they reflect badly on our country and on the majority of troops who try to carry out their duties honorably and as humanely as possible. They also demolish the trust that is necessary if we are to end hostilities and establish peace.

Doctor Jonathan Shay, a psychiatrist who has done extensive work with combat veterans with severe post-traumatic stress disorder for the United States Department of Veterans Affairs, writes in his book *Achilles In Vietnam*, “Any army, ancient or modern, is a social construction defined by shared expectations and values....When a leader destroys the legitimacy of the army’s moral order by betraying ‘what’s right,’ he [or she] inflicts manifold injuries on his [or her] men.” (p.6) Therefore, it is extremely important that we maintain that moral order, both for the good of our country and for the good of those who serve on our behalf.

If the Church is to have any moral authority during a time of war, we must be prophetic and courageous. We must hold our civilian and military leaders accountable for their actions. We must call our government to task when it fails to uphold standards of justice, morality, and humanity. This at times will require us to speak truth to power in a way that will make us unpopular with many of our fellow citizens. But let us not forget that our ultimate loyalty belongs to God, not to Caesar.

*Let us move now to our second focus: ensuring that our nation’s ultimate goal is the establishment of a just and lasting peace.*

The United States has now been involved in this war longer than any other in our nation’s history. The costs for our country have been astounding. We have spent \$1.42 trillion on a war that, I believe, never should have been started. In the combined theaters of Iraq and Afghanistan, more than 6,200 of our troops have been killed and more than 50,000 have been wounded. Over 70,000 veterans have been diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder. More than 700 are amputees. Many veterans suffer from traumatic brain injuries. And it is estimated that \$600 billion may be needed to pay for these veterans’ health care over their lifetimes. I don’t know what this war has cost your country financially, but I know that at least 56 of your people have been killed and 245 have been wounded.

War can be like gambling. When you have invested so much and it hasn't worked out as planned, you wonder if investing more will lead to a successful outcome. How much more money, how many more lives, will ultimately make a difference?

I acknowledge that progress has been made in some of the places where our troops have gone. I applaud the humanitarian efforts that have achieved much needed changes in things like education, women's rights, and medical care. But the question is, will this progress be lasting? Or will things go back to being as they were, or worse, after we leave? I hope the changes will last, and that more just, humane, and progressive societies will emerge.

Chaplains have had an increasingly important role to play in helping with humanitarian efforts as the war has progressed. Not only do our chaplains provide religious services and pastoral care to our troops, they also are advising commanders on religious issues that impact their mission. Often, chaplains are getting out into local communities to provide a direct liaison with civil and religious leaders.

In one case, a chaplain accompanied his commander to a local Afghan village for a meeting with tribal leaders. But the leaders did not want to talk with the commander, they wanted to talk to the chaplain. Through an interpreter, their mullah said to the chaplain, "I want to talk to you. I know I can trust you because you are a man of God."

In this month's issue of *The Atlantic* magazine (September, 2011, pp. 28-30), Brian Mockenhaupt wrote an interesting article entitled "Enlisting Allah." The article tells how a U.S. Navy chaplain named Nathan Solomon is helping local Afghan people become better Muslims. He and his Afghan liaison have installed audio speakers at joint patrol bases to announce the five times daily Muslim call to prayer. They are also providing classes to teach people who are largely illiterate to read the Koran. They invited area elders and mullahs for a meeting where speakers from influential tribes told the 238 men who showed up that the Taliban has perverted Islam. These leaders then were challenged to go back home and teach their people the true nature of Islam as found in the Koran. And in Mockenhaupt's final comment in the article, he writes: "And with that, Solomon the noncombatant, who sat quietly throughout the discussion, had perhaps shaped the battlefield as powerfully as any bullet fired or bomb dropped across Afghanistan that day."

This is an excellent example of chaplaincy at its best. And this is the kind of chaplain that our churches need to provide to our Armed Forces: those who will care not only for our own, but for those of other faiths; those who can be bridge builders and peace makers; those who will have the courage to say what needs to be said and to do what needs to be done to help their leaders and their troops maintain high standards of morality and humanity.

I think that if a just and lasting peace is to be made possible, it will come about not by the breaking of wills or spirits but by the winning of hearts and minds. And here, I think we need to ask ourselves again what it is that God requires of us. Is it not to do justice, to

love kindness, and to walk humbly—not only with God, but also among our fellow human beings? Is this not the way of peace?

*The Church's third major role in a time of war is to care for those who serve or have served our country during the conflict.*

Those who come home from the war today are treated far differently than those who returned from the war in Vietnam. Those who returned from Vietnam often took off their uniforms as soon as they landed in the United States. They knew that if they wore their uniforms home, they would be taunted as “baby killers,” or spit on. Today, our troops proudly wear their uniforms when they travel. In several airports I have seen people come up and thank individual soldiers for their service, and several times I have seen groups of soldiers cheered as they got off an airplane.

This does not mean, however, that many of us are not opposed to this war. We have just learned the importance of differentiating between the war and the soldiers we send to fight it.

In the Church, our opinions run the gamut from support of the war to staunch pacifism. We have some folk who believe that any criticism of the government in a time of war is unpatriotic, if not treasonous; and we have others who feel that anyone who participates in war is unchristian. At times, there have been a lot of harsh words uttered on both sides.

I once heard a mother talk about an especially hurtful remark someone made about her son, who had been wounded in Iraq. Her son was a medic, and he was wounded while caring for another soldier. The remark the woman made to his mother was this: “It’s too bad your son wasn’t killed, because that would have prevented him from taking care of any other soldiers.”

Regardless of where we stand on this war, or any other war, there is never any place for that kind of cruelty. That is especially true for those of us who are Christians. Instead, we need to reach out to those who are hurting with love, compassion, and care.

### **The Human Cost of War**

When our country fought the war in Vietnam, we still had a draft. I signed up for the draft, as every 18 year old male was supposed to do. But I was fortunate, because I was in college and could get a student deferment. After that, I was in seminary so I didn’t have to go. But thousands of others weren’t so lucky. They had to serve whether they wanted to or not—unless they fled the country or went to prison.

Today, we no longer have a draft. We have an all-volunteer force. In the minds of some people, that means we shouldn’t be too concerned about those serving in the military because they choose to do so. But I think this viewpoint is both flippant and callous.

While many young men and women join the military for patriotic reasons or for what they imagine will be the adventure of going to war, so many more enter the military today because they see this as their only option for a better life. In a struggling economy, with few job prospects back home and no money to get an education, they look to the military to provide opportunities. But in order to gain access to those opportunities, they have to put their lives at risk.

Fort Jackson, South Carolina is one of the bases where the Army trains new recruits. I have been there several times on days when recruits were graduating from basic training. I have seen the families that have come to witness the graduation ceremonies. By and large these were not affluent, well-educated people from places where there are plenty of jobs and bright prospects for the future. I have seen in their faces, behind their tenuous smiles, both the hope and the fear they have for their children. We need to share their concern.

Unlike the war in Vietnam, where more of our citizens shared the risk of having to serve, it is estimated that only one percent of our people have had any real connection to the war today. Most people are far more concerned about what's happening with the economy back home than what's going on in Iraq or Afghanistan.

In *The Ground Truth*, a powerful movie in which veterans tell about their experiences in Iraq, and what they faced when they came home one veteran who returned home an amputee shared this story. He was at a service station putting gasoline in his car. Noticing his missing arm, the young man at the next pump asked, "What happened to your arm?" The vet replied, "I lost it in the war." "What war?" the man asked. "The war in Iraq," he said. "You mean that is still going on?" "Yeah," the vet replied, "it's still going on." I think this story illustrates just how oblivious many people are, and how disconnected they are from what our troops are going through.

Whether one is physically wounded or not, everyone who goes to war is changed by the experience. No one returns home the same person as the one who left. Their lives are changed irrevocably.

Today there is a new psychiatric term being used to describe what many of our returning veterans are suffering from: "wounding of the soul." The term may be new, but the phenomenon is not. Soldiers who have been in combat report feeling guilt for what they've done or witnessed, or for being a "survivor." There is a sense of loss: loss of who they previously saw themselves to be, and a loss of their moral and spiritual foundations. And there is a profound sense of grief over the loss of friends and comrades.

In his book *War and the Soul*, Dr. Edward Tick writes, "Though hostilities cease and life moves on, and though loved ones yearn for their healing, veterans often remain drenched in the imagery and emotion of war for decades and sometimes for their entire lives. For these survivors, every vital human characteristic that we attribute to the soul may be fundamentally reshaped. These traits include how we perceive; how our minds are organized and function; how we love and relate; what we believe, expect, and value; what

we feel and refuse to feel; and what we judge as good or evil, right or wrong....[This] is always the result of the way war invades, wounds, and transforms our spirit.” (p.1)

Even chaplains are not immune to this wounding of the soul. Nearly all of our United Church of Christ chaplains who have returned home from the war have acknowledged having some symptoms of post-traumatic stress. And some have admitted to wrestling with questions about their faith. One who cared for wounded and dying soldiers in his unit in Afghanistan asked, “Where is God in all this? Where was God when I needed him?”

This chaplain is not alone. There are other chaplains and many other troops asking the same kinds of soul-wrenching questions. I think we, the Church, need to honestly wrestle with these questions along with them. We need to acknowledge the pain behind the questions. And we shouldn’t be quick to offer glib or simplistic answers.

Many veterans have lost hope that they will ever again be able to live a reasonably normal life. Suicide is the option that many of them are choosing to deal with their depression and despair. Five chaplains, none of ours, are among those who have already done so.

For the last two years (2009 and 2010) the American military has lost more troops to suicide than to combat. And if the past is any predictor, many more will do so in the future as a result of not being able to cope with their war experiences.

Another cost of this war is what it is doing to so many families. Several years ago, I was at Lackland Air Force Base in Texas visiting one of our UCC chaplains. One afternoon I had some free time, so I decided to take a walk around the parade ground to see the vintage aircraft on display there. I struck up a conversation with a young Air Force wife. We began talking about the war and its impact on her marriage and family.

Her husband had been in the Air Force for five years. During that time he had been deployed to the war zone three times. The first couple deployments went okay. The last one didn’t. He came home a changed man. All he could tell her is that he saw too much while he was over there. And now this formerly loving man and caring father is angry, edgy, distant from her and the children, and has all the symptoms of post-traumatic stress. But like so many of his peers, he wouldn’t go for the help he needs because he didn’t want to be labeled a “psych case.”

This family’s story remains close to my heart because I could look into this young woman’s face and see both her love and her pain. I hope that her husband has now been able to get the help he needs to enable him to fully return from the war.

There are lots of military families out there just like this one. The fact is, many of these families don’t survive. The divorce rate in the military is high. Repeated lengthy deployments, dealing with the personality changes brought on by post-traumatic stress, traumatic brain injuries and the troubling behaviors that accompany them are often more

than a family can bear. In the worst cases, spouse and/or child abuse and even murders have resulted.

### **What can we, the Church, do to help?**

It's obvious that the needs of service members, veterans, and their families are great—even overwhelming. *What can we, the Church, do to help?* I would offer the following suggestions for you to consider:

*First, care enough to become informed* about the needs and the issues these people face. Educate yourself about things like post-traumatic stress, traumatic brain injuries, suicide prevention and addictions. Every pastor and every seminarian should learn about these things because it is likely people with these issues will at some point become part of your congregation. If you don't understand what they are going through, how can you effectively minister to them?

*Second, find out what resources are available* both on the internet and in your communities to help meet the needs. What services will the government provide? What services do social services or veterans' organizations provide? What numbers can a veteran call when he or she is thinking about suicide? Churches need to have this information readily at hand.

*Third, reach out to help.* Minnesota Army National Guard chaplain Jon Morris offers several suggestions for how to do this that I think are right on target:

1. Make your church a military-friendly. That doesn't mean that you have to support or promote the war. It means that you see members of the military and their families as you would see any other distressed population in your parish, and minister to them accordingly. Some of our United Church of Christ congregations have developed special liturgies for service members deploying to the war or returning home. In some churches a special candle of remembrance has been lit during the worship service every Sunday until a deployed soldier connected with the congregation comes home. Deployed soldiers are mentioned in the pastoral prayer or prayed for in prayer groups. Displaying pictures of the church's deployed service members on a church bulletin board and providing their addresses is also a good idea. Other churches have offered their facilities for use by groups providing therapy for veterans, or their members have participated in church-sponsored activities for veterans. All of these things communicate to service members and their families that the church cares for them.
2. Reach out to military families. I have found that one of the most appreciated things that a church or pastor can do for a deployed service member is to care for his or her family. Treat the family of a deployed soldier as you would any family in crisis, and provide a gentle ministry of presence. Periodic phone calls to offer support or a listening ear, invitations for meals, periodic relief with child care, or other practical assistance can be very helpful.

3. Reach out to the deployed service member. Sending cards, letters, emails and “care packages” from individuals or church groups is very much appreciated. And if you send enough of these things for the soldier to share with others in his or her unit, that’s even better!
4. When the service member comes home, welcome him or her home. A simple acknowledgement in the church bulletin or newsletter, and an announcement from the lectern is good. But be sensitive to the fact that the soldier may not be ready for a big homecoming celebration. Also be sure to recognize the sacrifice the family has made during the soldier’s absence and publicly affirm their service also.
5. Listen, support, absolve and don’t condemn. Soldiers returning from war need a safe place where they can share the experiences that may trouble them. They need a safe place where they can wrestle with their doubts, their questions, and even their anger at God. I would have to say that they will not be looking for cheap grace or pat answers, but for compassion and a recognition of the trauma they have suffered. A church that can be this kind of spiritual haven can be a place of healing for them and their families.
6. Be alert to signs of distress. Just because a soldier and his or her family attend your church’s worship service doesn’t mean that they may not be having problems. Look for signs of depression, anger, withdrawal, addictive behaviors, inability to keep a job, discomfort with being in crowds, or other signs of distress. Pay attention to what they are saying and doing. By expressing concern and knowing where to get help, your church may enable them to receive the help they need to successfully adjust to life at home from the war.

In the May 26, 2008 issue of *Time* magazine, Nancy Gibbs wrote an article in which she said “How we treat our veterans says a lot about America’s character.” I think that is true of every nation that sends its people to war. And she quoted this poem that some soldier etched on the wall of a sentry box in Gibraltar many years ago:

*God and the soldier, all men adore  
In time of danger and not before.  
When the danger is passed and all things righted,  
God is forgotten, and the soldier slighted.*

During visits to the Pentagon, I have been drawn to the pictures of some of our nation’s Medal of Honor winners that hang on a wall in the Pentagon Conference Center. Under each picture there is a paragraph in which the person shown shares what I would describe as “words of wisdom.” As I looked at the pictures and read the words, there was one that stood out to me more than all the rest. It was written by an African American named Vernon J. Baker. This is what he said: “*War is the most regrettable proving ground.*”

*Those who launch it, and those who seek to create heroes from it, should remember its legacy. You have to be there to appreciate its horrors—and die to forget them.”*

Those who die in the service of our countries deserve to be honored. And those who will live on with wounds of body or spirit deserve not only to be honored, but to be well cared for. We need to open our eyes to see them, and open our hearts to embrace them. We need to do whatever we can to help them find their way home again. They and their families deserve nothing less.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, I would remind us again that it is our challenge in this day and age to determine what we owe to God and what we owe to Caesar. I believe that we owe it to both God and to the State to play a prophetic and pastoral role prior to, during, and in the aftermath of war. We need to be a voice of reason and sanity before a war is ever begun. We need to call our leaders to task for maintaining a level of morality and humanity as a war is prosecuted. And we need to advocate and work for the ending of war with a just and lasting peace. Equally important, all of us who call ourselves followers of the Prince of Peace and the Good Shepherd, must care for those whose bodies, minds, and souls have been so terribly wounded because of having gone to war.

Thank you for your kind attention.

Rev. John F. Gundlach  
Captain, Chaplain Corps  
United States Navy (Retired)

United Church of Christ

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