

Aiming to counter trend, UCC seminary will train military chaplains

by [Tim Townsend](#) in the [February 8, 2011](#) issue

A military chaplain serves as both a religious leader and a listener—ideally one who can assist military personnel of all faiths. A frequent refrain among chaplains is that one is a "chaplain to all, pastor to some." But government statistics show that the nation's corps of chaplains leans heavily toward evangelical Christianity, failing to mirror the military it serves.

Even though just 3 percent of the military's enlisted personnel and officers call themselves Southern Baptist, Pentecostal or some form of evangelical, 33 percent of military chaplains are members of one of those groups, according to the Pentagon.

The disparity could soon widen: data from the air force indicate that 87 percent of those seeking to become chaplains are enrolled at evangelical divinity schools. Liberty Baptist Theological Seminary, part of the Jerry Falwell-founded Liberty University, started its chaplaincy degree program in 2007 with two students and has more than 1,000 today—all but about 30 students taking the M.Div. courses online.

The paucity of nonevangelical chaplains results from a number of variables, but a major factor is commonly thought to be a post-Vietnam aversion by mainline Protestant and Catholic seminary leaders to participating in military culture.

Liberal theologians and educators say the imbalance could compromise efforts to meet the spiritual needs of many Protestant and Catholic soldiers facing combat or the stresses of military life. And some critics go further, arguing

that the armed forces are becoming a mission field for evangelical Christianity.

In response, Eden Theological Seminary is launching its own program to train chaplains. The school in St. Louis is affiliated with the United Church of Christ, one of the more liberal mainline denominations. Its decision to train chaplains comes despite reservations about military involvement and objections to war. "There's a vacuum," said Eden's president, David Greenhaw. "And there's a general sense here that it's important to fill that vacuum."

The roots of the new program go back to a visit that Eden professor Kristen Leslie and her graduate students made in 2004 to the Air Force Academy in Colorado Springs to train chaplains there to deal with sexualized violence on campus.

Leslie, then a professor at Yale Divinity School, later filed a report saying she and her students observed cadets who "were encouraged to pray for the salvation of fellow [cadets] who chose not to attend worship" and were told that those not "born again will burn in the fires of hell."

Mikey Weinstein, an Air Force Academy graduate and president of the Military Religious Freedom Foundation, has spent recent years fighting aggressive proselytizing at the academy and across the military. "These are government-backed missionaries for Jesus Christ who see the military as a mission field, fecund and fertile for proselytizing," Weinstein said. "I commend [Eden] for trying to fight back."

Military officials say they are sensitive to issues of diversity and interfaith understanding. "We look, in particular, for a pluralistic understanding or attitude," said Col. Steven Keith, a chaplain and commandant of the Air Force Chaplain Corps College in Fort Jackson, South Carolina. "We want you to keep your theology, and be able to work with people of different theologies."

Critics say much of the imbalance stems from the fact that the faiths of chaplains do not reflect the military rank and file.

For example, while Catholics make up the largest share of active-duty members of the military (20 percent), just 8 percent of military chaplains are Catholic. Southern Baptists, who make up just 1 percent of the military, account for 16 percent of active-duty chaplains.

According

to the Pentagon, there are 33 Jewish, Muslim, Buddhist, Baha'i or Hindu chaplains across all branches of the military to serve the less than 1 percent of military members who belong to those faiths.

Air force

data show that the vast majority of prospective chaplains are choosing divinity schools with an evangelical Christian focus. Military officials say they can't change that. "We mirror . . . what's going on in the civilian sector, so a decline in mainliners naturally means a decline in mainline Protestant chaplains," Keith said.

As Eden launches

its chaplain program, its leaders say the school is placed in the difficult position of choosing between a theological aversion to war and a desire to right a theological imbalance they see in the chaplain corps.

"There's a feeling that you don't want to affiliate with the military for fear that such an affiliation could be seen as an endorsement, an encouragement and support for warfare," said Greenhaw. He said the chaplains that Eden hopes to produce would be "distinctively Christian, actively ecumenical and actively interfaith." And despite some theological reservations about working with the military, the Eden faculty is on board.

"Schools like ours have tended to not want to be involved," Greenhaw said. "You have the full weight of ambiguity about even having a military, but ambiguity doesn't mean people in the military shouldn't have the ministry of the church." —RNS