

Heavy hearts: Truth-telling prophet, caring pastor

by [John Buchanan](#) in the [July 13, 2004](#) issue

Pastors often experience an uncomfortable tension between trying to be both a truth-telling prophet and a caring pastor. That's the case these days as I, like most pastors, take in the news of ghastly terrorist violence in the Middle East, the ongoing violence in Iraq, and the regular reports of civilians and U.S. soldiers killed. When it comes to speaking out on such matters, the parish minister is struck by the reality that the congregation includes people with vastly different perspectives.

Sitting together in the same pew may be outspoken opponents of U.S. military action, who look to their church for theological grounding and moral support for their views, which seem to them a simple reflection of the Sermon on the Mount; parents of a young soldier in Iraq for whom the war is a nightmare and every ring of the telephone an occasion for heart-stopping anguish; and a retired military officer who regards every criticism of U.S. policy as a sign of lack of support for the troops.

So I read with interest [John W. de Gruchy's review](#) of a recent book by Stanley Hauerwas about Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the German theologian and onetime pacifist who was involved in a plot to kill Hitler. De Gruchy, a South African who teaches at the University of Cape Town, and Hauerwas, on the faculty at Duke, are two of the most stimulating Christian thinkers around. Both warn against oversimplifying Bonhoeffer's decision to use violence.

De Gruchy reminds us of the agonizing and very controversial decision by the African National Congress in 1963 to move away from Gandhian nonviolence toward armed struggle against the apartheid system. I remember how difficult it was for American churchpeople to understand that decision. De Gruchy notes that Bonhoeffer took his own position with reluctance and humility and a sense that even a "just" act of violence is an awful act. This humility is something most military people tend to understand well.

I think it was Reinhold Niebuhr who said that when a Christian decides to take up arms—and I would add, when a pastor decides to support his nation's military activity—it should be with humility, a sense the pervasiveness of sin, and a heavy heart. The dilemma all of us find ourselves in is, as de Gruchy concludes, a reminder of our need for the grace of God.