

Congregation in uniform: Unselective service

by [John Buchanan](#) in the [June 14, 2003](#) issue

We've received a small but steady stream of letters objecting to the advertisements in our pages for military chaplaincy. Some have argued that military chaplaincy is objectionable on moral grounds and probably unconstitutional. Others have been distressed by the way the chaplain in the ads seems to be blessing military activity. Some accused us of caving in to the culture of war and concluded that we'd probably advertise anything so long as the customer paid the price.

The magazine's editors are not of one mind on this issue, and such diversity is probably a pretty good thing in a journal like this one. As we discussed the issue, I recalled a phone conversation I had with a chaplain at West Point during the Vietnam war. He had inquired if I might be interested in applying for one of the assistant chaplain positions at the academy.

The massacre at My Lai had just occurred, and after a long struggle I had concluded that the U.S. presence and activity in Southeast Asia was wrong and that I needed to go public with my convictions. I wrote the chaplain a long and what I intended to be thoughtful letter, declining his offer and explaining why I thought the war was wrong.

A few days later I was told there was a man on the phone who said he was from West Point and he sounded angry. "Buchanan," he said when I answered, "I don't like this [expletive deleted] war either. But that doesn't mean I have the right to back away from some of the finest young Americans at the very time their needs are the greatest.

"Who do you think you are?" he asked. "You've just decided not to be a minister to the brightest and best of our young people, the ones who will go on to become national leaders in the military, education, science, politics, at the very moment in their lives when their values are being formed. I hope you feel good about that." Then he hung up.

When I had the privilege of serving the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) as moderator of the General Assembly I visited some of our chaplains and found them committed to their sense of call, aware of the constitutional and theological issues accompanying military chaplaincy and willing to live with the tensions because of their commitment to their flocks. They also felt distant from their church.

I talked to a Korean Presbyterian woman serving as an army chaplain who told me about wading ashore in Haiti with her unit in the middle of the night, unarmed, not knowing what she would encounter. I talked to a navy chaplain, near retirement, who went with his marine unit yearly to Okinawa to spend several months living in a tent, in tropical heat, fighting sand fleas and counseling young marines separated for six months from families, spouses and children.

Christians are involved in this world. Being a faithful Christian means risking getting one's hands dirty. I've learned to respect those who minister to people in the military, even if I may disagree with what the military is doing. The actions of the military, and the role of chaplains, are issues we will continue to address in the content of the magazine. And we'll continue to run ads for military chaplaincy.