

**Written Testimony of Rev. Dr. C. Welton Gaddy, President of Interfaith Alliance  
Submitted to  
The House Armed Services Committee,  
  
Subcommittee on Military Personnel  
for the Hearing Record on “Religious Accommodations in the Armed Services ”  
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As a Baptist minister, a patriotic American and the President of Interfaith Alliance, I submit this testimony to The House Armed Services Committee, Subcommittee on Military Personnel for the Hearing Record on “Religious Accommodations in the Armed Services.” A national, non-partisan organization, Interfaith Alliance celebrates religious freedom and is dedicated to protecting faith and freedom with members nationwide who belong to 75 faith traditions as well as those without a faith tradition. Through my work at the Interfaith Alliance I have had numerous opportunities to engage with the military on issues of religious freedom. From my trip to the Air Force Academy to discuss religious freedom concerns on campus, to a Capitol Hill symposium of military chaplains I hosted in 2011 and my organization’s tireless work to repeal Don’t Ask Don’t Tell, I have consistently been impressed by the military’s openness to Interfaith Alliance’s concerns and their willingness to consider the changes we propose.

In my more than fifty years as a minister, I have witnessed time and time again the immense sacrifice that the men and women of the armed services make for our country. Service in the military necessarily comes with some disruption to an individual’s personal and family life, individual freedom and religious community, however there are some sacrifices we should not ask of these men and women.

The U.S. military must strive to protect the personal religious freedom of every one of its service-members. The Interfaith Alliance firmly believes that it is America’s commitment to religious pluralism and the freedom of religious practice that has made American democracy great – certainly these same commitments will make those who defend our democracy great as well. We must ensure that our military, like our nation as a whole, remains open to a wide variety of religious practice and abstains from the public adoption of any one religion.

Where possible, the right of an individual service-member to adhere to religious practices of grooming, garb and personal prayer should not be infringed. It would be unjust to ask a Sikh man, a Muslim woman or an Orthodox Jew, who has already given so much to our military and our country, to give up these religious practices without a compelling military reason. Furthermore, it is critical that these accommodations follow service-members throughout their careers and are not subject to the whims or personal biases of individual military officers.

While the individual right of a service-member to pray is crucial to the promise of religious freedom, the military cannot allow public, communal prayer outside of designated times for religious services. Just as we must respect the religious freedom of those who choose to pray, we must respect the freedom of those who choose not to – and we must prevent the social isolation and harassment that can arise from these situations.

The First Amendment that guarantees the men and women of the armed services their religious freedom also guarantees them the freedom of speech to express these beliefs. This protection is immutable and does not need the supposed reinforcement written into Section 533 of last year's National Defense Authorization Act. While Section 533 purports to protect the freedom of conscience of members, at best it is redundant and at worst it is a subtle attempt to distort the promise of religious freedom to legitimate discrimination and harassment.

The freedom of conscience of service-members and chaplains has never been, and never will be, under threat by the U.S. military's laudable work to include gay and lesbian service-members. What is not protected is hate speech, discrimination or harassment justified under the guise of religion or "deeply held moral beliefs." The right of gay and lesbian service-members to serve in the military openly and free from fear must not be sacrificed in the name of a misunderstood concept of religious freedom. Just as affirming the religious identities of all service-members is integral to building a healthy and cohesive military, so too is affording lesbian and gay service-members the human dignity they deserve.

Military chaplains can play a transformative role in helping guide individual service-members and creating vibrant communities within the ranks of the armed services. As clergy in their private lives, many of these chaplains are entitled to certain liberties that are not afforded them in their role as officers of the U.S. armed forces. There is no facet of American life, the military included, where agents of the state are allowed to discriminate based on religion, proselytize or sanction sectarian prayer. Those are freedoms that chaplains willingly and knowingly relinquish when they enlist. They do not need, nor should they be permitted any "extra protections."

The members of Interfaith Alliance and I recognize that the circumstances faced by the men and women of the U.S. armed forces are often extraordinary. Striking the proper balance between the religious freedom and emotional well being of every service-member and the good order and discipline of the military is not easy. The preceding testimony, however, contains tried and true principles that we believe can help the armed forces maintain that balance.