



**Presidential Religious Liberty Commission  
Fourth Hearing Transcript  
December 10, 2025  
The Debate Chamber at the Old Parkland  
Dallas, Texas**

---

**Testimony on the Military Chaplaincy**

Chap (Maj. Gen.) Doug Carver, USA (Ret.).....	2
Chap. Rabbi (Col.) Dresin, USA (Ret.) .....	8
Amy Vitale, Government Affairs Counsel, Becket.....	13
Monsignor Anthony Frontiero, S.T.D., Vicar General and the Moderator of the Curia, Archdiocese for the Military Services, USA .....	16

## **Chap (Maj. Gen.) Doug Carver, USA (Ret.)**

**Chaplain (Maj. Gen.) Doug Carver, USA (Ret.):** Thank you. Lieutenant Governor Patrick, distinguished committee and guests, thank you for this opportunity to give my public testimony about religious liberty in the armed forces.

It was my humble honor to have worn the uniform for 38 years, eight years as a field artillery officer and 30 years as a Chaplain, appointed as a 22nd Army Chief of Chaplains during the Bush era, I asked God for a scripture that I could use during my time as the Chief of Chaplains. It was from Psalm 28:9, which basically I prayed and continued to pray over the members of the armed services. Basically, “Lord, save your troops, bless your troops, shepherd your troops and carry them forever.”

That remains my prayer today for those who serve have answered the call to duty.

Less than 1% of our population ever wears the uniform.

And so, they are very, very, very important to me. And one of the important resources that exist within the armed services is that of the military Chaplain.

We’ve just celebrated 250 years of our heritage. And so, in my remarks today, I’d like to kind of talk about three things:

- One, the legacy of the military Chaplaincy.
- Secondly, the landscape of what it sort of looks like today.
- And then maybe with some lessons learned.

In 1775, the new Continental Army commander in Chief George Washington, one of his first requests of Congress was that a religious leader—Chaplain—might be appointed to serve the needs of this new military.

And if I can move forward to December the 17th, 1777. It was a distinctive point. On that particular day, a day of prayer and fasting took place before the Continental Army moved into Valley Forge, where they would spend a six-month hard winter and a deployment. On that particular day, a young 30-year-old Chaplain, Israel Evans, was asked to speak and his message was from Psalm 115, verse one, not to us, O Lord, not to us, but to your name be the glory, because of your love and faithfulness. And he went on to say in a very lengthy sermon, which I will summarize, that it’s not the size of the military. It’s not the brilliance of the strategists who lead the military. It’s not the fierceness of the warriors who fight our battles, but it all—all of the glory, all the power, all the honor—belongs to the Lord.

When General Washington heard the sermon, he said, “we need the blessing and the protection of heaven at all times for success, especially in times of public distress and danger.”

And he summarized some things that he wanted his Chaplains to instill in the lives and the heart of the Continental Army soldiers: one, that they trust in a supreme being, the providence of God in their lives; and, also, that they would do their best to reflect through their moral character and conduct the nature of that supreme being of which they worshiped.

And so, for 250 years, our Chaplains have always been there with in respect to their faith, beliefs and practices as they are sent out by their religious institutions.

Of about 225 endorsing agency or religious bodies who send Chaplains into the armed services, I would say one of their missions is always to be there and provide a ministry of presence in the lives of our troops to remind them, should they need to be reminded, especially in times of danger and pain, that a Supreme Being, that God is there with them.

Our Chaplains have endured the winners of Valley Forge. They've comforted the wounded in action the first time that opposite forces of Union and the Confederate Chaplains all prayed over and buried the respective individuals from that particular battle. We've braved trench warfare, stormed the beaches of Normandy, endured the cold winters of the Korean War, slugged through the Battle of Vietnam, traveled the most dangerous roads in Southwest Asia.

Our Chaplains were there, and as our Chaplains have been with troops, they have felt convicted to ensure that they are with them, that they are honoring them, that they are caring for them, that they are nurturing the living, that they are tending to the wounded. They're honoring the fallen.

One of our Chaplains, Chaplain Charles Pierce, in the early 1900s, saw something that was taking place that needed to be corrected. He noticed that during the Civil War that over 40% of those who had were killed during the war were unidentified, and his desire was to ensure that we show the respect and dignity to those who have fallen in battle. And he came up with something called "identification tags"—name, rank, serial number, also in the faith of that particular individual, so that we might show the dignity to the fallen.

There's another Chaplain by the name of Oliver Nave. He wanted to ensure that our troops read the Bible, that they read the Sacred Scripture. And so, he worked on a 14-year study classifying various topics in the Bible—22,000 topics, by the way, and Chaplain Oliver Nave produced the Nave's Study Bible, which some of us are aware of.

We had 13 Chaplains jump into Normandy.

Four Chaplains on the USS Dorchester as that was sinking. There's a beautiful picture of a rabbi, a Roman Catholic priest, a United Methodist Chaplain, and a Dutch Reformed Chaplain, all linking arms after they had cared for the troops, many of whom perished. As the as this ship was going down, they also went down, but they stood in unity to their very death, because they had given up their life preservers to those who did not have them.

Chaplain Robert Taylor, you may never have heard of him, but he was a POW and was with his troops on a 65-mile Bataan Death March.

Emil Kapaun, Chaplain Emil Capan, who was a POW in the Korean War, and he served their particular needs until his own demise and death, ensuring that they again experienced the presence of God through his ministry to them even as he was dying.

Chaplain Charlie Waters in the Battle of Dak To during Vietnam, again out front, serving the needs of our troops, ensuring that they were being brought close to the presence of God and receiving spiritual nourishment as God would give that to them.

Some of you may have never heard of Dale Goetz. Dale Goetz was our first Chaplain killed in action since Vietnam? He was killed in action in Kandahar in 2010 while supporting a sister battalion, ensuring that they had an opportunity to reflect on the things of God.

And even today in Congress, we have two former Chaplains, Navy Chaplains Barry Black and Margaret Kibben, who often, as they serve the 119th United States Congress, ensure that even our congressional leaders have an opportunity to reflect on the things of the Lord.

So, my point is, our Chaplains have always been there. And by the way, Chaplains are noncombatants. They don't carry a weapon, but they are there with our troops performing religious services within their own faith, beliefs and practices, and ensuring that those who are not within their own faith and belief background have the opportunity also to be respected for their particular religious beliefs.

A Chaplain is a religious leader and an advisor to the chain of command.

A Chaplain is a prophetic voice, one who hopefully will speak truth to power.

The landscape—I entered the army in 1973. At that time, Chaplains taught character guidance classes. They'd been doing it since 1953. Because of some of the challenges of our veterans in World War II and the Korean War, Chaplains had the opportunity to have a duty day with God, one day a month where Chaplains would take troops on fly fishing, hiking, some adventuresome training, and it would include an opportunity to have some spiritual reflection.

Our military chapels on the weekends were decorated with flags from units that actually sponsored a military chapel for that particular weekend service.

In 1977, I signed for. Field Artillery Battery, a company of 110 soldiers, and part of my requirement was to look in their eyes to ensure they had the ID card, their dog tags, that they were actually present for duty. And after that took place, I had to sign a government document, not for 110 soldiers, but as I recall it, and that was some time ago, I signed for 110 souls. I was responsible as a young 26-year-old officer, for the souls of all those within my chain of command, and that's why I needed a Chaplain.

I was raised in a Christian home. I accepted Jesus Christ as my Savior and Lord when I was 11 years old, but I needed some help working with those who were not from my particular religious

background. And I looked to my Chaplain to advise me on how properly to ensure the free exercise of religion in my ranks.

As I look at the challenges of the day in the landscape, we are losing ground—as many of you have already mentioned—in the area of religious liberty.

And, as a good Baptist. I'll kind of alliterate a couple of things.

There is a defiance to Almighty God, or to the authority of God, or to authority in general. We can read that and see that every day in the news. There's a degradation to the Supreme Being having any input into our lives. I'm not sure how we can change that direction without serious repentance. 2 Chronicles 7:14, "If my people, which are called by my name, shall humble themselves, and pray and seek my face, and turn from their wicked ways, then then God will hear from heaven and forgive their sin and cleanse their land."

We need that kind of repentance, especially as we face the 250th celebration of our nation in 2026.

Wouldn't it be wonderful to have a spiritual awakening that moves across our nation?

Secondly, there is a dilution of religion's importance in the lives of people.

You hear the common phrase, now "I'm spiritual, but I'm not religious." We're almost afraid to use that word religion and religious.

And what we now have is this loose spirituality that does not have necessarily a religious leader to lead you in, that there's no Sacred Scripture in which you can walk together in that particular faith group. In some cases, if you're only spiritual without a religious community to grow in your faith and to be accountable, that's where a lot of isolation and alienation comes.

So, I would say that religious community is very therapeutic and helpful, as we all learn to grow in the fear and the reverence of Almighty God.

And finally, there is a depreciation or denigration of the importance of Chaplains, military Chaplains as religious leaders.

According to United States Code Title 10, which appoints and pays for Chaplains, we pay for religious leaders. That's what our government does.

What I see a trend that we're almost losing that identity within the context of the armed services.

As a religious leader, Chaplains are called, and I just wrote a few of these down spiritual readiness "coaches, combat multipliers, morale officer, the spiritual technician, values facilitator." "Resident philosopher." I added that one.

And there's nothing wrong with us taking on other opportunities and duties that Chaplains obviously do. You'll not find someone better counselor in the area of crisis than Chaplains. They know something about crisis and traumatic moments. They know something about family life.

They know something about marriage. They know something about working with parents. They know something about working with others and being a reconciliation agent.

And yet, bottom line, their primary role in the context of the United States armed services is that they are religious leaders first and foremost. But the role of Chaplain seems to have been diminished.

You've asked what happened in the last 15 or 20 years.

I noticed it when I first came in the Army in the early 80s that we would be told, you can only pray a nonsectarian prayer, whatever that means.

No one, to my knowledge, even today, tells the Chaplain how to pray.

They can pray within the context of their faith, beliefs, and practices.

If a Chaplain is told how not to pray or how to pray, you've just established religion and you've violated the religious liberty.

And yet, Chaplains have also, maybe they can't share their theological beliefs or thoughts on the sanctity of human life, or biblical sexuality, or marriage or family.

In some respects, Chaplains have been removed from some of these discussions where they need to be front line and center, including in the area of religious accommodation.

Our religious apparel, our dietary requirements or grooming standards, or Covid shots. But something happened that it gets too complicated when you get the Chaplain engaged. And yet that's why you absolutely need to hear from this individual who has another set of eyes and experience about what most benefits and helps and can speak to the particular issue. Chaplains who are providing ministry of presence and they are truth bearers and they bring soul care in two days.

**Chairman Lt. Gov. Patrick:** General, can I have you kind of come to a conclusion just so we can stay on time?

**Chap. Maj. Gen. Carver:** Yes, sir.

In two days, Fort Campbell will observe the 40th anniversary of the worst airplane crash in history. December the 12th, 1985. The plane crashed on takeoff at Gander, Newfoundland. There were no survivors. And I still remember our commanding general, who basically, as he looked at a room full of Chaplains and commanders, he said to the senior Chaplain, "Chaplain, tell us what we need to do."

And I close my remarks. Basically, with this, there is still, within the context of the armed services, those questions that are being asked that I believe Chaplains have an answer to soul questions. "Chaplain, what I need to do to take away the guilt, the pain, what I need to help me sleep or to ease my conscience, or to forgive others, or to forgive myself." "Chaplain. What will help me

break addiction? What will help my marriage? What will help me love my family? What gives me hope?"

And I believe that's why we need to really emphasize within the context of this, of this Commission and this hearing, to reemphasize the critical role that Chaplains play as religious leaders within the context of the armed services.

**Chairman Lt. Gov. Patrick:** Thank you. General. Rabbi.

## **Chap. Rabbi (Col.) Dresin, USA (Ret.)**

**Chap. Rabbi Col. Dresin:** So, I'm sort of grateful that I am following Chaplain Carver because to some degree, I'm going to echo much of what he said. I may find myself being critical of the Chaplaincy, but hopefully in a positive way.

So let me begin by, ladies and gentlemen of the Commission, I greatly appreciate the opportunity to testify before you to assist in your mission, to mend the very broken and dysfunctional spiritual environment in today's US military.

To be sure, President Trump and Congress have taken steps to support religious liberty in the military, such as policy changes under the first Trump administration that protected religious accommodation for beards, for Jewish service members, and legislation by Congress in the 2012 and 2020 National Defense Authorization Act that required protection for religious liberty and mandated military training on religious freedom—mandatory.

But as you will see from my testimony today, more work is necessary.

Even the existing protection that are at risk at being rolled back, with Jewish service members being forced to choose between serving their country or their religion.

That dilemma runs counter to the very values on which this nation was founded.

At every stage of his service member's career, beginning at the recruiting office and continuing through basic training, deployment and beyond, we see mounting obstacles to Jewish religious accommodation and free exercise rights.

Given the central place of the First Amendment in our constitutional framework, we believe that religious accommodation should not be treated as an exception to policy. It should be policy.

My name is Rabbi Sanford Dresin. I served for over 26 years as an active duty Army Chaplain, retiring in the rank of colonel. I have been the Chaplain endorser for the Aleph Institute for nearly 20 years. The Aleph Institute was founded in 1981 to serve the needs of Jewish men and women who find themselves distant from the support of a Jewish community. In the 1990s, Aleph served as the US military, first by providing religious supplies and materials, and then in 2007, becoming a Department of Defense-recognized Chaplain endorsing agency. We now endorse over 50 Jewish Chaplains and contract rabbis. We also advise and advocate for Jewish service members to ensure their free exercise rights are respected. We estimate that 50 to 75% of the religious accommodation needs that come to our attention require our intervention. Yet while our advocacy has been strong, Aleph's power is only advisory.

All too often, Jewish needs are dismissed outright. The cases we see each year number in the hundreds, and that does not include those who never reached it reach us because they are in basic training, deployed, or have a simple or simply given up.



Let me walk you through what Jewish service members experience. Starting with the earliest stage recruitment, recruiters are rarely familiar with religious accommodation, rarely familiar. Moreover, they are incentivized to meet recruiting quotas. It's a numbers game.

Because of that, recruiters fail to advise recruits about receiving exceptions to policy. Religious exceptions to policy. Many recruits who do request accommodations are told that will be taken care of in basic training, or you will request that when you arrive at your unit, when in fact it is not.

Testimonies in the packet you will receive illustrate this chronic situation. We have packets for many of you here which have the anecdotal material, so to speak, of what I'm talking about.

At basic training, these problems intensify. Trainees are intimidated easily by cadre, and the religious liberty rights are routinely disregarded.

Many troops report that during basic training, the religious preference on the dog tags and personal records is automatically set to a generic "none." That's the kind of default or non-denominational, and they are told to fix it at their first duty station. This is unacceptable.

In addition, kosher meals ready to eat (the field rations) are not consistently available. The need for Jewish Sabbath and holiday worship is regularly not acknowledged. Non-Jewish Chaplains rarely advocate for their Jewish personnel, and most training bases do not have a Jewish Chaplain or contract rabbi assigned to them, so the burden is left to the individual recruit.

Unfortunately, the struggles do not end. After basic training. Jewish service members face regular impediments to their religious observance at all stages of their careers. They could be a private, they could be an officer, a field grade officer, or even higher. They need to fight for accommodation for every Sabbath and holiday, and fight to receive kosher MREs at every field, training, exercise and deployment.

That brings me to our first major area of concern: food rations. Religiously observant, and even many less observant, Jews keep a kosher diet. The parameters of kosher diet are complex and beyond the scope of these proceedings. The US military does provide kosher memories. However, there are many problems with the availability and distribution of these emissaries. Pre-session, or pre movement requests for kosher memories are not taken seriously and orders don't get processed. The process of acquisition of kosher memories is complex and lends to breakdowns in communication. This ordering process must be simplified.

Who is responsible to order these rations? No, no one has identified clearly in the regulations—supply chains, the unit or the Chaplain? How does the information flow to the Jewish Service member? How can the servicemember follow up to ensure their food will be available? A Jewish soldier who currently who is currently deployed, wrote us to just wrote to us last week. Most of my calories are stuff like chips, honey buns and chocolates because they can't get MREs. Why is that okay? Why is that acceptable?

Even when supplies exist, how do personnel get them?

A command Chaplain, a senior command Chaplain in the Middle East told us that he has a warehouse full of kosher MREs in his area of responsibility. But our Jewish service members arriving on station can't easily access them.

In one case, an officer in the Space Force was interrogated by a wing Chaplain when she requested kosher MREs. It was only when Aleph intervened that she was given the MREs.

In addition, there is a lack of training as to what constitutes kosher. As you will see in your packets, many supply sergeants have substituted non-kosher alternatives—vegetarian, halal or porkless food instead of kosher.

I can only recall anecdotally when I was the command Chaplain for the seventh Medical Command in Germany, when we deployed to at the beginning of the Iraq War, our medical teams went in there and they decided to drop MREs to the Kurds. And not knowing that Kurds do not eat pork. And what, lo and behold, what was in the MREs? Pork products. Well, our doctors, when this came out were scared stiff because they thought the Kurds were going to wind up shooting them. So, there is a lack of education here when it comes to things like that.

Finally, the quality of kosher memories is far below nutritional standards. Thanks to an amendment in the 2026 National Defense Authorization Act, which is was shaped by Aleph in concert with Representative Abraham Hamadeh, the law now requires functional parity and equitable treatment for kosher MREs.

We look forward to seeing that requirement implemented before July 2026 as required.

And, focusing on commissaries. You know, commissary is like a military supermarket, but few substantive kosher products are found in their facilities in comparison with the average American supermarket. I know down south here, I can walk into a Piggly Wiggly and get bagels and lox and cream cheese and find a lot of kosher food. That doesn't hold true in many of our commissaries. This is because commissaries in the United States are limited by local distributors. For commissaries outside the United States, the situation is exacerbated by.

**Chairman Lt. Gov. Patrick:** Rabbi. Excuse me, can I have you kind of conclude and wind up recommend you wind up?

**Rabbi Col. Dresin:** Yes, I will wind it up. Basically, there is a lot of ignorance in terms of the role of Chaplain. You know, many commanders will accept the Chaplain if they see him as a combat multiplier. Yes. You know, but otherwise, if he functions in traditional spiritual domains, it's he's like a fifth wheel. And so I have much more to share with you. But I would, you know, given the pressures of time and so forth and the patients and the bladders of our people here, I would I'm willing to relinquish my time. And if there are any questions, be happy to answer them.

**Chairman Lt. Gov. Patrick:** Thank you. Rabbi, any questions? Yes. Bishop Barron.

**Commissioner Bishop Barron:** Yeah, thank you both very much for the presentations. And this has been eye opening in many ways. To me, this whole hearing today, one thing I'm intrigued by, I've been following this whole question of disaffiliation for a long time. Young people, especially going away from the faith. But in recent years, we've seen a halting of that, even a little bit of an uptick of interest. I spoke at the Naval Academy a couple of years ago, and was met with this extraordinary enthusiasm from these young kids. My question is, do you sense a resistance to the religious dimension among the soldiers and sailors themselves, or is it higher up in the chain of command, like where is the where is the institutional opposition coming from? If you sense, you know, things have shifted. My guess is among the young, you know, soldiers and sailors themselves. It's not there. But I'd be curious to know.

**Chap. Maj. Gen. Carver:** I work with our Chaplains at our basic training out installations. Let's take Fort Jackson, I think, which averages the highest number of new recruits, and also on the service academies. And both of them, I can say the same thing. They are hungry for truth. Any truth. They are hungry for relationships. They are interested in spiritual things, and they are interested in religion and community.

And you find that within the context of, of, of a religious community of which we can provide.

And so I can tell you, there seems to be an uptick, especially in that initial entry training.

But something happens as they go forth from their basic training outfits to the new units.

And I could argue that it might be, as the Rabbi has mentioned, it could be training that does not take place within the within the context of units that they go to, or any mandatory training discussions on, on RFRA, discussions on the worldview. Just there are so many things that could take place.

And I do remember back in the 70s, at least, we used to have some of these philosophical discussions on race relations or on character guidance. But something's happened. It's like, no, it's all about war fighting. We don't have time to talk on some of these soft areas of which there is an interest, including in the area of religion.

**Chap. Rabbi Dresin:** Yeah. I would just like to add to Chaplain Carver that I was a race relations facilitator in the early 70s following the Vietnam War, where we did experience a lot of racial conflict there. And so Chaplains were the facilitators doing this type of work. And I would like to also point out that I find the average troop is quite amenable to the Chaplain. I think a lot of it is top down. The problems that we're experiencing are top down. So if we have mandatory training in RFRA or free exercise issues, then I would demand that senior officers be required to attend, not simply be able to sign off on a site and say they were present, but I would like to see them there as a requirement.

**Chairman Lt. Gov. Patrick:** So fine. We'd love your recommendations to what you think we should put in the report for the president. Because again, our charter is to report not to Congress,

but directly to the president. So, if you will do that, thank both of you for your long service. And thank you for your testimony. And I apologize for having to hurry you along a little bit, but we lose the room at a certain time, and I have a few more witnesses. So, General. Thank you, Rabbi. Thank you.

Rabbi just said, in a crazy way, he may be related to me. So that's a whole 'nother story. We got to go back there. That's very funny. Thank you. Rabbi. Our next two witnesses. Our next two witnesses.

## **Amy Vitale, Government Affairs Counsel, Becket**

**Amy Vitale:** Thank you.

**Chairman Lt. Gov. Patrick::** Please tell us who you are and why you're here.

**Amy Vitale:** Mr. Chairman, thank you for the honor of this invitation and the chance to be in this incredible building. The love of history and attention to architectural detail is around every corner. It's delightful. My name is Amy Vitale, and I serve as government affairs counsel with the Becket Fund for Religious Liberty.

It's fitting that we're here today to talk about military Chaplains, because the Army Chaplaincy turned 250 years old this July, military Chaplains have been meeting the religious needs of our service members since before the very founding of our nation. We've heard so much about this this morning.

Many of us do not understand the duties of a military Chaplain, because we will never encounter the challenges of deployment or the harsh realities of war. Chaplains are an often unseen but critical part of the support structure needed by the brave men and women and their families who take up that burden. They follow service members directly into harm's way, and they do so unarmed as noncombatants.

Because the military Chaplaincy is unique, I'd like to highlight three components of the Chaplain Corps and its supporting legal structures.

First, the Chaplaincy is necessary to fulfill the government's constitutional obligation of providing for the religious exercise of service members. Religious liberty is core to what makes America a great nation. In the context of military service. That First Amendment promise creates an additional duty to provide for religious exercise. That's because those who answer the call to defend our nation, leave their faith communities and support structures to deploy to new and foreign places. They are asked to take on challenging, stressful, grueling duties far from home. And that's why the Chaplaincy exists to bring God to soldiers and soldiers, to God on the front lines, where no one else can.

George Washington understood this, which is why, in 1775, as the general of the Continental Army, Washington created the Chaplaincy that is still in existence to this day.

The Chaplaincy ensures that the government is meeting this constitutional duty to provide for the religious needs of our men and women in uniform. It is not optional. It is an essential element of support for our military service members.

Second, the role of a Chaplain is inherently religious.

The panel before us touched on this as well. Of course, the government isn't qualified to decide who can be a Jewish rabbi or a Catholic priest or a Muslim imam. So, all Chaplains are endorsed or certified by their own religious groups, who are best fit to judge those religious qualifications.

These Chaplains then perform two roles. They are both commissioned officers in the United States military, and they are religious leaders. But, at all times, they represent the ecclesiastical bodies that certify them to the military branches as fit to provide pastoral care.

Military Chaplains distinctively serve members of all faiths, not just their own.

There are approximately 3,000 Chaplains across the entire United States military, and they are responsible for supporting almost 1.32 million active-duty personnel, counseling them, providing pastoral support, and leading congregational worship—3,000 Chaplains, 1.32 million active-duty personnel.

If there is a religious need that a Chaplain cannot meet, they work to connect the service member with somebody who can.

When Chaplains perform their duties, they are doing so as pastors, priests, rabbis, imams of their own faith groups.

This means that the Chaplains Council is inherently religious, and it's protected by the First Amendment, which places a structural protection around Chaplains' performance of their religious duties.

Chaplains, along with all service members, are additionally protected by multiple federal statutes, including the Religious Freedom Restoration Act or "RFRA," and conscience protections that the National Defense Authorization Act has that Congress has passed in the NDAA. Collectively, these laws ensure that Chaplains are not forced to abandon the very religious beliefs that animate their service.

These federal protections are not just window dressing. In the mid-1990s, after President Clinton had vetoed the Partial Birth Abortion Ban Act, the Pentagon issued a gag order forbidding military Chaplains from speaking about important moral issues and legislation.

It was RFRA that protected the ability of a Catholic priest, Father Vincent Rigdon, and a Jewish rabbi, Rabbi David Kaye, to speak to their congregations about protecting life. It was RFRA that stood in the gap between military orders and sermon censorship. Chaplains are religious ministers who exist to meet the religious needs of soldiers. Congress has repeatedly reaffirmed the Chaplaincy's religious role, and it's imperative that the religious distinctives of the Chaplaincy be maintained for the future.

Third, Chaplains are an essential part of advising the chain of command. We've heard a lot about this today as well. Chaplains advise commanding officers and JAGs to ensure they're meeting the legal obligations of providing for religious exercise, but they best fulfill this role when they are

fully integrated into the decision-making process by the officers that they serve. Ensuring the proper integration and support of Chaplains through all levels of command improves the quality of our military force.

Chaplains are able to help provide advice that both protects the rights of service members, and that ensures we're able to maintain the best and brightest recruits of the highest moral character.

A Chaplain can advise on the sincerity of a Jewish or Sikh member's desire to have a neat and conservative beard, consistent with their religious beliefs. They can help provide modest accommodations for this. They can weigh in and should be weighing in on questions of COVID vaccinations.

And, of course, they help to ensure they can help ensure that the command is not running roughshod over these religious beliefs.

With all of this in mind, I'd like to propose four recommendations that this Commission can consider to maintain the Chaplaincy effectiveness:

1. First, the executive and legislative branches can ensure the role of a Chaplain that it remains fundamentally religious. Chaplains are pastoral, and they should not be diluted to something more general than that.
2. Two, the President can support and Congress can maintain full application of RFRA to protect religion in the military. Proactive support for RFRA's consistent application from the highest levels—the Secretary's office, military brass, down. That will cultivate a culture that is protective of religious liberty first. If we prioritize it, it will change.
3. Congress can work with the Secretary as well to better integrate Chaplains as advisors in the chain of command, and to implement training for commanding officers, JAGs, Chaplains on constitutional and statutory protections for religious freedom. If they know about the protections, they can better enforce them.
4. And, last but not least. Congress can ensure that an adequate number of Chaplains and the necessary commission and contract staffing are maintained. Prioritizing something means funding it and backing it so that the resources that need to be there are there.

Thank you for your time and your commitment to protecting religious liberty for all.

**Chairman Lt. Gov. Patrick:** Thank you. Amy. Monsignor.

## **Monsignor Anthony Frontiero, S.T.D., Vicar General and the Moderator of the Curia, Archdiocese for the Military Services, USA**

**Monsignor Anthony Frontiero:** Thank you very much. My name is Monsignor Anthony Frontiero and I serve as the Vicar general and the moderator of the Curia of the Archdiocese for the Military Services, USA.

So, Mr. Chairman and distinguished members of this Commission, ladies and gentlemen, thank you for this opportunity to be with you. I am with the Archdiocese for the Military Services of the United States is headquartered in Washington, D.C., and the Archdiocese provides pastoral and spiritual care to the nearly 1.8 million Catholic men and women and their families serving in the military installations in the United States and overseas to Catholic release staff and patients at Veterans Health Administration facilities, and to staff and other federal services located abroad.

And I'm pleased to speak with you today, particularly about the importance of Catholic sacraments and the military Chaplaincy.

As Vicar-General of the Archdiocese, I offer my testimony as someone who intersects with the realities of constitutional law, pastoral practice, and military readiness on a daily basis.

My testimony will be limited to a few brief but fundamental points.

First, constitutional foundations and military realities. Religious liberty, as has been said here by every speaker, is not a luxury good.

It's a constitutional right with direct implications for morale, cohesion and ethical conduct within the ranks.

The First Amendment protects the free exercise of religion, and the Supreme Court has repeatedly emphasized that this protection does not disappear upon entry into military service. Nevertheless, the military's unique institution, hierarchical, mission driven, and necessarily restrictive in many aspects of personal liberty.

The challenge, therefore, is not whether service members enjoy free exercise rights—because they do—but how those rights are operationalized in the demanding environment of military life.

The more control the military exercises over an individual, the greater the military's responsibility becomes to ensure the free exercise of religion of service members and their families, especially during deployments or assignments abroad.

Catholic service members and their families, currently one of the largest religious groups in the Armed Forces, rely on Chaplains not simply for spiritual encouragement, but for sacramental access. This is an essential distinction for the Catholic tradition. Sacraments such as the Eucharist, confession, anointing of the sick are not symbolic gestures or optional rites. They are indispensable channels of grace instituted by Christ himself. So, denying access to the sacraments denies full



religious practice. The role of Catholic Chaplains. The US military Chaplaincy exists precisely to bridge the gap between constitutional principle and operational need. Chaplains serve the religious needs of their own faith communities, while facilitating the free exercise rights of all personnel in a pluralistic environment.

We know this. Catholic Chaplains bear an additional burden, though, because many sacraments require a priest, they are the sole providers of those rights. In deployed a remote environment, no other personnel, religious or secular, can substitute for sacramental ministry of a Catholic priest, such as the celebration of the Holy Mass, the Sacrament of Penance, confession, the Sacrament of anointing of the sick, and the dying.

This creates a critical dependency when Catholic Chaplains are in short supply or overly restricted in their movements. Catholics service members may effectively lose access to their faith. This is not an abstract concern. In forward-operating bases, ships at sea, submarines, and expeditionary medical units, the absence of a priest can mean weeks or months without mass of the ability to receive absolution before dangerous missions.

The military has long recognized that such deprivation harms morale and undermines the spiritual resilience essential for those serving under extreme stress.

Spiritually, souls are at risk without the sacraments. The stakes cannot be higher.

In recent years, the constraints and pressures, several pressure points have emerged. Personnel shortages. The number of Catholic priests entering the Chaplaincy has declined dramatically, creating coverage gaps across all branches. This shortage strains the ability of Chaplains to provide minimum levels of sacramental access. Operational restrictions, increased security protocols, transportation limitations, and bureaucratic hurdles sometimes impede Chaplains from traveling to remote units or from conducting services in field conditions.

While safety is paramount, the unintended result can be de facto suppression of sacramental practice. Conscious protections Catholic Chaplains must be allowed to minister according to their faith tradition.

This includes adhering to Catholic teachings and counseling, sacramental practice and liturgical conduct, clear and forced conscience protections ensure Chaplains are not coerced into actions that contradict their sacred and ecclesial commitments.

Pluralism and misunderstanding.

Genuine religious pluralism is a strength of our armed forces. We all agree with this.

However, misunderstanding arises when Catholic sacramental needs are viewed as mere preferences rather than doctrinal obligations. The Chaplaincy model must maintain room for faiths with non-interchangeable rites.

Decreased budgeting for religious support.

To Amy's point, the dietary shortage and requirements for priests to serve in operational units also necessitates adequate staffing of installation chapel communities with administrative staff and religious education professionals to support the daily activities of Catholics and priests in their ministry.

It is impossible for priests to fulfill the work of operational unit and equally demanding roles of pastoring the installation chapel community without proper support.

We've recently had a challenge with this with the Army, they're canceling contracts, all over the place. Now, as a result of the intervention of Archbishop Broglio, we've seen some positive movement towards rectifying the situation. And that should be noted.

Mission readiness and human dignity.

The military has long recognized that providing reliable access to religious support is not a distraction from mission readiness. It's mission enhancing soldiers, sailors, airmen, Marines and Coast Guardsmen carry enormous burdens.

They face life and death decisions, separations from family, exposure to moral injury, and the psychological weight of operating in high-risk environments.

For Catholics, the sacraments offer not only spiritual meaning, but profound emotional stability. Confession, for example, helps address guilt and moral injury. The Eucharist strengthens a sense of identity, community, and purpose. Anointing of the Sick provides comfort and hope in medical crises. Pastoral counseling grounded in Catholic moral teaching helps guide difficult ethical decisions.

A military that preserves the sacramental life of its Catholic members is one that respects their dignity, supports their resilience, and reinforces the moral fabric essential to honorable service.

Finally, recommendations,

To ensure the robust religious liberty for our service men and women and their families, I respectfully offer several recommendations:

- Strengthen recruitment and retention of Chaplains, including Catholic Chaplains through improved outreach, career pathways, and collaboration with the Archdiocese of Military Services;
- Reduce unnecessary barriers to Chaplain mobility and deploy to isolated settings, allowing priests to reach personnel who rely on them;
- Ensure rigorous enforcement of conscience protections, preventing Chaplains from being pressured into activities that conflict with their religious obligations;
- Integrate religious liberty impact assessments into operational planning, to identify situations where sacramental access may be impaired,

- And finally, educate commanders and staff on the non-substitutable role of Catholic sacraments to foster informed accommodation at every level, and to encourage adequate support staff to equip the priest to succeed in ministering to service members and their families.
- Finally, the United States military has a proud tradition of defending religious freedom, often in the most difficult of circumstances. Upholding that tradition today requires a clear recognition that Catholic service members cannot fully practice their faith without access to the sacraments, and that Catholic Chaplains are indispensable for providing them for preserving this access honors the Constitution, supports the moral and psychological health of the force, and strengthens the readiness of our armed forces.

Thank you very much for your attention.

**Chairman Lt. Gov. Patrick:** And just questions, comments, questions, comments. I just had a thought as I'm listening, and we've had a number of witnesses on this issue, because it's important if we're talking about religious liberty, what all of you are talking about, you can't deliver that opportunity to the soldiers if you're not there.

It would be like taking a community in America and removing all the churches and all the synagogues for what we might say are a part of the population, particularly at war, or even just away from their families that are very stressed individuals.

So, in the area of some of the most stressed individuals we have in performing their duties, without a strong Chaplaincy, we have removed the church, we've moved the synagogue, we've removed all these opportunities from them.

That only makes compounds that issue.

And I think this is really important part of the testimony today. So, thank you very much for being with us.

**Msgr. Frontiero:** Thank you very much.

**Ms. Vitale:** Thank you.

**Chairman Lt. Gov. Patrick:** Thank you.