

To Whom It May Concern:

1. The purpose of this open letter is to offer a counterpoint to the 31 October, 2002 article written by former U.S. Army chaplain Peter M. Dietsch, entitled "Shepherding Goats: The Paradox of the U.S. Army Chaplain Corp." Since his article was published there has been widespread evidence of its increasing circulation via various electronic means such as blogs, WebPages, etc. Our primary concern is that Dietsch's article has effectively dissuaded two viable candidates from seeking endorsement to the military chaplaincy. In addition, it has tempted currently endorsed Chaplains to question their sense of calling to this superb Christian ministry. Thus, while Dietsch's self-described "ramblings" have been in the public domain since late 2002, it is in light of the evident increase of its negative effects on the thinking of some who previously expressed a serious interest in the military chaplaincy, that the members of the Joint Commission, at their annual meeting in Atlanta in February, 2008, reluctantly voted to address his accusations and conclusions. Hence this open "letter".

2. We begin by acknowledging that Mr. Dietsch's article contains a large number of his understandably disappointing, and obviously discouraging, negative personal experiences as an active duty Army chaplain. But, from these personal experiences, he draws sweeping criticisms of (presumably) all Army chaplains, and chaplaincy situations. This represents a significant disregard for the wise caution from Deuteronomy, reiterated by Paul in II Corinthians 13:1, where responsible application of a cardinal rule of evidence for establishing fact(s) is commanded, viz. "Let every fact be established in the mouth of two or three witnesses".

3. We do not contest, or belittle, the painful sense of disillusionment experienced by a brother in Christ who obviously has a heart for the gospel ministry, and would consider it a serious lack of compassion should anyone do so. But we do contest the degree and extent to which he applies his conclusions about the whole Army Chaplaincy. He draws all-encompassing conclusions stated in the language of absolutes, based upon his unilateral experience. In this aspect of his thinking, the subjective appears to have trumped the objective in terms of his accusations. His strong implication is that a faithful, Christ-centered, Gospel ministry within the bounds of the United States Army Chaplain Corps is simply impossible. In this, we believe, Mr. Dietsch has done a significant disservice to the cause of Christ.

4. The Chaplain Corps of the two senior services have been in existence for well over 200 years and in the Air Force since 1947. During parts of that time there has been opposition (sometimes overt, sometimes covert) on the part of chaplains from theologically liberal denominations against biblically sound gospel ministry. We agree that the pressures of political correctness, tolerance of evil, secularization and the loss of a Christian consensus all present challenges to any minister striving to be faithful to the Bible in his ministry. But these same obstacles occur elsewhere in American society, and are not unique to the Army chaplaincy.

5. Furthermore, we doubt there is a single, seasoned, PRJC endorsed chaplain, who is senior in assignment, or now retired from active duty, who has not somewhere encountered most of the types of opposition to the gospel ministry encountered by Chaplain Dietsch. We strongly contest his implication that the only solution is for a Chaplain to get out of the military ministry, or to avoid military chaplaincy altogether. We are firmly convinced that there is no such thing as a truly unsolvable situation if, repeat, if, one will humbly – and in faith - seek a

biblical solution, including the sorts of trials Mr. Dietsch experienced. We do well to remember the words of Paul in Philippians 4:13 and Luke in Acts 18:9-10. We also recognize that not every God-given solution is guaranteed to be quick, easy, personally satisfying, or free from pain and unpleasantness, or even persecution.

6. Now we will address some specific concerns. Mr. Dietsch's article contends that "goats" (unsaved sinners) cannot be shepherded, by which he presumably means they simply cannot be dealt with in any meaningful way. We note that in the parable of the wheat and the tares (Matthew 13:24-30 and 36-42) our Savior made it abundantly clear that unbelievers will always be mixed in among believers in the visible church. Pastors regularly have to deal with unregenerate and unsaved individuals who participate in the life of a congregation, and sometimes have even been received as communicant members!

7. It is simply untrue that military chaplains are commissioned "to guard pluralism and protect people from objective truth". That is Chaplain Dietsch's opinion. It cannot be demonstrated as fact. Such careless declarations, read by the inexperienced, can seem to be the truth.

8. Dietsch states that the "Chaplain is not encouraged to be the best minister of his particular faith group. " This is another of his sweeping generalizations that many who have served as chaplains can attest is not universally true. It may have happened to a specific Chaplain, but one cannot make a universal statement based on sparse evidence.

9. Dietsch also declares that, "the nature of the chaplain's role, in practice, is to boost morale and provide diversions for soldiers so they can feel good about themselves." While it may be true that some chaplains choose to do that, or may try to pressure other chaplains to function in that manner, it is not true that such a role is required of any chaplain in the Army, Navy or Air Force Chaplain Corps. Such a requirement cannot be demonstrated, and is not contained in any regulations which deal with chaplain ministries. Dietsch asserts as fact that, "The highest good of the Chaplain is for his soldiers to feel good about themselves." He cites no references. We challenge him to demonstrate where that is claimed in any official publication relating to the Army (or Navy, or Air Force) chaplaincy.

10. In the section Dietsch headed "Counseling," he concludes with the following incident. 'The trainer, a lieutenant colonel chaplain responded, "Pastors who are in the preaching ministry, who preach the Gospel from the pulpit, should not and cannot do therapy. They can do pastoral counseling, but they must get the help of a professional expert for therapy." The opinion of the trainer he quotes is only one of the many possible pastoral abdications which have been around for a long while. But an opinion of that sort does not become true simply because a senior chaplain stated that in a training session.

11. It is important to note that Mr. Dietsch's article contains far too many unsubstantiated declarations, making it pointless to address each one individually in this response. What emerges again and again in the written record of his thinking is that his understandably negative conclusions about some unpleasant and improper pressures experienced at the hands of ungodly, and/or unbelieving, and/or unethical individuals constitute unqualified truth about conducting ministry within the armed forces of the United States. Perceptions and conclusions Mr. Dietsch considers as true out of the crucible of his own personal experiences does not make them universally true, or necessarily even true at all.

12. A significant body of retired military chaplains, including the present writer, can testify that it is simply false that faithful, genuinely Christian, pastoral ministry cannot be effectually carried out in the military context. On the basis of his own words, I would sadly conclude that an earnest and committed, but inexperienced young pastor was so significantly intimidated by the sort of secular thinking individuals we all have encountered from time to time, that he lost his perspective, and the ability to effectively overcome those improper pressures. II Timothy 1:7 certainly can be brought to bear on such experiences.

13. Chaplain Dietsch wrote the article while still on active duty. His concluding paragraph states, "But maybe, just maybe, some chaplains will take a stand and perform their duties according to their ordination vows and the Army Regulations." Thankfully, we can testify that, with very few exceptions, those chaplains once, or still, endorsed to the United States military services by the PRJC, regularly - and demonstrably – have taken, and do take, "a stand" courageously and consistently, for the preaching of the gospel of Jesus Christ, for the truths of Scripture, for their ordination vows and for the conduct of Christian ministry according to the Word of God. Christian ministry in the military services, rightly understood and maturely undertaken, is still a superb, Christ-honoring opportunity for effective evangelism, powerful preaching, substantive Bible teaching and pastoral care of the highest order.

I Peter 3:-17