Leaders’ Guide to Youth Military Discernment Session

This curriculum was created in response to a 2012 Minneapolis Area Synod Resolution (RC2012-2**).** Agoogle.doc with internet accessible video clips is available at https://docs.google.com/presentation/d/11FSKhXhpYUUroD9KrfozsTcnwzv2w4g-qjW-WhECuNw/edit#slide=id.p

Contact: Amy Blumenshine [Buddy@ListenToVets.org](mailto:Buddy@ListenToVets.org)

with questions or suggestions

Recommended: Bracket the gathering with prayer . Light a candle as a sign of invoking the Holy as we discuss these very significant and troubling issues. At the conclusion of the session. do some sort of active body prayer. Potentially traumatic feelings may have been generated by the session, subtly triggering the body’s incredible fight/flight/engage system. Movement can help the body re-balance. (Best not to just “sit with it.”) Then blow out the candle.

Possible preamble:

Have you seen ads and other promotions to join the military? Have you thought about it?

Over the centuries people of good conscience and faith have given much thought to when and how it might be permissible to join the military. A lot of that concern has to do with the moral consequences of killing. Is it ever right?

The ELCA decided in 1995 to clarify the positions of this relatively new church on participation in the military – long a controversial issue for Christians. Today we will teach the 3 positions adopted by our church (in its social statement “For Peace in God’s World”), see some videos of post 9/11 deployed military who struggle with moral decision making on these issues, and take some time to share our own reactions and thoughts. More information is available for getting deeper into these issues; this is just an overview. We want you to know about the different positions of the church to give you tools in your own moral discernment.

Option: Stop the first video around 1:45, for discussion on feelings.

Then overview the 3 positions, checking on vocabulary which may be unfamiliar. Why the words “Conscientious objection” , for instance. How it comes from a time when people had to be forced (drafted) to become combatants in war, and is an international principle.

Pull the timer lever to start at 1:45 into the first video to continue the program.

More on Camilo Mejia (pronounced *Meh-hee’a)* of the first video. Camilo became a conscientious objector during his deployment to Iraq. He attempted to leave the military based on the military’s rules recognizing conscientious objection. Instead the military convicted him of desertion for his refusal to kill. Camilo spent a year in military prison. He has written the *book* [*Road from Ar Ramadi: The Private Rebellion of Staff Sergeant Mejía*](http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Road_from_Ar_Ramadi:_The_Private_Rebellion_of_Staff_Sergeant_Mej%C3%ADa&action=edit&redlink=1) which recounts his journey of conscience in Iraq. Under Article 85 of the [Uniform Code of Military Justice](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Uniform_Code_of_Military_Justice), (the military has its own laws which are separate than those for civilians) conviction on the charge of desertion during time of war can result in a sentence of death.

Mejía served his time at the [Fort Sill](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fort_Sill) [military prison](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Military_prison) in [Lawton, Oklahoma](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lawton,_Oklahoma). During his time in custody he was recognized by [Amnesty International](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Amnesty_International) as a [prisoner of conscience](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Prisoner_of_conscience).)

The clip on Mejia is from the documentary “Soldiers of Conscience” which shows the varied choices and perspectives regarding participation in the military.

**JESUS AND WAR**

What are other examples of the non-violent actions of Jesus? See additional references. Many books and resources are available.

Some believe that the Holy Spirit is in every threatening situation offering a nonviolent response; a response where your attacker isn’t harmed and you won’t be harmed – but if there is a choice, you suffer on behalf of your attacker.

**SELECTIVE CONSCIENTIOUS OBJECTION**

Selective Conscientious Objection is probably least familiar. During prior wars when people had to be forced by the Draft (Selective Service) to join the military, activists urged for exemptions on conscience for those who object to a particular war, instead of the objection to all wars. The ELCA recognizes this position of Selective CO as a legitimate position of conscience in relation to military duty, but the United States government does not. Selective Conscientious objection to being forced to participate in military killing is now recognized as an international human right by the UN (see more detail below.)

Selective CO as supported by the ELCA also applies to refusing to participate in certain military actions considered against one’s conscience. Punishment for refusing an order in the military can be quite severe. According to military law, it is always legal to refuse an illegal order, but determining whether the order is legal can be problematic.

A recent example have been the orders to participate in the abuse of prisoners (The prisoners since 9/11 have been called “detainees” in order to avoid the application of the Geneva Convention requirements for humane treatment.) There has been a range of consequences for military who used conscience as their explanation for refusing an order, ranging from harassment to prison. Military law permits execution for refusing to fight during war. If a person uses Selective CO as a reason to object to being conscripted/drafted, that person is subject to being sent to prison. For instance, some of those who refused to fight in Vietnam on the basis that the Vietnam war was unjust were sent to prison. Now that the UN recognizes Selective CO, we can anticipate some legal challenges on that basis should the US re-institute the draft.

In 2013, the UN Human Rights Council (UNHRC) determined that Selective Conscientious Objection is a right as part of overall conscientious objection to military service. This right flows out of the right to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion, as noted in Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights as well as in Article 18 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. The resolution passed by the UNHRC also requires nations to facilitate conscientious objection by passing appropriate laws and procedures, as well as making information about CO status and how to obtain it available to conscripts, volunteers, and those already in the military. United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner. *Conscientious Objection to Military Service*. New York and Geneva,2012. http://www.ohchr.org/ documents/publications/ conscientiousobjection\_en.pdf

It stands to reason that not all wars nor all methods of war are just, even if some may be. Obviously, those on opposing sides of a war are not both just. Some particular weaponry, nuclear bombs, for instance, which cause massive and indiscriminate harm across generations, might be considered unjust.

The clip from Maj. Kilner is from a class of military officers in training on ethics. Kilner represents a current concept among the military that some of the post-war suffering, including PTSD and suicide, could be averted if military members did not feel guilty about killing. There is currently debate within the military on the impact of moral injury, when people violate their consciences with military behaviors. See <http://brite.edu/academics/programs/soul-repair/resources> for more on moral injury.

Regarding the 3rd video, Joshua Casteel was an army interrogator at Abu Ghraib prison in 2004. Because of his experiences there, he became a conscientious objector, and was granted an early honorable discharge. He then joined Iraq Veterans Against the War. He died from cancer in 2012, about a year after his father died from non-hereditary brain cancer.

From Wikipedia: “An [oncologist](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Oncologist) told Casteel's mother that "Joshua died of lung cancer without having any of the conventional risk factors such as smoking, asbestos exposure or radiation ... I am quite sure we did not have anyone younger with lung cancer those five years I worked at the [VA](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/United_States_Department_of_Veterans_Affairs)."[8] Casteel's family believes his cancer was the result of exposure to toxins released by a [burn pit](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Burn_pit) he slept near for six months in Iraq.[8] He was a [University of Chicago Divinity School](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/University_of_Chicago_Divinity_School) graduate student at the time of his death” He authored, Casteel, Joshua. *Letters from Abu Ghraib*. (Ithaca, NY: Essay Pr., 2008)

More videos of testimony from the Truth Commission at which Josh is speaking are available at http://brite.edu/academics/programs/soul-repair/resources

**JUST WAR**

Scholars note that, although Augustine may have seen his criteria as a way of limiting war, that the concept has been used more to justify wars in the last two centuries. Christian peace-makers note that the criteria are never met. A excellent scholarly review of the Just War concept is Robert Meagher’s *Killing from the Inside Out: Moral Injury and Just War.*

The Church recognizes that sometimes the government is wrong. Not all wars meet the test of conscience. And there are Christians who maintain that none do.

We hope that this session has generated a thoughtful discussion amongst the youth that will assist in both discerning their personal participation in the military and their civic engagement in the important issues of our day.

We have provided additional resources for those study groups or individuals who can continue to expand their knowledge base.

We hope to be able to add resources to those listed as you alert us of them!

(Buddy@ListenToVets.org)