

Chaplains Recalled to Active Duty

As there continues to be a U.S. military presence in Iraq, questions regarding chaplains being mobilized for active duty have again been coming into our office. The *Book of Order* is quite clear, but sometimes the practice is a bit more confusing.

Section G-14.0534 deals with the task of the congregation, the minister and the presbytery putting together the pastoral call. "If the minister is obligated to fulfill military commitments during a period of pastoral service, an agreement should be added to the terms of call for that obligation and potential mobilization."

Similar language was first added in 1986 and was designed to result in full disclosure of a minister's military commitments at the time of the call. Since the terms of call cannot be changed without the consent of the presbytery, the congregation and the ministers can then be assured of the presbytery's help in working out a reasonable solution to the problems created by the minister being called to active duty.

Any such agreement should provide some process for notification to the calling agency (such as a congregation) that the minister may shortly be called into active service. There needs to be some mutual understanding of how and when and to whom such a "heads up" will be given.

The agreement also needs to make provision as to when the salary from the calling agency might cease. It may well need to deal with issues regarding housing and maybe even the payment of rent for family use of a manse during the mobilization period. There should also be some procedure laid out regarding what would happen if there were death or disability of the minister.

In 1994 Congress adopted legislation called the Uniformed Services Employment and Reemployment ACT (USERRA), which deals with many of these issues. It is a law of general application and does not appear to exempt Church employers. It covers such topics as pension continuation and reinstatement upon return from active duty. It is unclear what impact USERRA might have on a Presbytery's authority under G-11.0103o. Clearly an extended absence could have much impact on the relationship between a pastor and her/his congregation.*

When a minister is called to active service, the Committee on Ministry should be ready to step in and help the session locate pastoral services for the congregation during the period of its pastor's absence. This is a time when a Committee on Ministry might well call upon its specialized and retired pastors to provide such services. Such persons can often ease the burden upon the congregation.

This is a circumstance where the Committee on Ministry's responsibility to a minister's family takes on some very practical attributes. The emotional strain upon the family is

readily predictable, but there may be other stresses (financial, child care, etc.) with which the minister's family needs assistance.

If your presbytery does not have a record of all its members who are in the reserves of one of the branches of the armed services, this might be a very appropriate time to compile such a list. A little careful planning can go a long way in minimizing the disruption such calls to service might bring about.

* The [Board of Pensions](#) (in cooperation with Legal Services, the Office of Vocation, and Constitutional Services) has published a very helpful document (available at the [Board of Pensions](#) Web site, or call 1 (800) 773-7752 and ask for the USERRA Questions and Answers document), which should be consulted for more specific information.

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