

Notes from the field –

The words below are a transcript of a presentation made to a Regional gathering recently by Nichole Arnold-Swindle. She is currently a seminary student and is a Chaplain Candidate in the U.S. Army Reserve. Nicki has graciously agreed to share her words with our Disciples Chaplain Community:

"I was asked to come share a story with you about someone who had experienced moral injury. It could have been my story, my husband's, an anonymous story about a Soldier I have worked with, or some combination of stories. As I prayed over what I should say, I was also talking to several of my progressive, affirming Chaplain friends. I won't attribute the Chaplain's name to uphold confidentiality, but one of them said, "Being confronted with the violence and exclusion at the hands of those we trusted is a type of moral injury." I was struck by that. I had to pause and gather my thoughts and composure.

I remembered when a senior Chaplain called me into his office and told me that I couldn't pray or read Scripture if he was preaching in a service, and that he wouldn't be able to pray or lead Scripture for me if I were. I wanted to respond in a way that both respected his religious beliefs and his rank. I feel I did. Then, I went to my office, closed the door, and I angry-cried.

Progressive, affirming military Chaplains risk and are often the victims of moral injury from two groups who are diametrically-opposed. On the one hand, you have the far-right Christians who believing that they are being true to the Word of God rely more on the translations of man and forget the character of their Creator. They deny our LGBTQ+ Chaplains, affirming Chaplains, and our female Chaplains the ability to pray or read Scripture or sometimes even participate in a worship service at all if they are acting as Pastor. They deny us the ability to share a message from God if they feel it conflicts with their religious freedoms, with no regard to our religious freedom or that of our Soldiers, who primarily don't look like them. They sometimes choose where the progressive and affirming Chaplains will be assigned or what duties they will be able to perform based on theological differences. They schedule speakers who would deny marriage to some people based on gender, sexuality, previous marital abuse and brokenness, or even the color of their skin to come lead prayer breakfasts that are supposed to be pluralistic and provide for the moral and spiritual care of all Soldiers. It can be heartbreaking to hear my siblings who have experienced moral injury from those we see as brothers and sisters in Christ harm us with a violence that is ineffable and invisible because it is based on exclusion, fear, and bigotry.

And that's not the worst moral injury that we as affirming and progressive military Chaplains have inflicted on us. See, we also have moral injury from many who are our allies on Sunday or every year when we gather or every two years when we come together as a larger body. We are on the receiving end of violence from the very people who share our love and inclusion of others but feel we are part of the problem because we are part of the "military industrial complex" or maybe even "baby-killers" when all we want to do is provide care for these Soldiers and Veterans who have been betrayed by some in power in our country, used to fight wars, and left broken. We want to provide healing and wholeness to these troops, Veterans, and their families so that they may be healed from their moral injury, and we end up being hurt on both sides--by those who want inclusion, except for those they see as enforcers of empire rather than victims of it, and those who want to proselytize these vulnerable people because they care more about a kingdom that exists in another time and place than doing kingdom work here on this Earth."