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*For Gods and Country (From "Sightings")*  
William E. Middleton

As a University of Chicago Divinity School alumnus and ordained PC minister, my views place me in a certain context in the range of thought present in such a diverse religious group as the U.S. Navy and U.S. Navy Chaplain Corps where I serve as chaplain.

One of the main goals of the Chaplain Corps is to provide for the free exercise of religion for all members of the Armed Forces. The challenge is discerning how to interpret that mandate. Recently, in my current post at the Naval Hospital at Camp Pendleton, we ran into a unique situation that provided some clarity.

The delightful people at the local Gideon's branch regularly drop at our door cases of little white New Testaments, intended for nurses and other medical professionals. Our small hospital on Camp Pendleton is the site for nearly 200 births a month. Young marines and sailors often start their families right under our roof. After nearly tripping on these cases of Testaments one day, an idea came to me. We could reach out to those new families with these new New Testaments.

The idea was an easy sell to the rest of the staff, but instantly we knew we needed to be sensitive to the rich variety of faiths in our pluralistic military. Luckily, on our shelves, we had Jewish Prayer books, Books of Mormon, and Korans. These are a part of every military Chaplain's deployment case. So, my staff put pink or baby blue ribbons and business cards around the books, placed them in a basket, and a young female sailor (a Religious Program Specialist) went up to visit the first new families.

She returned with a puzzled look on her face. There were 10 new families in the hospital; six of the new mothers were Buddhist. As such, we had no Scriptures to give to 60 percent of the moms that day. What a humbling lesson in 21st century American plurality. Somehow, we had forgotten that many young marines marry women when stationed in Japan. That creates a larger Buddhist population than

is present in the general U.S. population. We have solved that glitch in the system, and named the program "Baby's First Scripture." Of course, there have never been that many Buddhist babies in the hospital at one time since that first day. But there was a sense, on that first day that we were being shown just how diverse our military population military can be.

Unfortunately, some folks do not feel that such diversity is a good thing. I was interviewing a chaplain candidate one day and described to him some of our programs. After explaining "Baby's First Scripture" to him, he got a little agitated. He told me he could not, would not, give a book of lies to people when he could give them the truth. The only truth to his fundamentalist mind was the New Testament. All other forms of Scripture were false to him.

There can be no greater expression of love than new parents sharing their beloved Scriptures with a new child. There may not be anything more hurtful (or illegal) than an institution insisting that a new family believe a certain way or hold a certain book as Scripture.

To serve in a diverse religious community, a delicate balance must be maintained which is easily managed by remembering two simple guidelines. First, there is Jesus' commandment to love our neighbors and, second, the free exercise of religion clause. These two pillars clearly close the door on religious bigotry and open the door for plurality. I am proud to be on the frontlines of ministry in our pluralistic age.

*Rev. William E. Middleton is a chaplain in the United States Navy. "Sightings" comes from the Martin Marty Center at the University of Chicago Divinity School.*