

June 05, 2026

The Honorable Pete Hegseth
Secretary of War
U.S. Department of War
1000 Defense Pentagon
Washington, DC 20301-1000

CC:

Members of the Armed Forces Chaplains Board
Office of the Under Secretary of War for Personnel and Readiness
Service Chiefs of Chaplains

Re: Joint Endorser Concern Regarding Reduction of Religious Affiliation Codes

Dear Secretary Hegseth,

We, the undersigned religious bodies and representatives, write in common cause to express our grave concern regarding the recent revisions to the Religious Affiliations Code List administered under the authority of the Secretary of War.

Though our traditions differ in belief, practice, polity, and language, we share a common commitment: every Service Member must be able to serve with dignity, receive appropriate spiritual care, and have their religious identity respected within the military community. The revised list undermines that commitment by removing or obscuring the identities of longstanding religious communities whose members serve in uniform.

We understand the Department of War's interest in simplifying systems and reducing unused or duplicative categories. Religious affiliation codes are not merely administrative conveniences; they are also one way the Department recognizes the religious diversity of the force, supports chaplaincy care, informs command awareness, and communicates to service members whether their traditions are respected and taken seriously.

When distinct religious communities are collapsed into broad or inaccurate categories, service members may experience that change as erasure. Such changes can obscure meaningful differences in belief, practice, clergy access, dietary needs, holy days, burial customs, conscientious objection claims, grooming or apparel requirements, and other matters of religious exercise. This is especially concerning for minority faith communities, Indigenous and earth-centered traditions, non-theistic traditions,

historically marginalized communities, smaller denominations, and others whose members may already face diminished support or isolation.

These revisions also have consequences beyond individual identification. Accurate religious affiliation data helps chaplains know when to provide direct care, when to seek consultation, and when to connect service members with appropriate religious leaders or endorsing bodies. Classification is resource allocation: it helps commanders and institutions understand and support the religious needs of the force. It may also affect the ability of civilian religious organizations and endorsing agencies to validate requests, support religious accommodations, and advocate for chaplaincy resources tied to specific faith designations.

The removal of recognized communities from the list is therefore not a neutral administrative act. It has real spiritual, institutional, and material consequences. The revised list has eliminated or obscured designations for a number of longstanding and formally organized religious communities, including the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), Historically Black Churches, the Unitarian Universalist Association, the United Church of Christ, Wiccan and Pagan practitioners, and others whose members currently serve and whose identities and spiritual needs have been rendered less visible by omission or consolidation.

We do not dismiss the administrative burden of maintaining a broad and accurate code list. We believe that religious liberty has never been a matter of mere convenience; the United States has staked part of its national identity on an extraordinary commitment to the free exercise of religion. Thus, the armed forces have a heightened responsibility to recognize and accommodate the religious lives of those who serve, particularly because military service requires members to surrender significant autonomy to the institution. The burden of breadth is a worthy one.

We respectfully call upon the Department of War to:

- Restore the religious affiliation codes removed in the recent revision, including but not limited to those for the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), the Unitarian Universalist Association, the United Church of Christ, Historically Black Churches, and Wiccan and Pagan practitioners;
- Publish the criteria, rationale, and selection process used to revise the Religious Affiliations Code List;
- Establish a transparent, consultative process for any future modifications to the Religious Affiliations Code List, including formal engagement with affected

denominations, faith communities, and chaplaincy endorsing agencies before implementation; and

- Affirm, in policy and practice, that every service member has the right to identify with the religion they actually practice, or with no religion at all, and that the administrative systems of the armed forces will be structured to honor that right.

We affirm the Department of War's responsibility to maintain efficient systems. But efficiency cannot come at the expense of religious liberty, pastoral care, equal respect, or the accurate recognition of the people who serve. A military that asks people of every faith and conscience to serve must also be prepared to recognize and care for them with precision, humility, and fairness.

We make these requests as partners in the care of those who serve. We believe the Department of War can streamline administrative systems without narrowing recognition, diminishing religious liberty, or signaling to minority-faith service members that their traditions no longer warrant specific acknowledgment.

Religious affiliation codes exist because the institution has recognized that the whole person, including the spiritual person, matters. The Religious Affiliations Code List should reflect that same conviction.

Respectfully Submitted,

The Undersigned Religious Bodies and Representatives:

Rev. Dr. Jonathan R. Fisher
Ecclesiastical Endorser, Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)

Rev. Dr. Rebekah A. Savage
Ecclesiastical Endorser, Unitarian Universalist Association

The Rt. Rev. Ann Ritonia
Ecclesiastical Endorser, Episcopal Church

Rev. Dennis Hysom
Ecclesiastical Endorser, Presbyterian Church (USA)

Rev. David Plummer
Ecclesiastical Endorser, Coalition of Spiritual Filled Churches

Rev. Stephen B. Boyd
Ecclesiastical Endorser, United Church of Christ

Rev. Amy Canosa
Interim Ecclesiastical Endorser, Alliance of Baptists

Rev. Selena Fox
Ecclesiastical Endorser, Circle Sanctuary

Rev. Dr. Patricia Murphy
Ecclesiastical Endorser, American Baptist

Rev. Renee Owen
Ecclesiastical Endorser, Cooperative Baptist Fellowship

Most Rev. Dr. Diana Dale
Ecclesiastical Endorser, Apostolic Catholic Orthodox Church