

**NO. 1119**  
**(ITEM FOR REFLECTION AND RESEARCH)**

**MORAL INJURY AND SPIRITUAL CARE IN A TIME OF WAR**

Proposal for Reflection and Research:

That the General Assembly of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in the United States and Canada, meeting, July 9 – 13, 2011, in Nashville, Tennessee, accept “Moral Injury and Spiritual Care in a Time of War” as an item for Reflection and Research during the 2011-2013 biennium. This reflection and research process would be accountable by report to the Administrative Committee, the General Board, and the 2013 General Assembly.

This process would encourage the church to engage in reflection, prayer, and education around conscience, moral injury, and spiritual care in a time of war. According to section 2.4 of the Special Rules of Procedure for the General Assembly, the Administrative Committee would work with the submitters of this item in developing ways for members of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) to:

- 1) Discern how the moral and spiritual life of individuals, families, and churches are affected by war;
- 2) Study the role of religious communities in addressing moral injury and spiritual care in a time of war, including the needs of military personnel, their families, their congregations and communities.

Background

Those who go to war and those who see them off to war and greet their return face an array of moral, spiritual, and pastoral concerns. Prayer, ritual, mutual support, and the shared search for moral and theological understanding are among the ways that those who send persons to war can stand with those who go to war and return. This item for reflection and research focuses on moral injury, spiritual care and healing in a time of war.

Instruction in moral principles and the development of moral conscience are crucial dimensions of Christian faith. The capacity and will to do what is right are matters of faith. The potential damage caused by the violation of conscience is recognized by religious traditions and civil authorities.

“Moral injury,” sometimes called “spiritual injury,” is a term that Veterans Administration (VA) mental health professionals have begun to use about an injury of war. The VA clinicians define moral injury as the devastating negative consequences of “perpetrating, failing to prevent, or bearing witness to acts that transgress deeply held moral beliefs and expectations.” Moral injury was identified as both a contributing and an aggravating factor to Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), but unlike PTSD, it involves a conscious moral dimension and is sometimes called “spiritual injury.”

Research on moral injury indicates it is a significant contributor to clinical depression, addiction, violent behavior, and suicide, though its preliminary status means moral injury remains off the official list of injuries treated by VA clinicians.<sup>i</sup>

The idea behind “moral injury,” however, is not new. Through the Bible and history we have understood that our actions and their consequences have potential to wound our souls. In difficult situations, such as war or other times of extremity, moral decision-making can be agonizing and carry life or death consequences. Moral suicide can lead to physical suicide.<sup>ii</sup>

For these reasons, we call for the Administrative Committee to explore ways for the whole church to engage in reflection, research, prayer and education so that we might respond to brokenness and be agents of healing in a time of war.

First Christian Church, Oakland, CA  
Park Avenue Christian Church, New York

The General Board recommends that the General Assembly ACCEPT  
Business Item No. 1119 as an Item for Reflection and Research.

---

<sup>i</sup> ([www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/19683376](http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/19683376)). See also [www.conscienceinwar.org/events/report-release](http://www.conscienceinwar.org/events/report-release)

<sup>ii</sup> Suicide rates among active duty military, which have been climbing since 2003, are at unprecedented rates; in some cases, such as the Marines and Army, the annual rate in 2009 was double the 2006 rate. In addition, veterans constitute twenty percent of all U.S. suicides, while veterans are fewer than ten percent of the population. The Veterans Administration continues to attempt to stem the tide of veteran suicides, an average of eighteen a day, with little success; among the six thousand suicides a year, an especially large number are among veterans under age 35, even though fewer than one percent of Americans now serve in the military. <http://ipsnews.net/news.asp?idnews=49971> covers suicide in veterans, VA efforts at prevention, and mentions active duty military. <http://www.military.com/news/article/services-tackle-rising-suicide-rates.html> and in Marines, [http://www.wthitv.com/dpps/military/marines/Initial-data-show-Marine-suicides-declined-in-2010\\_3691909](http://www.wthitv.com/dpps/military/marines/Initial-data-show-Marine-suicides-declined-in-2010_3691909), current military service numbers at DOD, <http://www.defense.gov/pubs/dod101/index.html> and veterans' percentages are at <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=126573303>.