



FOR THE WELS SERVICE MEMBER:

How to have religious services on base

Your rights:

Even if you have been in the military for some time, you may not know that the military has a responsibility, within the confines of military necessity, to allow you to practice your religion and assist you in finding a worship opportunity that meets your religious needs. The military calls this “religious accommodation.”

When you should invoke this right:

When you cannot access regular worship, such as during basic training, periods of restriction to base, exceptional distance from a local church, if there is a large group of WELS/ELS believers at the installation who need to worship, or a long period of training away from home.

Situations where you should not invoke this right:

When you have the means to access local WELS/ELS worship or when deployed. When deployed, a pastor will not be able to physically come to worship with you, but you still have options. Keep in contact with your home church pastor, the pastor from the congregation nearest to base, or the WELS National Civilian Chaplain.

It's your responsibility:

Only you can trigger the chain of events within the military that leads to your religious accommodation. Your pastor, mom, or friends aren't the answer—YOU ARE.

What you need to do:

1. ALWAYS be RESPECTFUL, kind, and polite, but insistent. Maintain your military bearing while you stand your ground and know the applicable regulations/orders/policies.
2. You must make a request for religious accommodation through your chain of command. This needs to be in writing but can be handwritten in extreme circumstances. (See the example below.)
3. Be ready to answer all the questions that you will be asked:

Q: Why can't you worship with the Protestants/other Lutherans?

A: You are a member of a “distinctive religious group” recognized by the Department of Defense and the Armed Forces Chaplains Board. DoDI 1300.17 states: “The DoD places a high value on the rights of members of the Military Services to observe the tenets of their respective religions...” In accordance with section 2000bb-1 of Title 42, USC, “requests for religious accommodation from a military policy, practice, or duty that substantially burdens a Service member's exercise of religion may be denied only when the military policy, practice, or duty: a) Furthers a compelling governmental interest. b) Is the least restrictive means of furthering that compelling governmental interest.”

Q: How are we (the unit) supposed to know what specific person you need to help you worship?

A: You should have the contact information for either the Military Contact Pastor (nearest WELS or ELS pastor) or Chaplain Ziemer (the WELS National Civilian Chaplain at military@wels.net) to give them.

Q: Why do you want a WELS/ELS pastor to come?

A: Only he can perform all the sacraments included in the worship of my religion.

Q: What exactly are you asking for?

A: Help in getting the WELS/ELS pastor on base during regular religious worship times and a private place to worship and receive the sacrament of Holy Communion.

What to do if you are denied this right:

Contact your unit chaplain. Also, consider speaking to your unit-level Equal Opportunity NCO or appealing to your next-level commander. If that isn't working, your inspector general or local staff judge advocate is the right resource. It is generally best practice to try to solve issues at the lowest level, but if you have always maintained your military bearing and are respectfully insisting on reasonable accommodation to stay connected to the church and your Savior, you should have no issues as you move up the chain of command. Keeping the WELS National Civilian Chaplain informed can help you navigate this process, and if all else fails he can apply pressure through the Armed Forces Chaplains Board, but understand that using this path jumps several chains of command.

Word to the wise:

If in a basic training situation, this request will have to start with your drill sergeant or drill instructor. Outside of basic training scenarios, this request can begin with your unit chaplain, but letting your direct chain of command (enlisted chain of concern) know your concerns is the right thing to do.

Useful definitions:

The rules governing official worship can be very confusing. There are several layers of orders and directives which govern how you can worship, and what your chaplain's and unit commander's obligations are to assist you. Sometimes you could be misunderstood because the service you are in uses different or specific wording to describe an action or duty. Below is a description of common terms that should help you.

Military Contact Pastor: This is a WELS term to describe the WELS/ELS minister closest to your base who can help provide you religious services. Your chain of command won't know this term, so just say "pastor" or "minister."

Facilitate: A DoD term to describe the duty of every chaplain to help their military members worship in a way that is acceptable to their religion.

Distinctive Religious Group: The DoD term to describe a religious group that has been recognized as having distinct practices that require separate worship opportunities. WELS is an officially recognized DRG.

Religious Accommodation: The DoD term to describe the military's responsibility to help you find an appropriate worship opportunity.

Military Necessity: The general term used to describe the compelling reason the commander has for denying a religious accommodation. Without a clear, stated military necessity, the commander should grant a religious accommodation.