

Church of the Brethren

# CALL OF CONSCIENCE



## SESSION 4 Making a Defense for Hope

### Declaring My Case for Conscientious Objection

#### Background for leaders

There is no conscription at this time, but registration for the draft is required by law so that the Selective Service System can institute a draft with very little advance notice. It would take only a few months to begin inducting draftees and appoint draft boards. The draft boards would hear the requests of conscientious objectors for CO classification, deferments, and hardship and medical disqualification.

For those young men who do not register, either by neglect or because their conscience won't permit them to cooperate, Selective Service imposes stiff penalties. These penalties include disqualification from federal student loan programs. Many states are also tying draft registration to a young person's ability to get a driver's license or register to vote.

In some ways, Selective Service is sensitive to the constitutional rights of conscientious objectors whose objection to killing is based on religious or moral principle. Selective Service stays in regular contact with the Church of the Brethren and other similar groups to alert them about rules, regulations, and possible provisions for alternative service. It is important for youth to develop their conscientious position on war with as much forethought as the government gives to military preparedness.

#### Purpose of this session

- Thoroughly familiarize youth with the questions of conscience asked by Selective Service
- Provide youth an opportunity to practice interviewing with a mock draft board
- Make a final plan to complete a CO file



In that preparation, some youth may come to the conclusion that they cannot register for the draft or that they cannot participate in alternative service. They might argue that any form of cooperation with the system is tacit support for war.

In this session, youth who decide to register and those who refuse to register will prepare to articulate their objections to compulsory military service based on deeply held religious convictions. They will also be given the opportunity to role-play their responses to questions from a draft board, much as they may have to do in real life. Finally, they will make a plan to complete a CO file.

## Exceptions for conscientious objectors

In almost every war that has involved the United States, some consideration has been made for those who are conscientiously opposed to killing in war or supporting the war effort. At the very least, pacifists and objectors were assigned to medical corps or office positions. In the Civil War, objectors were allowed to pay a fine or pay a substitute (which also had moral hazards). In World War II and later, the government allowed conscientious objectors to serve in some alternative capacity, something that did not require them to carry a gun but still contribute something of “national importance.” Conscientious objectors were allowed to serve in what was called alternative service. They participated in dangerous medical experiments, fought forest fires, served as orderlies in mental hospitals, and even allowed themselves to be starved in nutrition experiments.

Only those who could demonstrate a conviction against war based on a long-held religious belief or a well-reasoned moral standard were given this status. Members of the Church of the Brethren have had an advantage because of the church’s longstanding teachings about conscientious objection. Others, such as soldiers Dennis Lipton and Camilo Mejia, who came to oppose the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, had to prove they were conscientious objectors after they had already enlisted and served in the military. They finally received their classification as conscientious objectors, but not before they were discharged dishonorably from the military and paid heavy fines.

## **Connect**

If you can bring laptop or tablet, show this photo of General Hershey drawing the first lottery number for the Vietnam War draft: <http://www.historynet.com/live-from-dc-its-lottery-night-1969.htm> . Then ask one of the youth to read 1 Peter 3:15-16b: “Always be ready to make your defense to anyone who demands from you an account of the hope that is in you. . . . Keep your conscience clear” (NRSV).

## Materials you will need

- Several copies of a lottery chart from <http://www.landscaper.net/draft70-72.htm#Lottery> or <http://www.historynet.com/whats-your-number.htm>
- Samples of military recruitment brochures (find at the post office, search online, or ask youth to bring materials that they have received)
- Copies of the Selective Service registration form from the post office or download from [sss.gov/regver/wfregistration.aspx](http://sss.gov/regver/wfregistration.aspx) (optional)
- Extra copies of the “CO Checklist” (in case some participants have lost the copy from the previous session)
- Extra copies of the “Questions about Conscientious Objection worksheet” from session 3
- Copies of the 12-page “comprehensive guide” from the Center on Conscience and War website. Find the link at [www.brethren.org/CO](http://www.brethren.org/CO).

## **B** Set up the session

This session is about *preparedness*. Tell the group: “The Selective Service System is always prepared to institute a military draft, complete with plans for alternative service, draft boards to hear requests for conscientious objection, and lotteries to determine who will be inducted first. But people who are 18 years old are rarely prepared to make a defense for their beliefs. In this session, you will have an opportunity to pull together your files with evidence to demonstrate that you are a conscientious objector, how you arrived at your beliefs, and how those beliefs will affect your choices of a career and lifestyle in the future.”

Even if the government institutes a draft, whether or not a person will be “called up” by Selective Service is a gamble. Selective Service will hold a lottery to determine who will be inducted first. Click on <http://www.landscaper.net/draft70-72.htm#Lottery> to find lottery charts from the Vietnam War. Have youth look up their birthdays see how close they would have come to being inducted first. They can also check the birth dates of relatives and friends to see how they would have fared. Some might have relatives who were drafted. Talk together about their reactions to the numbers.

## **C** How to register your wish to be a conscientious objector

When youth register for the draft within 30 days of their 18th birthday (30 days before or 30 days after), they will not find a space on the form to declare they are conscientious objectors. Besides, all information on the form will be entered into a computer and the form will be thrown away. Here’s what conscientious objectors should do:

1. Get a registration form at the post office.
2. Fill out the form at home. In the margin write, “I am a conscientious objector.”
3. Make at least three copies of the form. Keep one in a safe place at home. Put another in a safe deposit box at a bank. Put the third copy in your file of supporting documents that you will deposit with the Church of the Brethren denominational offices in Elgin, Illinois. You will turn the original copy in to the United States Post Office, register online, or mail your form to Selective Service. The photocopies will demonstrate that you declared your position at the time you registered, even if the original form is destroyed.

Do NOT fill out the form at the post office and turn it in unless you can make copies there. Selective Service will not keep a record of your statement of conscience or your request to be classified as a conscientious objector.

## **Brethren Volunteer Service**

has provided alternative service placements in the past, and has an agreement with Selective Service to do so again in the event of a draft.



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## **D** What about non-registration?

Some people take a conscientious position against any level of participation in the military and choose not to register for the draft. Even alternative service is overseen by the military and requires that draftees first be inducted into military service.

Ask youth to place themselves on a continuum that stretches from “I will do military service” to “I will not register for the draft or participate in the military in any way.” Give participants a chance to talk about their positions on the line. Be sensitive to any who are noticeably different from the others.

Talk about the penalties for refusing to register for the draft. Non-registrants are subject to prison terms of five years and/or \$250,000 fines. They are also ineligible for guaranteed student loans, U.S. citizenship, federal jobs training, and a driver’s license in many states.

Those who are preparing to attend one of the six Church of the Brethren colleges might be eligible for institutional grants and loans that offset the loss of federal grants and loans. They should tell the school’s financial aid officer that they have refused to register with Selective Service and will mark “no” on federal financial aid forms when it asks about compliance with the law on registration.

## **E** Things to think about and do

**1. Meeting with a draft board.** At some point in their lives youth will need to account for what they believe. The more they have thought about their beliefs, the better able they will be to defend their positions. If they wait until they turn 18 to decide whether they could serve in combat, officials may not believe that they have given the matter serious thought. The church encourages all young people to “be ready to make your defense to anyone who demands from you an account of the hope that is in you. . . . Keep your conscience clear” (1 Peter 3:15-16b).

If Selective Service asks a person to appear before a draft board to request status as a conscientious objector, they will ask at least three questions. See the handout for the questions with descriptions. Review these questions with youth, making sure they understand each one.

With the group leader acting as the draft board, have youth practice responding to the three questions. Let those who are waiting their turn act as a team who will feed additional suggestions to the interviewee. This could be a boisterous activity. Let the energy of the team support the person in the hot seat and generate good ideas for responses. **Note:** Anyone who has to appear before a draft board is allowed to choose one person to take along for moral support, though this person may not speak.

## **Shoes of Peace**

Consider giving each participant a copy of *Shoes of Peace: Letters to Youth from Peacemakers* as a symbol of the importance the church places on peace. This book is referred to in the “Call of Conscience” handout. Order from [www.brethren.org/shoesofpeace](http://www.brethren.org/shoesofpeace)



**2. Examine military recruitment materials.** Examine the materials that youth have brought in or that you have obtained. If you don't have printed materials, participants will be able to recall advertisements from movie theaters, the Internet, and magazines. Use these questions and ideas for a discussion:

- What does the material offer members of the military?
- Why is or isn't the offer attractive?
- With a marker, circle words or sentences that talk about moral or religious decisions.
- With a different color, circle the words that appeal to your sense of patriotism and duty.
- What is your own definition of patriotism?

**3. What would Jesus do? What would you do?** Members of a draft board might ask questions to determine whether a person's peace position is consistent. For instance, they might ask conscientious objectors about their reaction to violence in settings other than war to find out if they are opposed to all violence or just violence in war.

Ask the youth how they would apply the church's teachings about peace to other types of violence, such as crime, gang violence, discrimination, bullying, murder, and the death penalty. Invite a discussion about examples such as fights at school, helping a friend who has been abused, or instances of racism or discrimination. Encourage youth to journal several sentences about each situation, explaining what they might do to confront violence. Evidence that they seek alternatives to violence in everyday life will support their cases for conscientious objection.

**4. Prepare files.** Make sure each youth has a copy of the "CO Checklist." If possible, give time to work on the questions. Make a plan for finishing the files. Arrange to help youth complete the project and turn in the materials to the national office of the Church of the Brethren.



## Closing

Distribute copies of the "Call of Conscience" handout.

**1. Ponder.** Ask youth to reflect on this question as they leave the *Call of Conscience* study series and complete their files: "What is God's call of conscience to me?"

**2. Pray.** "God of peace: Help us to be ready to make our defense of the hope that is within us. . . . Help us to keep our conscience clear. Amen."



## Another idea

**Cut apart pictures and phrases from the recruiting pamphlets and use these images to make a short video that uses Bible verses on peace as captions.**