

# Liberty leads ranks of would-be chaplains, but concerns persist

by [Tim Townsend](#)

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(RNS) According to Air Force data, no training program is more popular among prospective chaplains than Liberty Baptist Theological Seminary, part of the late Rev. Jerry Falwell's Liberty University in Lynchburg, Va.

One out of every five Air Force chaplain candidates studying at an evangelical seminary is enrolled at Liberty.

Critics say that high rate of enrollment could add to an imbalance of evangelical Christians among the military's corps of chaplains. And some even within the military have raised questions about the quality of Liberty's program.

Liberty's pairing of evangelical Christianity and patriotism is exemplified during the university's annual Military Emphasis Week. According to the school's website, the highlight of that week is "the patriotic convocation, occurring the Wednesday closest to Veterans Day, featuring patriotic music, veteran testimonies and an inspirational message from a Christian combat veteran."

Liberty is not accredited by the Association of Theological Schools, the national accreditation agency for graduate-level seminaries. Instead, it is accredited by the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools. The Department of Defense requires only that seminaries that

train chaplain candidates be listed with the American Council on Education, which is not an accrediting body.

Retired Air Force chaplain Charles Davidson is a professor at Liberty Baptist Theological Seminary and director of the school's chaplaincy degree program. Davidson launched the program in 2007, taking advantage of a 2004 change in Armed Forces Chaplain Board policy that set training requirements for the Master's of Divinity at 72 credit hours. Most seminaries require 90 credit hours. Liberty eliminated Greek and Hebrew from the required coursework, meeting the Pentagon's 72-hour level.

Davidson also made the coursework available online, and the combination has resulted in an explosion of interest in the program, growing from two students in 2007 to more than 1,000 today.

"The majority" of those students are Army chaplain candidates, Davidson said. Only about 30 of Liberty's chaplain-track students reside on campus.

Such online degrees are a "concern" for Air Force chaplain leaders, said Col. Steven Keith, commandant of the Air Force Chaplain Corps College in Fort Jackson, S.C.

"We are taking note of that," he said. "Resident seminarians, we feel, are better prepared."

All military chaplains must first have the endorsement of a denomination or other institutional religious body before entering a chaplain-candidate track. Liberty has its own military endorsement arm, Liberty Baptist Fellowship. Davidson is the endorsing agent, and

estimated that the school has endorsed 180 chaplains or chaplain candidates.

"Praise the Lord, 10 or 15 years from now we could have 600, 700, 800 evangelical chaplains sprinkled throughout the military who are Liberty graduates," Davidson said.