

Registering as a Conscientious Objector – background and how-to's

*(This information was compiled by Amy Blumenshine
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Conscientious objection (CO) to being forced to kill has long been a moral/ethical and Christian concept. Currently, in the US, CO is most often used related to the obligation to register for selective service, which is a term used for the draft, conscription, compulsory participation in the military.

The US has not implemented a draft since the Vietnam War era yet the selective service registration continues to be required by law for males in the 60 day period around their 18th birthday. Many register for the draft with little awareness as part of applying for a driver's license.

As of May 15, 2017, the US is threatening military action on multiple continents. Events could move very quickly to necessitate more military personnel than can be mustered voluntarily. Anyone registering for selective service should do so with thoughtful discernment regarding their possible conscription with all of its consequences. Resources regarding personal discernment on participation in the military is posted at <http://mpls-synod.org/youth/discernment-military/>.

While none of us can predict what will happen, we do encourage those vulnerable to conscription to prepare. (Actually we think all Christians should consider these issues!) The selective service registration itself is archaic, developed before computers and the internet. If a draft is instituted, it is likely that major changes to the selective service system would be made. Many expect females to be included. Many expect that those young adults conscripted would be more effectively located by means other than their selective service registration information. (It is notable that it is far easier to register to be a soldier than to be a voter.)

The legal situation is also unknown since legalities have changed since the draft was last instituted and it is also uncertain how courts and selective service boards will act. During the last draft, there was wide variation in how the local selective service boards made their determinations. One significant legal change is that the UN Commission on Human Rights, which the US as a signatory is obligated to follow, has determined that "selective conscientious objection," that is, objection to participation in a particular war (like the Vietnam war) or a particular military activity, like nuclear bombing, is also a basic human right. That a person has the right to refuse to kill in a particular war or to refuse to act against their conscience by doing particular military activities has long been a Lutheran principle. The church and state can hold differing positions, and this is one of them. Lutherans generally hold to the primacy of conscience over the authority of the state. Where the church and state differ there can be legal consequences to following church positions. None of this should be taken lightly.

The first step is to make your discernment decision regarding whether you can in conscience participate in military killing. If you determine that your conscience allows you to do so without restrictions, you need only –if you are male – register for selective service as provided in your state.

If, however, you discern that your position is one of conscientious objection (including selective conscientious objection), the following steps could help to comply with the law and prepare for a possible later appearance before a draft board (in the event of a draft.) As currently operating, the selective service administration provides no official procedure for registering as a CO. The suggestions below are from the Center on Conscience and War, CCW, a leading non-profit that has been advocating for the rights of conscience for 75 years.

<http://www.centeronconscience.org/co/conscientious-objection-and-the-draft/7-draftregistration.html>

Overall there are two steps to this preparation, which are expanded on below:

1. **Communicate your CO status** to the Selective Service. Print in legible black ink on the face of all Forms sent to Selective Service (not on the edges): *I am a conscientious objector*. Important: Make a photocopy all Forms for your own records before you submit it to the postal clerk for date stamp and initials. Send all mail return-receipt requested.
2. **Keep a documentation file.** Put the copies and receipts from Step 1 into a File that you will maintain to document your CO. In this file, also prepare a statement of your beliefs. (Some choose to file the statement of beliefs with their church or a reputable peace organization such as CCW.) Such a statement could be helpful in getting the government to recognize your CO beliefs.

Regarding Step 1, How to try to register as CO

If you have not yet registered:

Fill out a paper registration card available at the post office. Write somewhere on the face of the card, between the lines or above your signature, "I'm opposed to participation in war in any form because of my ethical, moral, or religious beliefs," or words to that effect. You should make a photocopy of the card before surrendering it to the postal clerk. Keep your copy in the file recommended below. When they send you a letter in response, keep the letter they send you, Form 3A, as proof that you have registered in your file.

Then continue by sending in Form 3B to Selective Service as directed in the next paragraph.

Even if you have already registered electronically or as part of applying for a driver's license, you should have received the letter Form 3A which states that if there is any information listed is incorrect you should file Form 3B.

In order to leave a paper trail, everyone who intends to register as CO should also file Form 3B. The registration acknowledgment (Form 3A) will contain no reference to the fact that you registered as a conscientious objector. Note on Form 3B that you are a conscientious objector and wish this to be noted in Selective Service records. Selective Service will not change its data in the computer to acknowledge that you would like to be registered as a CO. However, if you send this statement to Selective Service by **certified mail return receipt requested**, and keep a photocopy together with your receipts, you

will have documented that you attempted to get your beliefs on record with Selective Service long before they attempted to draft you.

(If you registered without mentioning that you are a conscientious objector, you could send a letter stating this to Selective Service at any time.)

Regarding Step 2 – Preparing a personal file

To females as well as males who are approaching or of conscription age, we encourage you to establish a file, a record, of how you have been influenced towards your decision of conscience. In the past when draft boards decided to approve or disapprove applications for CO status, such records were helpful in gaining approval.

These are the sorts of things that can be helpful. Print out the information at these websites as we cannot guarantee that the information will continue to be available.:

1. Official positions of your national church (again, the resources currently at <http://mpls-synod.org/youth/discernment-military> cover the ELCA support for CO and selective CO)
2. A statement from your pastor that you have been engaged over time in discernment on this issue and take seriously the Christian mandates to love your neighbor and not kill them.
3. A personal statement that you write (perhaps filing with your church) before a draft is instituted regarding your discernment that your deep principles would be violated if you were forced to engage in military activities. Unfortunately, recent US military activity has included pre-emptive invasion, constant bombing of poor people, torture of prisoners, imprisoning people indefinitely without trial, middle of the night home invasions, assassinations by drone or special forces, driving military convoys over pedestrians, atrocities like Haditha, and other killings of civilians and rescue workers as well as wide-spread and long-term destruction of homes and means of livelihoods. The arguments that these actions are necessary or done also by the enemy are not morally defensible by Christian ethics. Many veterans suffer from the soul wounds of what they have done. So far, the whistle-blowers who have disclosed these offenses to morality have suffered more official punishment than those who ordered them.
4. Keep a list of what you have read or otherwise encountered that influenced your decision.
5. It may be helpful to also have a statement from teachers or other mentors who have reason to know why you discern as you have. A parent who many not be alive during a draft determination might also want to file a statement. Anything that shows that this has been a life-long educational process, and that you are being raised in a nonviolent manner. Suggestions would include papers showing participation in camps, classes, or training sessions emphasizing cooperative play, peace, nonviolent resolution to conflicts, books read, awards or pictures showing participation in marches or protests, mediation training, letters written to educators, and clubs in school that would emphasize these issues.

None of this material gets used unless a person is drafted and can be considered “revisable” until that time. People’s decisions do shift with changing circumstances and maturity.