

# CHAPLAINS GUIDE







**F**or DAV's 100-plus year history, chaplains have played an historical role. DAV's first national chaplain was a rabbi. In spite of having a clerical exemption from military service, Michael Aaronsohn enlisted the month after the U.S. entered World War I.

During the war, antisemitism was on the rise in part because of accusations that Jewish people shirked military service. Some foreign-born Americans at the time claimed to be ineligible for the draft because they weren't born in the U.S.

Aaronsohn considered anyone who would avoid the call to duty "a hypocrite or a low down coward."

He rose through the ranks to become a battalion sergeant major and was blinded by an artillery shell while saving a wounded comrade during the Meuse-Argonne offensive.

In spite of his disability, he went on to complete his religious education. In addition to serving as DAV's first national chaplain, he supported developmentally disabled children and helped found the Jewish Braille Institute to make religious texts accessible. Like DAV, that charity is still going strong. Aaronsohn wrote books and was a noteworthy civic leader.

Particularly for an organization that serves people whose lives were forever changed in service, the role of DAV chaplains at every level is special and needed.

Chaplains help facilitate and support the needs of veterans of all religions, faiths and denominations. To meet the needs of our diverse members, it is critical that those who are elected to the position understand their role and support DAV's membership and mission as effectively as possible.

The purpose of this guide is to inform and educate chaplains on their responsibilities and provide the resources veterans need to help them meet their spiritual needs based on their beliefs. It is further intended to educate the chaplains colleagues and elected leaders on how they might engage or employ DAV to support our mission and provide comfort and inspiration to affect the good of the order.

DAV is grateful for all who served, especially those who continue to serve through our sacred organization. Thank you for your tireless drive to ensure we keep our promise to America's veterans.

Barry A. Jesinoski  
DAV National Adjutant/CEO



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## Introduction

Beyond noting that chaplains are elected by DAV's membership, their duties are not elaborated upon in DAV's National Constitution and Bylaws. But one of the most important tenants of DAV's stance on religion and faith is very clearly defined. Section 2.2, which covers nonpartisanship, states clearly that DAV shall be non-sectarian. As such, at every level, DAV shall not be used in representing the desires or wishes even of our members in sectarian religious matters. Chaplains are also mentioned briefly in the DAV Chapter Officer Guide.

In DAV's official ritual, chaplains are mentioned in greater depth. The purpose of this resource is to provide guidance to help those elected to this office at every level. Elected officers in DAV should have adequate room to exercise their judgment and utilize their knowledge and skills to the betterment of the organization. It is equally important that those chosen to lead understand the scope of their position, the boundaries that exist based on DAV's chartered purpose, and their associated responsibilities.

**DAV National Constitution and Bylaws,**  
visit [dav.la/3ps](https://dav.la/3ps) or scan the QR code.



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**DAV Official Ritual,** visit [dav.la/32r](https://dav.la/32r)  
or scan the QR code.





## Historic perspective

Those elected to be DAV chaplains often look to the roles and responsibilities of their military counterparts to inspire their efforts. In the military, as in DAV, chaplains are important officers with a unique role in the morale and welfare of the troops they support and serve.

Military chaplains are unique among those with a spiritual calling in that their ministry may call them to the battlefield. Though military chaplains are noncombatants, at least nine have been honored with the Medal of Honor for heroism dating back to the Civil War.

The Continental Congress instituted the Navy chaplaincy in November 1775 and provided for chaplains for every Army brigade two years later.

Historically, military chaplains are part of the command structure with a unique mission and responsibility to servicemembers.

Chaplains in the military seek to fulfill the needs of members and families in the units they serve. That means facilitating and supporting the needs of religions from Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Buddhism and more.

Unlike military chaplains, it's impractical for DAV chaplains to receive the extensive training required to perform the vast myriad of duties required to serve all the needs of those in uniform. Based on their election to office alone, DAV chaplains do not have the authority to officiate marriages, perform religious birth rituals, grant absolution, provide spiritual counseling or handle many other duties that come with a fulltime religious avocation.

Though DAV chaplains can't be expected to understand the tenets of every religion, they must equally respect and honor the needs of all – even those with much lesser known religious beliefs or affiliations.

The consequences of a chaplain even unintentionally disrespecting the religious beliefs of DAV members or their families could be harmful for our cohesion, membership and reputation as a charity.

A DAV chaplain cannot be dismissive of members whose beliefs may be unknown to him or her. For instance, Asatro, the worship of the Norse gods, is a belief system military chaplains have been asked to support. While it is impossible to say if DAV has any Asatro members who worship gods like Thor, giants and their ancestors, it would be of great discomfort and a disservice to the good of the order to discriminate against any spiritual or religious beliefs a chaplain might encounter.

In terms of responsibilities, according to the DAV Chapter Officer Guide: The chaplain is responsible for leading the opening prayer of the chapter meetings. The chaplain is the spiritual leader of the chapter and may be called upon to represent the chapter at the funeral services for deceased members, send sympathy cards and visit members of the chapter or their family members who are ill.

**DAV Chapter Officer Guide**, visit [dav.la/3pt](http://dav.la/3pt) or scan the QR code.



This guidance is intended to provide a very basic framework of the role of the chaplain in a way that allows one elected to the post to customize their approach to serving the entity they represent based on their availability and capabilities.



## Requirements for service

One does not have to be of any particular faith or creed, or have specific training, credentials or qualifications to be elected by a body's membership to be a chaplain at any level. It is incumbent on DAV members, as an electorate, and leaders to ensure those running for any given office meet high standards for integrity and are capable of credibly representing and contributing to the organization. The moral character of those serving as chaplains is particularly important based on their purpose.

Those with a stated interest or a willingness to serve as chaplains should be willing to answer questions and disclose any information that could result in harm to DAV's reputation.

Beyond that, chaplains must be willing and able to perform duties described from the aforementioned DAV Chapter Officer Guide and the ritual.

## Serving all

DAV chaplains cannot be selective about who they serve, as their constituents include all members in their specific entity within DAV. DAV chaplains must do their utmost to avail themselves to support veterans in their time of need.

Chaplains, with rare exceptions, benefit in their work by being present at all their entity's events and doing their utmost to ensure members they serve are aware of the services they offer. This is especially true in meetings where they play a prominent role.

Chaplains should also make every effort to be aware of the health and welfare of their members and be notified in the event of a need, illness or death within their DAV community. Chaplains may visit ill members and even comfort the survivors of our fallen.

All that said, chaplains should understand and respect the limits of their capabilities. Chaplains are not required to be credentialed crisis counselors to be elected. In the absence of significant training, extensive qualifications and understanding, chaplains should refer veterans in crisis to the VA Crisis Line, which can be reached by dialing 988 and pressing 1 or by texting 838255. Chaplains should frequently mention the crisis line to members and be willing to connect them with other resources within DAV and VA that may help them in their time of need.

Those seeking the assistance of chaplains in any matter should feel confident that their personal



PHOTO BY MICHELE WIENCKE/DAVIDS

concerns will be treated sensitively. In some states, laws identify clergy privileges. Others may not. Based on being elected a DAV chaplain alone, most do not have the requisite requirements to provide religious counseling and should avoid doing so in conjunction with their role in DAV. Elected DAV chaplains in the vast, vast majority of cases should refer those in need of intensive spiritual counseling to Department of Veterans Affairs chaplains or others based on the needing individual's desires or religious affiliation.

Based on their unique circumstances, knowledge and experiences, most DAV chaplains are not equipped to provide customized religious ceremonies or services for members of all beliefs. However, it is absolutely essential that they respect their members' beliefs and avoid proselytizing. In prayers or invocations, chaplains must not denigrate any opposing religious or spiritual belief.

Chaplains should also recognize that they serve non-religious DAV members. It is not their responsibility to change the views of atheists, agnostics, humanists or individuals without personal spiritual doctrine, but to be available and provide comfort and assistance when it is needed.

Chaplains should be a uniting presence within the body they serve. In their role as chaplain, they should not express views of their faith or personal beliefs on topics such as homosexuality, transgenderism or the nonreligious.

Should a chaplain host a memorial service or provide an invocation during a meeting, the message must not proselytize on behalf of a specific creed and should be presented in a nonsectarian way that allows members to make it their own in terms of their personal beliefs and values. The purpose of the chaplain is not to convert but to facilitate, comfort and empower others.



## The ritual

The full scope of a chaplain's role can be customized based on the abilities, desires and needs of the individual elected to the position. However, there are some very specific duties for which chaplains are required based on DAV's official ritual.

Firstly, the ritual identifies the placement of chaplains in recommended meeting arrangements for chapters. It notes the prominent placement recommended for chaplains to provide opening prayers for chapter meetings. It even provides a recommended prayer.

In an optional recommendation, after the prayer, the chaplain is asked by the commander presiding over the meeting to place the POW/MIA flag on an empty chair to honor those taken prisoner or missing in action.

Further into the meeting, according to recommendations in the ritual, the chaplain may be asked to report on sickness or distress among the membership. This is a key responsibility of the chaplain because it empowers the body to look after our members and their families in times of hardship.

In the ritual, the chaplain is asked to lead the body once again in prayer before the close of the meeting, with a recommended prayer.

## Honoring our fallen

Guidance on one of the most important responsibilities for a chaplain can be found in the ritual. Laying to rest a veteran is a sacred and hallowed occasion. The ritual discusses this procedure at length.

One thing to note about the prayer for the fallen, it loosely quotes Christian scripture in stating "Though we walk through the valley of the shadow of Death." This quote is taken from Psalm 23:4. Like all recommendations, it could and should be omitted if it causes discomfort based on the beliefs of the fallen. But by not directly quoting Bible and verse, it allows for an open interpretation that can be molded to the varying beliefs of those attending the service.

On other occasions, this same philosophy can be applied to other universal themes from other texts that should not be directly quoted, but may be used more generally to unite in common spirit those in attendance.

The ritual's guidance on burial procedures includes planning, a proposed order of events and script.

At DAV state-level department meetings, memorial services are frequently held. Honoring our fallen on these occasions provides important closure for those who knew or honor the lives and accomplishments of the deceased.

## Why is there a Bible at the meeting?

There is no official religion of DAV. As noted previously, DAV's first chaplain was a rabbi and others have represented a variety of personal religious beliefs. The national organization does not incorporate religious texts in meetings or events.

Some DAV departments or chapters reserve a place for a Bible during their deliberations.

This is not mandated by any DAV policy or resolution and is potentially divisive.

Even within the Christian religion, there are different versions of the Bible and having one versus another can imply a bias for a specific creed.

If the placement of any religious or sectarian text or symbol creates or contributes to strife amongst the membership, it is counterproductive to display it and peripheral to DAV's congressionally chartered purpose.





# Remembering DAV members brings comfort and a sense of community.

These events can be customized based on the burial services noted in the ritual and include ceremonies such as candle lightings by DAV leaders. What is most important to note is that the purpose of these events is to honor the fallen and pay homage to their lives in a way that brings comfort to the membership at large.

## Memorial services

Honoring our fallen is a sacred obligation that brings solace to our community. Memorial Services are typically conducted at the department (state) level, but may be held at the chapter level. Services can be modified based on facilities, available volunteers or other factors.

It is important to honor the solemnity of the occasion and holding rehearsals or, at minimum, a verbal run through, should be held in advance to ensure key participants are prepared and the effort is appropriately organized. Some entities will honor fallen members by name in ceremonies. If this is done, special attention should be taken to show respects in equal measure for all the known departed. It is not required to do so.

## Identifying the deceased

A list of names of the known fallen, or the Membership Deceased Listing, can be accessed online by DAV and Auxiliary commanders, adjutants and line officers. A range of dates can be submitted to generate a report through the Reports Repository in **MyDAV.org**. To access this report, members must be registered users on **MyDAV.org**. Registration confirmation can take up to two full working days, so please prepare in advance.

More information on registration, visit **MyDAV.org** or scan the QR code.



Resources can be found by visiting **dav.org/member-resources** or scan the QR code.



Chaplains may also reach out directly to the membership department at DAV National Headquarters to request their entity's deceased listing by calling **1-888-236-8313 from 8 a.m. to 4 p.m. ET**, or emailing [membership@dav.org](mailto:membership@dav.org).

## Proper planning

When applicable, DAV and Auxiliary chaplains participate in memorial services, with the presiding DAV chaplain taking the lead. Some memorial services include a non-denominational ritual with a communal response, often referred to as a liturgy. In many cases, DAV leaders, members or even family members get involved and take on readings. Some include music or a visual presentation that honors the fallen in some way. Songs like "Amazing Grace" or even popular music that evokes respectful thoughts or feelings may be played or performed.

Some services include a printed or projected program to help attendees follow along with elements of the event and to recognize participants.

Beyond being respectful to the fallen and participants of all faiths and beliefs, chaplains involved in facilitating these services have no hard and fast requirements.

The resources (time and funds) allocated to a memorial service should be appropriate and thoughtfully measured. While important, the way we honor our fallen should not take away from our efforts to serve the living, their families and survivors.





### POW/MIA ceremonies

DAV entities often reserve a table and set it with specific items to remember those taken prisoner or missing in action. Sometimes there is a brief mention or even a short ceremony as part of a regular business session or even during a banquet. If a memorial service is held, a formal ceremony recognizing the symbolism of the table is often incorporated.

Below is a template script which includes a prisoner of war/missing in action ceremony. Having a POW/MIA or “Missing Man” Table. The typical items used on the table, according to the Department of Defense, include:

- A table, set off to the side, usually round
- A single chair, often covered or tilted so the back leans against the table
- A white tablecloth
- A single candle
- An inverted glass
- A single red rose in a vase
- A yellow ribbon tied around the vase
- A plate containing a slice of lemon and small amount of salt



For more information from DoD regarding The POW/MIA or Missing Man Table visit [dav.la/3pu](http://dav.la/3pu) or scan the QR code.



Some will actually place seven settings recognizing the branches of service. Some even include uniform headgear representing each branch. There is no hard and fast requirement, though many members are very sensitive about how the table is presented.

The DoD provides a video that can be played to illustrate the symbolism of the table and the reference it holds for those who’ve served, their families and survivors.



# The POW/MIA table shows the unique connection DAV members have to our missing and their families.

Here is a script that may be read to explain the symbolism:

*As an organization comprised of veterans forever changed in service and families who share in that sacrifice, we must never forget the souls of those missing in action or taken prisoner of war.*

*As such, we have reserved a place of honor for our POWs and MIAs.*

*We remember... (Pause)*

*The table is round, to show that our concern for them is continuous.*

*The cloth is white, symbolizing the purity of their intentions as they answered the call of duty.*

*The single rose is red. It reminds us of the love we share for these brave Americans, their loved ones and families who wait for their return.*

*The ribbon is yellow. It symbolizes our determination that they should all return home and hope that remains in the hearts of those who are separated.*



*The salt symbolizes the tears of all who suffer and mourn their tragic parting.*

*The slice of lemon reminds us of their bitter fate and the unfulfilled moments that we mark until they return.*

*That candle, and its yellow flame, shine with our hope for their return. Alive or dead.*



*The chair are empty. Because they are not here, though they live in our hearts.*

*The glass is inverted. For they are not hear to be toasted for their service.*

*(as applicable)*

*Now, let us raise a glass of water to toast the brave souls who cannot join us. May their memories remain bright in our hearts and inspire our work to honor their brothers and sisters through DAV and the Auxiliary.*

*(or)*

*Now, let us bow our heads in a moment of silence and consecrate our sincere wish that all our missing be accounted for – whether they be returned home in life or death.*

*(Pause)*

*We remember...*

*(Pause)*

*We remember...*

*(Pause)*

*We remember*





### In closing

An effective DAV chaplain does not need a doctorate in divinity or to have led a faultless life. A good chaplain has a great deal of empathy, emotional intelligence and a sincere desire to comfort and facilitate the spiritual beliefs of a diverse range of veterans and family members. He or she is also an excellent communicator who fosters relationships with DAV leaders and members in a way that empowers the chaplain to understand their constituents and collaborate with them to strengthen and unify DAV and advance our charitable cause.

One phrase in the ritual is not associated exclusively with chaplains, but with all who take the oath of office and are installed into elected or appointed positions. At installation, all officers raise their right hand and state: “I pledge to act and conduct myself, in such a manner, at all times and places, as will only affect the good of the order.”

This phrase is especially important for DAV chaplains whose primary responsibility is to provide comfort and ease while unifying our members in common purpose. By respecting the views, experiences and beliefs of all our members, serving as a chaplain can be an immensely rewarding way to support DAV’s mission.





#### **NATIONAL HEADQUARTERS**

860 Dolwick Drive  
Erlanger, KY 41018  
859-441-7300  
Toll-Free 877-426-2838

#### **WASHINGTON HEADQUARTERS**

1300 I Street, NW, Suite 400 West  
Washington, DC 20005  
202-554-3501

**dav.org**

