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Pastor's son home on leave from Afghanistan

The Rev. Chip Roberson's son is on a mission in Afghanistan, yet he believes church isn't the place to air his views on war. His mission, he says, is to preach the message of God, not politics.

By Rob Johnson

Ben Roberson stood by his father to greet newcomers at Cave Spring Baptist Church in Roanoke County on Sunday. And Chip Roberson, the pastor, stands solidly behind his son, a U.S. Army sergeant home on leave from an area of heavy fighting in Afghanistan. But in the pulpit, the preacher is neutral.

"Yes, I support the war," the Rev. Chip Roberson said in an interview. "I believe we're trying to do the right thing in Afghanistan and in Iraq. But my mission is to preach the gospel," said Roberson, who arrived at Cave Spring Baptist in 2003, about the same time his son, now 26, joined the Army.

"I only get a few minutes a week to get God's message across. And if I get off-message, talking about the war, with all the politics that go with it, God's word could get lost," Roberson said.

Of course there are potential political pitfalls for cause-minded pastors. "Ministers certainly run the risk of alienating parishioners who may not hold their point of view -- whether on the Middle East or some other contemporary issue," said Grace Kao, a professor of religious studies at Virginia Tech.

Another preacher who holds back on making public his support of America's military actions in the Middle East during sermons is Eddie Barnett. He was pastor at Greene Memorial United Methodist Church in downtown Roanoke in 2005 and 2006 -- between two stints as an Army chaplain in Iraq. This summer Barnett will start pastoring another church in Williamsburg. He said, "The Bible is above world politics, and I try to stick to the gospel."

There's plenty of precedent for preachers speaking out on war, from the Revolutionary War clergy labeled "The Black Regiment" by King George III because of the black-robed pastors' anti-red coat rhetoric, to the late Martin Luther King Jr., who occasionally sermonized against America's actions in Vietnam.

The closest that Roberson gets to the subject of the Middle East conflict during services is an occasional mention -- on Christmas Eve for example -- that Ben Roberson and his Italy-based unit, the 173rd Airborne Brigade, are in perilous territory. Ben Roberson is an infantry light weapons specialist -- a proverbial and proud "grunt." The pastor asked the congregation to include the soldiers in their prayers.

Indeed, the 173rd's turf in eastern Afghanistan is claimed by the Taliban, and military intelligence has said al-Qaida is training across the nearby border of Pakistan. It's the notorious area where three members of a four-man Navy SEAL team were killed in a 2005 ambush; the rescue helicopter carrying 16 commandos was shot down, killing all aboard -- the biggest blow to U.S. forces in Afghanistan since they toppled the Taliban in 2001.

Roberson, whose two-week leave ends Thursday, is reserved in his assessment of the U.S. military effort: "I think in Afghanistan the Taliban are still stronger than most people here understand."

He's in his second tour of Afghanistan; the first was a year long and ended in March 2006; his second

deployment began in May 2007 and is scheduled to end in August. Ben Roberson's Army enlistment ends in November, and he said he plans to re-enter civilian life and take a second crack at college.

A Liberty University dropout who said he was "just wasn't ready to study" at that level before, he doesn't profess strong foreign policy views.

"My whole concept isn't about if we're winning the war, it's just about protecting my friends to my left and my right," he said.

Similarly, Cave Spring Baptist's pastor seeks only prayers of safety for his son, rather than the congregation's endorsement of the cause. That's fine with them.

"I think he has handled the involvement of his family in the war very diplomatically," said Ron Salyer, a deacon whose son Lee is a Navy-enlisted man on the aircraft carrier USS Harry S. Truman -- which has seen duty in the Persian Gulf.

"When I tell people about my son being over there, I sometimes get teary-eyed. Only once or twice have I seen Chip like that," Salyer said.

Salyer's wife, Margie, said pastors' duties shouldn't include pumping up support for a war, even if their children are in it.

"I really don't need to hear about it in church. That's not why I'm here," she said.

Still, some in Chip Roberson's flock wish he would speak out on the war. Darrell Bransetter, 77, a youngster when Pearl Harbor was bombed, recalls hearing rousing pro-war sermons. He views today's silence from the pulpit as a retreat by pastors from their leadership responsibilities. "I believe they should preach on what's happening in the world right now," he said.

Yet his pastor is adamant about being publicly impartial. "I could go on and on stomping about the war being right. And probably 95 percent of the people in this church would agree with me," Chip Roberson said. "This is a very conservative congregation.

"But that other 5 percent, they're important, too," Roberson said. Besides, he reasons that the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan will eventually end. "The gospel's message about God's promise of life everlasting is timeless. That's what the church should be all about," he said.

So on Sunday, with Ben in the congregation, the pastor's sermon focused on trouble in the Middle East long ago, when -- as described in the Book of Numbers -- God sent "fiery serpents" to bite the Israelites in a test of trust. As the story goes, Roberson pointed out, God never took the snakes away.

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