Although all major religions have enduring principles and concerns, the issues and events of the day often trigger responses from religious leaders and organizations (Ahlstrom 2004; Butler, Wacker, and Balmer 2003; Gaustad and Schmidt 2002; Harvey 2001). When people face the possibility or reality of warfare, they are likely to press for some form of response from many social institutions, including religious institutions. Given the value of peace and its fragile nature, many people are also likely to expect religious institutions to discuss and support peace much of the time—although many people also experience warlike feelings at least occasionally, such as immediately after September 11, 2001.

One part of that response in many religions is prayer (Moore 2005). Prayers take many forms, but they usually offer a communications link between people and a divine being or presence, between religious leaders or organizations and their members, or among members of a group. In addition, prayers serve as vehicles for individual reflection and self-examination.
For much of American history, intensive wars occupied fairly limited spans of time, although more limited battles took place between major wars. Beginning with World War II, however, the United States entered an era of nearly continuous mobilization for war with periods of active warfare, albeit at varying levels of severity. With the collapse of communism in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, some observers hoped for an extended period of relative peace. However, the world has remained mired in military conflicts, and the United States has been directly involved in conflicts of various sizes, including the recent invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq.

Since the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, Americans have also faced the specter of attacks on American soil. Terrorism presents the added stresses of violent conflict that may erupt virtually anywhere and that may be quite open-ended. Moreover, some of the combatants are not clearly identifiable and may make no distinction between military and civilian targets (see Howard, Forest, and Moore 2006; Sauter and Carafano 2005). All of those dynamics make terrorism particularly frightening and confusing. In that environment, many people are likely to turn to religion as a source of guidance and reassurance.

In the following, preliminary analysis, we will explore war and peace in Christian prayer with particular emphasis on prayers linked to the United States. We limit our analysis to Christian prayer because Christianity has by far the largest number of adherents in the United States (Gallup and Jones 2000) and due to resource constraints. We plan to extend the analysis to prayers of other religions in the near future.

THE USES AND PURPOSES OF PRAYER

Virtually all religions incorporate some form of prayer. The types of prayer vary considerably. They may be long or short, spoken or sung, spontaneous or written in advance, focused on a single topic or spanning a number of topics (for an overview of the considerable diversity of types, see Water 2004). Prayers may be uttered by an individual who is alone or in a large group. Prayer is used for a great many purposes, and when several people utter the same prayer, they may interpret it in a number of different ways (Buckley 1986, xvii). Even a single individual may use a prayer for a number of different