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January 4, 2006

Navy Chaplain's Hunger Strike Enters 16th Day

by Pete Winn, associate editor

Gordon Klingenschmitt is battling for the right to pray publicly as God would have him.

A Protestant Navy chaplain based in Norfolk, Va., is in Day 16 of a hunger strike protesting restrictions that have been placed on his religious freedom.

Lt. Gordon J. Klingenschmitt says he has been forbidden to pray "in Jesus' name" while he is in uniform.

"I'm asking the president of the United States to give me back my uniform and let me pray publicly in Jesus' name," Klingenschmitt told CitizenLink. "The chief of Navy chaplains has told me if I pray 'in Jesus' name' that I am denigrating other faiths."

Klingenschmitt says the Navy, at one point, tried to oust him because he insisted on publicly praying to Jesus.

"My commanding officer told a Navy board to end my career, saying in writing, 'Chaplain Klingenschmitt overemphasized his own faith system'—and he was talking about my prayers and my sermons," the chaplain explained. "He also punished me for one of my sermons that I preached in the chapel, in the pulpit—optional attendance on a Saturday afternoon—where I said 'Jesus is the way to heaven.' "

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After nine months of being threatened with the end of his career, Klingenschmitt declared his hunger fast in front of the White House a little more than two weeks ago.

"Suddenly, within 24 hours, they gave me a contract extension, so I am still in the Navy, and my career is no longer in jeopardy," Klingenschmitt said. "But I can't wear my uniform for public appearances, and they say I cannot pray 'in Jesus' name' in public unless I'm wearing civilian clothes."

Klingenschmitt, a former Air Force major who took a pay cut to switch branches and become a Navy chaplain, said there has been a law on the books since 1860 permitting individual chaplains to conduct public worship "according to the manner and forms of his own church."

"That law is not being enforced," he said.

The U.S. Navy did not comment on Klingenschmitt's situation.

The Rev. Pat Mahoney of the Christian Defense Coalition, who has joined the chaplain on his fast, also joined in the plea to President Bush, asking the commander in chief to issue an executive order allowing military chaplains to pray according to their own faith traditions.

"It should never be the role of government to dictate to American citizens, especially the clergy, how they are to publicly pray," Mahoney said.

Alex Person, who heads Focus on the Family's outreach to military chaplains—and who is himself a former armed-forces spiritual adviser—said a chaplain in the military wears two hats. One, obviously, is the military hat.

"She's a Protestant chaplain, or he's a Jewish chaplain, or a Catholic priest for the Navy or the Air Force or the Marines or the Army," Person said. "However, they also represent their specific denomination or faith group, as well."

Balancing the two roles isn't always easy, Person added. And there has long been pressure in the military to be sensitive to "pluralistic" situations, where many different faiths may be represented.

"But a Protestant chaplain, preaching in a Protestant chapel to a crowd of people who are there voluntarily, ought to always be able to pray in Jesus' name," Person said.

Klingenshmitt, meanwhile, said more than 75 members of Congress have joined him in asking President Bush to stand for religious freedom.

TAKE ACTION

Please respectfully ask President Bush to support the rights of military chaplains to be true to their individual faith traditions. For contact information, including an easy-to-use e-mail form, visit the [CitizenLink Action Center](#).

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