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Chaplain on hunger strike to protest 'religious harassment'

By [Laura M. Colarusso](#)

Times staff writer

A Navy chaplain has stopped eating to protest what he calls "religious harassment" in the military.

Chaplain (Lt.) Gordon Klingenschmitt, an evangelical Episcopal priest, said Navy officials are trying to force him out of the service because he wants to pray in the name of Jesus.

"I will not eat again until the president of the United States gives me back my uniform and allows me to pray in Jesus' name," Klingenschmitt said with the White House in the background. "For me, it's a matter of conscience."

Klingenschmitt's hunger strike began Dec. 20. Evangelicals such as Klingenschmitt say the First Amendment protects their right to pray in Jesus' name in any setting. Others argue that more secular prayers are appropriate for gatherings of people of multiple faiths.

"It's a very sacred command of scripture that cannot be violated," said Klingenschmitt, who is drinking only water during his hunger strike.

His convictions may cost the 37-year-old Air Force Academy graduate his job. As of Dec. 22, the Navy has not renewed his contract, which expires Dec. 31, he said.

Navy spokesman Lt. William Marks said Klingenschmitt is still an active-duty chaplain, and is not facing disciplinary action, in part because he is currently in leave status.

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Chaplain (Lt.) Gordon Klingenschmitt, center, prays with supporters outside the White House on Thursday evening. Klingenschmitt is on a hunger strike to protest what he says is a Navy prohibition on his ability to pray in the name of Jesus. — M. Scott Mahaskey / Times staff photo



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