



COMMONWEALTH of VIRGINIA

Office of the Governor

Timothy M. Kaine
Governor

September 30, 2008

Chaplain Gordon James Klingenschmitt
Post Office 9226
Norfolk, VA 23505

Dear Chaplain Klingenschmitt:

I received your letter of September 26 along with the other attachments you forwarded to my Chief of Staff, Wayne Turnage.

First, I applaud your devotion to your faith. I share it. I served with Jesuit missionaries in Honduras during the 1980-81 school year and my Christian faith is central to my public service career. I work with many great state officials who share the same motive and numerous others whose strong attachment to faith traditions other than mine give them the heart to serve their fellow citizens.

Second, I believe that the moral commands of our faith compel us to be truthful. I see a few things in your letter and attachments that are not truthful. I assume these are simple misunderstandings, rather than anything malicious. No one has "lost their jobs." No one suffered a "forced resignation." There is no "anti-Christian persecution" or "violation of free speech rights." And, while I acknowledge that this is a matter of opinion, I do not believe that anyone has been forced to offer only "watered down prayers."

Let me explain what has occurred. Our Virginia State Police has a voluntary chaplaincy program. The chaplains are State Troopers who volunteer for the service, receive proper training and then, if selected, are given the awesome responsibility to minister to state troopers and their families. The hours that these individuals serve in ministering is part of their job and they are paid for that service as state employees. As such, the mission is service to troopers and their families and not proselytizing.

The overwhelming majority of a chaplain's responsibility is working with troopers and their families, sometimes individually and sometimes in small groups. In that capacity, our chaplains have always been free to minister as they best can to the individuals they serve. And, our chaplains also participate in religious ceremonies and scripture studies where they are not limited in how they serve.

In the aftermath of a recent opinion authored for the United States Court of Appeals by Retired Justice Sandra Day O'Connor, Colonel Steve Flaherty (also a dedicated Christian) and the State Police leadership considered one of the very narrow duties of the chaplains, i.e., offering prayers at services open to the broader public such as graduations (which occur once or twice a year, at most) or the annual memorial service held to honor all law enforcement members who have lost their lives in duty. In these relatively rare instances, there are public crowds that normally contain people of different faith backgrounds. It is important for state employees to be sensitive to the entire population who would attend such events.

Acting on their own review of the situation and using their best judgment (after consultation with legal counsel), the State Police leadership decided that—in these relatively infrequent public events—public prayers offered by salaried public employees should be non-denominational in nature. A non-denominational prayer to the Creator, God, Lord or Father is not “watered-down” by any means--Jesus suggested that we pray to the Father. It just ensures that most if not all people attending a state-sponsored event are made to feel included and welcome. In all other instances, the chaplains are encouraged to minister as they see fit, using their best judgment to the task at hand.

Most of the members of the chaplaincy program understand this guidance from the leadership and accept it. I am very sorry that some members feel that this rule about the public ceremonies is unacceptable. I am surprised that they would give up all chaplaincy duties and opportunities to minister to their fellow troopers and families. If they refused to comply with the directive at public ceremonies, they still could have retained their chaplaincy positions and continued to minister to troopers in the myriad of other ways that comprise the vast majority of the work. They simply would not have been assigned to perform duties at the public ceremonies. (I hope that some may think further about this matter and choose to return and serve in this way.)

Still, the members who resigned had every right to do so. They certainly have not lost their jobs and they were not forced to resign. They remain valued and appreciated state employees.

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On a last note, I did note that the attachments to your letter contained some extraneous references to energizing voters before November 4 and disparaging comments about “liberals,” “atheists” and “homosexuals.” I take matters of faith and religious liberty very seriously and am offended when people attempt to inflame passions about these sacred matters for political ends. I hope you share that view.

Please feel free to correspond further if you feel the need. Thanks very much.

Sincerely,


Timothy M. Kaine