

## Clergymen urge reversal of state police prayer policy

Wednesday, Oct 01, 2008 - 02:28 PM Updated: 04:53 PM

A group of state and local clergymen today urged Virginia's governor and state police chief to reverse a decision prohibiting state police chaplains from using religious words like "Jesus" and "Christ" in prayers at department events.

"To ask these brave men to be silent about the one in whom they have committed their faith undermines all that they are about and diminishes their ability to serve their fellow troopers," Bishop Gerald O. Glenn, senior pastor of New Deliverance Evangelistic Church in Chesterfield County, said during a news conference this afternoon at the General Assembly building at the State Capitol.

Although Glenn said he considers Gov. Timothy M. Kaine to be a friend, he said, "I'm very, very disappointed in this action. I call on Governor Kaine to reinstate these men to their position as chaplain . . . "

Today's event was held in response to a policy decision by Col. W. Steven Flaherty, who recently directed the department's 17 volunteer chaplains to begin delivering neutral or nondenominational prayers at such functions as trooper graduation ceremonies and its annual memorial service for fallen officers.

The decision prompted six chaplains to resign their ministries in protest.

"Unfortunately, expunging our Judeo-Christian heritage from the public square seems all too in vogue in 21st century America, with elected officials and their political appointees leading the way," said Victoria Cobb, president of The Family Foundation. "In the name of tolerance, public faith is frowned upon. While we would hope that Virginia's rich heritage of religious freedom insulates us from such discrimination, recent history proves this not to be the case."

She added: "Requiring a chaplain to pray to an unknown God should frighten every American, and Virginian, regardless of their faith, Once again, our sacred rights are being sacrificed at the altar of political correctness."

Former Navy Chaplain Gordon J. Klingenschmitt, who organized today's event, said he sent a letter to Kaine signed by 86 Virginia pastors who are urging a reversal of the prayer policy. Klingenschmitt was kicked out of the Navy last year after a series of clashes with his superiors over his preaching.

The pastors will host a non-partisan, "state-wide prayer rally" outside the Executive Mansion on Nov. 1. "All churches in Virginia are invited . . . to honor these six police chaplains," he said.

The decision has developed into a culture-war issue. Del. Charles W. "Bill" Carrico Sr., R-Grayson, is backing the chaplains who resigned and has launched an Internet-based petition urging Flaherty to reverse his directive. The petition is available at [www.injesusnameipray.org](http://www.injesusnameipray.org).

House Majority Leader H. Morgan Griffith, R-Salem, has also entered the fray, accusing Kaine's administration of violating the chaplains' First Amendment rights by forcing them to "disregard their own faith."

In response, Kaine said he gave no directive to state police but supports Flaherty's decision.

In a statement, Flaherty said his decision was based on his belief that a state government agency needs to be inclusive and respectful of the "varied ethnicities, cultures and beliefs of our employees, their families and citizens at large."

Participants at today's news conference also included Dr. Mark Goodell of the Christian Coalition of Virginia, the Rev. Rob Schenck of the National Clergy Council and Dr. Terry Fairbanks, senior pastor of the Meadowood Church of God, among others.

-- Mark Bowes

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