

Chaplain Urges President in Prayerful Case against Navy

Growing public awareness of the prayer restrictions suggested by new guidelines in the Air Force is drawing attention to allegations of religious discrimination from other branches of the military, including the Navy.

Wednesday, Dec. 21, 2005 Posted: 10:09:47AM EST

WASHINGTON - Navy Chaplain James G. Klingenschmitt's future is on hold as he awaits a military judge's decision later this month that will either let his career of 14 years continue or end because he claimed the right to pray in Jesus' name, he said.

Growing public awareness of the prayer restrictions suggested by new guidelines in the Air Force is drawing attention to allegations of religious discrimination from other branches of the military, including the Navy.

Klingenschmitt's case has been pending for months, even before the Air Force adopted guidelines in August that discourage Christian chaplains from praying according to the dictates of their faith in certain public ceremonies. Klingenschmitt, 37, says the Navy's rules have been more restrictive for several years without drawing much media attention.

So far, 74 Congressional representatives have signed a letter asking President George W. Bush to issue an executive order affirming that Chaplains in the Air Force, whatever their religion, be allowed to pray in the name of Jesus or another name that their faith requires. The effort has so far resulted in 160,000 petitions gathered by the American Center for Law and Justice for the President to do the same.

"Today I'm beginning a hunger strike, and this communion bread will be my last meal, until the President of the United States gives me back my uniform, and lets me pray publicly 'in Jesus' name,'" he said at a press conference on the north side of the White House yesterday. Klingenschmitt implored the president to sign the Executive Order and said he'll be outside at 6 p.m every day at the White House until it is signed.

The Navy Chaplain was joined by other Christian leaders including the Rev. Patrick Mahoney of the Christian Defense Council who said he would join Klingenschmitt in the hunger strike.

The allegations by Klingenschmitt, who is ordained by the Evangelical Episcopal Church, have drawn the attention of major national newspapers and television programs. In May, Sen. Hillary Clinton (D-N.Y.) issued a letter to the Navy requesting further information on the case.

Klingenschmitt said at the press conference that though he maintains the right to pray in Jesus' name, the Navy restrictions go farther, teaching that chaplains of other religions cannot pray according to their faiths.

"The Naval Chaplain School teaches mandatory lectures to all junior chaplains, prohibiting that Muslim chaplains from praying to Allah, Jewish chaplains can't pray in Hebrew to Adonai, and Roman Catholic chaplains aren't allowed to pray 'in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit,'" he said.

"Senior chaplain evaluators with clipboards criticize our prayers," Klingenschmitt continued.

"The Chief of Navy Chaplains told me in writing that if I pray publicly 'in Jesus' name' that I'm denigrating other faiths."

United States Code Title 10, Section 6031 states that during divine services, an officer in the Chaplain Corps "may conduct public worship according to the manner and forms of the church of which he is a member," a mandate that Klingenschmitt calls upon to defend his case.

According to retired military chaplain George Baugham of the International Conference of Evangelical Chaplain Endorsers, it's an issue of the First Amendment and not allowing the government to impose its version of religion on Chaplains.

"When a chaplain is ordered to pray a government prayer, he has established a religion," said Bagham last week. "He becomes an agent of the sovereign. He no longer represents the church and his faith group. He is representing the United States government, which is prohibited by the constitution."

Baugham was present at news conference on Capitol Hill where Rep. Walter Jones (R-N.C.) and several other of the 74 congressional representatives called on the President to issue the executive order.

Rear Adm. Louis V. Iasiello, who is a Catholic priest and the Chief of Navy

Chaplains, had previously responded to Klingenschmitt's allegations. On Aug. 23, he issued a letter to the Vice Chief of Naval Operations where he said that prayers in Jesus' name in a pluralistic or civic setting could denigrate other religions.

"While respectful of the complainant's choice of faith, any chaplain's continued insistence on ending public prayers 'in Jesus' name' in all situations, without using discretion or regards to the venue or audience, could reasonably tend to denigrate those with different forms of faith," he wrote.

However in an interview with the Washington Post on Aug. 28, he said the Navy doesn't direct prayers.

"We train our people to be sensitive to the needs of all of God's people. We don't direct how a person's going to pray. Because everyone's own denomination or faith group has certain directives or certain ways of doing things, and we would never – it's that whole separation-of-church-and-state thing – we would never want to direct institutionally what a person could or couldn't do something," Iasiello said.

In a letter to President Bush, dated Dec. 15, Klingenschmitt replied to Iasiello's statement.

"So apparently even Chaplain Iasiello admits his policy violates the First Amendment of the Constitution he swore to uphold," he wrote.

Klingenschmitt asked the President to "take the gag off" military chaplains of diverse faiths and protect the Constitution, allowing each too pray according to his or her own faith.>

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