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Prayer debate roils chaplain corps

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WASHINGTON – Chaplains have always been on the frontlines, but today military chapels are a battlefield in an emotional and legal war over the role of religion in the military.

Much of the religious fight revolves around how and where Christian chaplains can pray to Jesus.

“I have to pray non-sectarian prayers,” said Lt. Gordon Klingenschmitt, a Navy chaplain at Norfolk Naval Station, “or I’ll be punished.”

Klingenschmitt, 37, a vocal critic of the Pentagon, charges that the military is violating his First Amendment rights to free speech and religion by prohibiting him from praying to Jesus at public events. He said a former commanding officer tried to block renewal of his Navy commission because of religious differences.

Military officials say that Klingenschmitt and the 3,600 other active-duty and reserve chaplains are free to pray to Jesus during religious services. During public or command-sponsored events, though, chaplains are urged to say prayers that include all faiths.

“We want to be inclusive (of all faiths) when we do a command-sponsored event as opposed to a religious worship service,” said Rear Adm. Robert Burt, the Navy’s deputy chief chaplain. Burt is the first evangelical chaplain to reach flag rank.

At the bottom of the dispute over the role and rights of chaplains is a demographic shift in the chaplaincy corps. Once largely Catholic and liturgical Protestant, today’s military clergy increasingly are Christian fundamentalists and evangelicals. Officials were unable to provide military-wide statistics on chaplains’ denominations.

The demographic shift has led to a series of faith-based conflicts.

At the Air Force Academy, an investigation last year found that chaplains were inappropriately proselytizing cadets.

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An Army pastor in Iraq was removed from his post because of he invoked Jesus in prayers at a memorial service.

More than 75 Navy chaplains have filed a class-action lawsuit against the military, claiming they have been passed over for promotion because they are evangelicals.

A chaplain's duties include ministering to and counseling troops and families. Chaplains form the backbone of the military's suicide prevention program. They preside over religious services troops attend voluntarily. But chaplains also regularly provide invocations and benedictions at official ceremonies, such as memorial services, changes of command and retirements.

Attendance at these official events often is mandatory, and it's these prayers that have fueled the recent firestorm over religion in the military.

The Navy adopted a new prayer policy earlier this year. It says chaplains are free from any restraint on what they say or pray during "divine services," but unit and ship commanders retain the right to set the prayer form used in official ceremonies. Chaplains are advised to consider "the diversity of faith" represented at events that are mandatory for crew members.

"The chaplain, once informed of the commander's guidance, may choose to participate based on his or her faith constraints. If the chaplain chooses not to participate, he or she may do so with no adverse consequences," the policy states.

The other armed services have similar policies.

But, evangelicals continue to oppose the prayer policies because chaplains must follow their commanding officers' decisions, which they argue violates the First Amendment.

In December and January, while he was on leave, Klingenschmitt went on an 18-day hunger strike and prayer vigil at the White House.

Klingenschmitt graduated from the Air Force Academy in 1991 and served as a Minuteman ICBM launch officer. Formerly a Roman Catholic lay reader, he moved toward evangelical Christianity during the 1990s, and by 1998 earned a divinity degree from Regent University. The university in Virginia Beach, Va., was founded by evangelist Pat Robertson. Klingenschmitt became an ordained priest in the Evangelical Episcopal Church.

When the Air Force would not allow him to switch to the chaplain corps, he became a Navy chaplain and took a one-step demotion to Navy lieutenant.

His Web site, www.persuade.tv, extols his viewpoint and collects donations to his legal defense fund.

During his hunger strike, the Navy notified him that his commission would be renewed for another three years.

Two weeks ago, he was back outside the White House, and during a protest by

evangelicals, he said a Christian prayer while in uniform.

“I disobeyed orders,” he said.

But, a Navy spokesman said Klingenschmitt was free to pray there because it was not an official event and he was on leave.

Klingenschmitt is not part of the class-action suit over denied promotions. That case is pending.

The International Conference of Evangelical Chaplain Endorsers, which represents about 800 chaplains, also opposes the Pentagon prayer policies.

A Vienna, Va., attorney, who represents many chaplains suing the military, said the policies are wrong.

“If you don’t want to offend anyone (by requiring non-sectarian prayers), then you offend the evangelicals,” said attorney Arthur Schulcz.

The evangelicals’ champion in Congress is Rep. Walter Jones, R-N.C.

He has written the Pentagon and the White House protesting restrictions on chaplains and has asked President Bush to protect prayer by chaplains.

“All I’m trying to do is protect the First Amendment rights of our chaplains,” he said. “My concern is there is more and more erosion of these First Amendment rights.”

White House staff has offered verbal support but nothing in writing.

Among the Pentagon’s supporters is the National Conference on Ministry to the Armed Forces, which represents chaplains from more than 200 faiths, including Christians, Jews and Muslims. The Pentagon is handling the issue adequately, said Jack Williamson, the group’s executive director.

The Navy’s Burt discounted First Amendment arguments.

“Sometimes it boils down to, is this about me or the people I serve,” he said. “If I insist my First Amendment rights be honored, then it’s about me -- not about the rights of others.”

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