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Navy Probes Religious Discrimination Claim

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WASHINGTON (AP) -- The Navy is investigating a chaplain's allegations he was punished for theological disagreements with superior officers, including his objections to requiring sailors to participate in services at a church that accepts homosexuality.

Lt. Gordon Klingenschmitt says he was transferred ashore and given a negative job recommendation because of the religious disagreements.

Other actions cited in Klingenschmitt's personnel records include his advocacy for a Jewish sailor who wanted kosher meals and his preaching of sermons that some sailors viewed as proselytizing and intolerant.

"I'm shocked that senior chaplains would force their faith on sailors and on me," said Klingenschmitt, who was chaplain on the cruiser USS Anzio, based in Norfolk, Va.

The Navy began an inspector general investigation Advertisement
Wednesday into Klingenschmitt's allegations, said Lt.
Cmdr. Charles Owens, a spokesman for Naval Surface Forces Atlantic.

"Anything he's alleged will be investigated," Owens said Thursday. "If there's any substance to it, the legal process will take its course."

Klingenschmitt became a priest in the Evangelical Episcopal Church after spending 11 years as an Air Force officer. He said he transferred to the Navy and took a demotion from major to lieutenant to become a military chaplain.

Other evangelical Protestant chaplains in the Navy have complained about religious discrimination. A group of evangelical chaplains is suing the Navy in federal court, saying they were passed over for promotions in favor of Roman Catholic or mainline Protestant chaplains and punished when they complained.

One of Klingenschmitt's run-ins with his commanders came in May 2004 during the Navy's annual Fleet Week celebrations in New York, when the city holds various events to honor sailors.

Klingenschmitt objected to having Navy personnel attend Fleet Week church services at the Marble Collegiate Church, which has an outreach ministry to gays and lesbians. The church has hosted Fleet Week services for years.

In an e-mail to senior chaplains, Klingenschmitt said the Marble Church "endorses homosexual sin." He said it was improper for the Navy to have sailors attend the church because homosexual acts are crimes under military law and two sailors recently had been discharged for homosexual acts while at sea.

Days later, a senior chaplain wrote to all chaplains and executive officers in the Anzio's group saying that "each ship is expected to provide bodies to this service" at the Marble Church. Klingenschmitt said he complied, finding 20 sailors to attend the service.

A July 2004 "letter of instruction" to the chaplain from the Anzio's commander, Capt. Jim Carr, took Klingenschmitt to task for the Fleet Week incident.

"You distributed an e-mail of protestation, alleging certain unacceptable beliefs in the Marble Church that created a great deal of concern among Navy and New York City leadership," Carr wrote. "This (incorrectly and improperly) created an impression in the highest levels of the U.S. Navy that Anzio and our Religious Ministries program were in contention with Navy policy to support Fleet Week obligations."

Officials from Marble Collegiate Church did not return repeated telephone and e-mails on Friday.

The church's Web site says Marble Collegiate "provides dynamic, positive spiritual direction to a diverse and embracing congregation." A mission statement describes "an inclusive community."

A message on the site from the senior minister at the church, Rev. Arthur Caliendo, says "all the world's great religions have the same social values at their cores: love for one another, help for the poor and disadvantaged, honor in personal behavior, and justice for all."

The Anzio's executive officer, Lt. Cmdr. Tom Williams, referred a reporter's questions to Owens, the Naval Surface Forces Atlantic spokesman. Owens said he could not provide any details on the Fleet Week incident.

Klingenschmitt said he also had to push for the Anzio to provide kosher meals for an Orthodox Jewish sailor. The Navy provides kosher meals for its Jewish members, but smaller ships such as the Anzio often must specially order such meals.

Klingenschmitt said the Anzio did provide kosher meals but did not stock enough kosher rations for the sailor,

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who lost 17 pounds on a tour at sea.

Carr's letter also mentioned that incident, saying Klingenschmitt "misrepresented the Command concern for this issue."

"The issue was easily resolved once the Commanding Officer became involved, but only after senior leadership in the Navy Chaplain Corps gained an (incorrect and unwarranted) impression of unrest or dissatisfaction within Anzio concerning the issue," Carr wrote.

In March, Carr wrote to Navy Personnel Command recommending against extending Klingenschmitt's tour of active duty.

"He has demonstrated recurring confusion concerning a chaplain's role within a military organization," Carr wrote.

Klingenschmitt, Carr added, "has been cautioned in this regard by his Commanding Officer and the Force Chaplain, but thus far has not made appreciable progress toward change."

Klingenschmitt said he is waiting for the Navy's final decision on whether he will continue on active duty.

On the Net:

Klingenschmitt's website: <http://www.persuade.tv>

USS Anzio: <http://www.anzio.navy.mil>

Marble Collegiate Church: <http://www.marblechurch.org/>

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