

Military chaplains told to shy from Jesus

By Julia Duin

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To pray -- or not to pray -- in Jesus' name is the question plaguing an increasing number of U.S. military chaplains, one of whom began a multiday hunger strike outside the White House yesterday.

"I am a Navy chaplain being fired because I pray in Jesus' name," said Navy Lt. Gordon Klingenschmitt, who will be holding 6 p.m. prayer vigils daily in Lafayette Park.

The hunger strike is intended to persuade President Bush to issue an executive order allowing military chaplains to pray according to their individual faith traditions. The American Center for Law and Justice has gathered 173,000 signatures on a petition seeking an executive order.

Seventy-three members of Congress have joined the request, saying in an Oct. 25 letter to the president, "In all branches of the military, it is becoming increasingly difficult for Christian chaplains to use the name of Jesus when praying."

About 80 percent of U.S. troops are Christian, the legislators wrote, adding that military "censorship" of chaplains' prayers disenfranchises "hundreds of thousands of Christian soldiers in the military who look to their chaplains for comfort, inspiration and support."

Official military policy allows any sort of prayer, but Lt. Klingenschmitt says that in reality, evangelical Protestant prayers are censored. He cites his training at the Navy Chaplains School in Newport, R.I., where "they have clipboards and evaluators who evaluate your prayers, and they praise you if you pray just to God," he said. "But if you pray in Jesus' name, they counsel you."

Muslim, Jewish and Roman Catholic chaplains are likewise told not to pray in the name of Allah, in Hebrew or in the name of the Trinity, he added.

But the Rev. Billy Baugham, executive director of the Greenville, S.C.-based International Conference of Evangelical Chaplain Endorsers, says restrictions on other religious expressions have "yet to be tested."

"No Islamic chaplain has been refused to pray in the name of Allah, as far as we know. Neither has a rabbi been rebuked for making references to Hanukkah, and no Catholic priest has been rebuked for referring to the Blessed Virgin Mary."

The Navy allows chaplains to pray in the name of Jesus Christ, Allah or any other deity during chapel services, spokeswoman Lt. Erin Bailey said.

At other public events, "Navy chaplains are encouraged to be sensitive to the needs of all those present," she said, "and may decline an invitation to pray if not able to do so for conscience reasons."

Lt. Klingenschmitt has not been formally punished, she added, and there are no plans to take him off active duty.

However, the lieutenant contends that he may lose his job next month and be evicted from military housing. He says he got in hot water during the summer of 2004 while aboard the USS Anzio for preaching an evangelistic sermon at the funeral of a Catholic sailor in a base chapel. The lieutenant said he was reprimanded by two senior chaplains and, in March, sent ashore to Norfolk.

Lt. Klingenschmitt also has fought at other times for the religious rights of non-Christians, having backed a Jewish sailor's bid to get kosher meals and sought to include a Muslim seaman in the rotation of sailors offering the ship's nightly closing prayer.

The lieutenant is not alone in fighting to pray to Jesus. The Navy is facing two lawsuits, filed in 1999 and 2000, by 50 Christian chaplains, saying the Navy discriminates against evangelical and Pentecostal clerics.

Mr. Baugham said the 350 chaplains he oversees are concerned about a new set of guidelines issued in August after complaints about Christian evangelism at the Air Force Academy in Colorado Springs. The Air Force guidelines allow "a brief, nonsectarian prayer" during military ceremonies "to add a heightened sense of seriousness or solemnity, not to advance specific religious beliefs."

"So, to what deity do you address your prayer to?" Mr. Baugham asked. "No one knows. And who gets to write the prayers? Once the government becomes the approving authority, the poor chaplain is forced to be an agent of the state."

Mr. Baugham said he had "just got a call from an Army chaplain in Iraq who says he'd be hammered if he used Jesus' name. Chaplains are scared to death. They must clear their prayers with their commanders, they can mention Jesus' name at chapel services, but not outside that context."

