

Chaplain Ends Fast, Continues Call for Religious Freedom in Military

By Chad Groening and Jenni Parker
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(AgapePress) - A Navy chaplain says God answered his prayers this weekend when his superior officers permitted him to wear his uniform while publicly praying in a manner in accordance with his Christian faith. For 18 days Lieutenant Gordon James Klingenschmitt conducted a hunger strike to protest the U.S. Navy's policy of not permitting Christian chaplains to pray in the name of Jesus in public.

Klingenschmitt had been stripped of uniform and faced the possible termination of his 14-year military career, partly because he has defied military policy by continuing to pray publicly in the name of Jesus. On December 20, after nine months of being told he was ineligible for renewal of his military without a positive endorsement from his commanding officer, the chaplain began his hunger strike.

During his protest, the Navy chaplain made several public statements, including a speech in front of the White House and further comments during a number of subsequent media interviews. And within 24 hours of the Christian officer's December 21 appearance on national television, the Chief of Navy Chaplains renewed his contract.

Last Friday, Klingenschmitt received a letter from his base commander stating that prayers may be permissible at a "bona fide religious service or observance." It was gratifying news to the lieutenant, who remarks, "The Navy gave me back my uniform and let me pray publicly in Jesus' name, and so I did that in front of the White House on Saturday. In uniform, I prayed in Jesus' name, even in front of the TV cameras, and I broke my fast. I shared communion with 40 people."

That weekend Communion service in Washington, DC, marked the end of Klingenschmitt's personal protest -- two weeks and four days during which he ate nothing at all and drank only water, ultimately losing 14 pounds but gaining a moral victory. "The victory is that they let me pray publicly in Jesus name," he says, "and they even gave me a brand new three-year contract to let me stay in the Navy."

But the Naval chaplain understands that what he has won was only a battle, not the war. He insists that President George W. Bush still needs to intervene to protect every U.S. military chaplain's right to pray according to his or her own religious tradition.

"There are still 65 chaplains who are in a lawsuit because of this," Klingenschmitt points out. "They couldn't get promoted because they preached the wrong way when the government was trying to censor their prayers and sermons. So we still need the president to act."

Ministers in the American armed forces need their Commander in Chief "to lift his pen and to sign an executive order giving chaplains the right to pray according to their diverse faith," Klingenschmitt says. He is urging American Christians to contact the White House and express their concern over the current policies that many critics feel amount to religious persecution in the military, and he is asking the public to urge the Executive Branch to act immediately to stop this injustice.

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