

White House to push Pentagon on prayer

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The White House will pressure the Pentagon into being more explicit in saying that military chaplains can pray in the name of Jesus Christ, an evangelical Christian chaplains' group says.

The administration struck a deal on Thursday with Rep. Walter B. Jones, North Carolina Republican, said the Rev. Billy Baugham of the Greenville, S.C.-based International Conference of Evangelical Chaplain Endorsers.

Since October, Mr. Jones has arranged for letters from 74 members of Congress demanding an executive order to end reported religious discrimination against evangelical Christian chaplains.

Claude Allen, White House domestic policy adviser, promised the congressman that President Bush will take up the issue personally with Defense Secretary Donald H. Rumsfeld, said Mr. Baugham, who was involved in the discussion.

"He asked Jones if he'd be satisfied with less than an executive order, and Jones said 'yes,' " he said.

Mr. Jones' office, which confirmed that the conversation had taken place, says chaplains should be able to pray to whomever "their faith tradition" demands, including named gods, saints or prophets.

Although no branch of the U.S. military explicitly forbids sectarian prayer, some say overtly evangelical Christian chaplains are whisked out of official ceremonies if they insist on praying in Jesus' name.

Army Chaplain Capt. Jonathan Stertzbach, now serving as a field artillery chaplain with the Army's 10th Mountain Division in Iraq, says the rules on the ground are less tolerant than military officials admit.

"When we were at chaplain school," he said in a phone interview from Camp Liberty near Baghdad, "there was a Muslim chaplain candidate. When he prayed in the name of 'Allah, the most blessed and beautiful,' he was talked to the next day.

"So he switched to 'the most generous and eternal God.' You need to allow people to pray according to their faith group. Many faith groups do not pray in general and generic terms ... For Christian groups, the name of Jesus is from where all the power comes."

Four weeks ago at a funeral for a slain sergeant, a brigade chaplain asked Capt. Stertzbach to "modify" his prayers to begin with, "Please pray according to your faith as I pray according to mine," and to end with "in Thy name we pray." He then could add, "and in Jesus' name I pray."

In Iraq, "it seems like there is an unwritten expectation. We don't know what's going on. We are asking for answers and not getting them," he said.

"When we come to a monthly division training meeting, we are told we cannot do this, and if you do this, you will be punished," the captain said.

Martha Rudd, an Army spokeswoman, said sectarian prayer has not been an issue among its 2,700 chaplains.

"Chaplains are advised to consider their audience when they're speaking publicly and be considerate of a plurality of views in the audience," she said. "But we don't tell them how they can and cannot pray."

But the military does, Capt. Stertzbach said, citing a speech last May in Fort Drum, N.Y., by Army Lt. Col. Phillip Wright, chief of about 40 division chaplains.

Lt. Col. Wright, he said, expressed sympathy for chaplains wanting to pray in the name of Jesus, but urged his listeners to not insist on it, "or we are going to lose our ability to pray at all.

If anyone does this without my knowledge, I will crunch you."

When contacted at Fort Drum, Lt. Col. Wright denied that he had said those words.

"I've never told chaplains they cannot pray in Jesus' name," he said. "Sometimes I've told them it's not a correct time to espouse their theology to everyone, [but] there is no regulation that says you cannot pray in Jesus' name."

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