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Chaplain ends 18-day fast

Claims victory in fight to use Jesus' name

By Teresa L. Heaslip

A Navy chaplain ended an 18-day fast outside the White House yesterday, proclaiming victory in his bid to use Jesus' name when praying in public.

"The Navy has finally given me back my uniform and let me pray publicly in Jesus' name," said Lt. Gordon James Klingenschmitt. He said his supervisor, Capt. Lloyd Polk, told him Friday that he can now give Christian prayers while uniformed.

Lt. Klingenschmitt, who had daily prayer vigils in Lafayette Park, lost 14 pounds during the water-only hunger strike that began Dec. 20. Before breaking his fast by eating Communion bread, he led about 40 followers in prayer, ending with "I pray in Jesus' name, Amen."

The hunger strike was 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 joined the request by sending a letter to the president.

Today is the first step, and we have a long way to go before we have religious liberty in the Navy," Lt. Klingenschmitt said. He also said the issue has become widespread among Navy chaplains since the late 1990s. Two lawsuits were filed in 1999 and 2000 against the Navy by 58 Christian chaplains, stating the Navy discriminates against evangelical and Pentecostal clergy.

"Most of those chaplains are no longer in the Navy, saying they could not get promoted and they're out on the street now without jobs, because they prayed and preached the wrong way when the government was trying to censor their prayers and sermons," Lt. Klingenschmitt said.

In the summer of 2004, he preached at an evangelical service while aboard the USS Enterprise at the funeral of a Catholic sailor in a basic chapel. After being counseled by two senior chaplains, he was sent ashore in March to Norfolk.

The chaplain said he initially feared losing his job and military housing, but doubts further action will be taken. He asserted that the Navy reduced because of unwanted attention he has brought to the issue.

"The next months, they were telling me I'd be kicked out, but as soon I declared that, I was on national TV the next day and the day after that, they gave me a buddy-new, three-year contract."

The Navy maintains that chaplains are allowed to pray in the name of all deities - including Jesus Christ - during chapel services. However, other public events, sensitivity to the needs of all those present is encouraged and chaplains may decline an invitation to pray if they feel able to do so for conscience reasons.

Lt. William Marks, a Navy spokesman, said yesterday there were never were restrictions against Lt. Klingenschmitt and he is not sure why the chaplain considered himself victimized.

"The policy hasn't changed," he said. "That's the way it's always been."

Lt. Marks also said the chaplain was reprimanded for the 2004 sermon because the sermon content was "inappropriate" for a service, not because he mentioned Jesus.

"There are about 1,000 chaplains, and we cannot find one with the same problems he has had," he said.

Navy officials also said Lt. Klingenschmitt has not been formally punished, and there are no plans to take him off active duty.