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## TESTING THE FAITH

# Air Force still no-Jesus zone?

New guidelines have some Christians cheering, but others say chaplain-prayer muzzle remains

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By Ron Strom

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Revised interim guidelines from the Air Force on religious expression released yesterday are getting mixed reviews from Christians – with some saying they protect chaplains' freedom of expression while others contend they still discriminate against evangelical chaplains.

Meanwhile, a Jewish publication is hailing the new policy, saying it "continue to bar Christian chaplains from praying in Jesus' name during official government ceremonies."

The guidelines are the latest version of a new policy drafted by the Air Force in August after complaints arose from non-Christians at the Air Force Academy who believed Christians, both cadets and staff, were being too heavy-handed about their faith on campus. The August policy allowed only a "brief nonsectarian prayer" by a chaplain during official



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ceremonies and events.

After the first set of guidelines were released, the Air Force received feedback from members of Congress, the public, religious groups, members of groups professing no faith, legal and civil liberties groups and individual citizens, a press release from the Air Force explained. In addition, more than 500 active, Reserve and Guard airmen from eight Air Force bases were interviewed.

The [revised guidelines \[a .pdf file\]](#) have been reduced from four pages to one.

"The guidelines address prayer at military events, but in no way restrict private prayer or chaplains' activities in religious settings," Lt. Gen. Roger Brady, Air Force deputy chief of staff for personnel, said.

The policy states: "We will respect the rights of chaplains to adhere to the tenets of their religious faiths and they will not be required to participate in religious activities, including public prayer, inconsistent with their faiths."

Brady says the Air Force will now go through another interim period before final guidelines are issued.

Christian organization [Focus on the Family](#), whose headquarters are near the Air Force Academy in Colorado, praised the new rules.

"We applaud these guidelines. If they are applied properly, they will safeguard the free exercise of religion guaranteed to all citizens, both military and civilian," said Tom Minnery, senior vice president of government and public policy for

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Focus on the Family, in a statement.

Minnery didn't comment on the chaplain-prayer issue, but focused on the freedom of airmen to worship.

"We particularly thank the Air Force for specifically recognizing that 'voluntary participation in worship, prayer, study and discussion is integral to the free exercise of religion,'" he said. "Some have claimed an offense against the Constitution at the mere mention of these matters, although nothing could be further from the truth."

Similarly, the [American Center for Law and Justice](#), which sponsored a petition drive to protect the rights of chaplains to pray in Jesus' name, lauded the new guidelines, calling them "appropriate and constitutional" and an "important victory" for chaplains.

"This is an important move by the Air Force to protect the free-speech rights of chaplains to pray according to their faith," said Jay Sekulow, Chief Counsel of the ACLJ, in a statement. "We are delighted that the Air Force has clarified this issue and has moved to protect the rights of chaplains in a manner that is both appropriate and constitutional."

Continued Sekulow: "The revised guidelines issued today by the Air Force not only protect the rights of chaplains, these guidelines should serve as a model for the other branches of the military. From the very beginning, we have maintained that chaplains have a constitutional right to adhere to the religious expressions of their faith and exercise them freely. We're pleased the Air Force has taken action to guarantee these protections."

## 'Nothing has changed'

But not all Christians are happy with the policy.

Lt. Gordon Klingenschmitt is the Navy chaplain who went on an 18-day hunger strike recently to protest Navy guidelines that are similar to the Air Force's. They encourage "inclusive" prayers at public events, a policy he says in effect prohibits prayer in Jesus' name. Klingenschmitt says the new Air Force policy does nothing to free up chaplains to pray according to their own religious traditions.

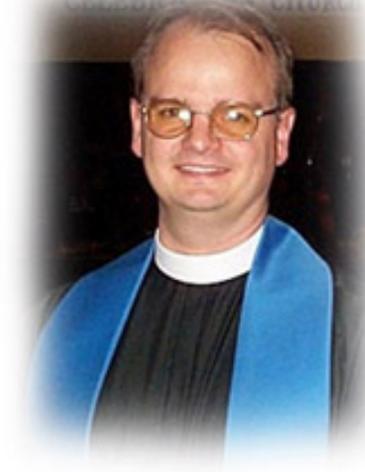
The chaplain's chief concern has been what the Armed Forces will allow at a non-religious military event, such as a change-of-command ceremony. At those events, the Navy wants inclusive, non-denominational prayers, but Klingenschmitt believes that chaplains, regardless of their specific faiths, should not be restricted in such settings.

States part of the new policy: "Non-denominational, inclusive prayer or a moment of silence may be appropriate for military ceremonies or events of special importance when its primary purpose is not the advancement of religious beliefs. Military chaplains are trained in these matters."

Responded Klingenschmitt on [his website](#): "Nothing has changed! They want prayers, but no religious beliefs. Huh? Non-religious prayers? The *new* guidelines and the *old* guidelines are practically identical, so even now Air Force chaplains cannot pray 'in Jesus name' in public ceremonies. Blatant censorship continues! These new guidelines are a sham, they're deceptive, they're not new at all, and they still prohibit prayers 'in Jesus name' and authorize commanders to exclude chaplains who pray 'in Jesus name' solely based on

the content of their prayers."

Klingenschmitt emphasized the part of the guidelines saying chaplains "will not be required to participate in religious activities, including public prayer, inconsistent with their faiths" – claiming it discriminates against evangelical chaplains.



Lt. Gordon James Klingenschmitt

The activist believes the Air Force is saying, in effect, "We won't require them to participate (nor allow them to participate) if they're unwilling to pray to the false neutered god of civic-religion. But if chaplains insist on praying publicly 'in Jesus name' we support their right to not participate."

Said Klingenschmitt: "Under these guidelines, the Air Force will continued to punish and exclude chaplains who pray in Jesus' name."

Though he supported the ACLJ petition drive, which collected 200,000 signatures in support of the right to pray in Jesus' name, Klingenschmitt strongly disagrees with Sekulow's rosy interpretation of the new guidelines.

"They fooled everybody," Klingenschmitt told WND. "They fooled Jay Sekulow."

### **GOP beat back**

While Christian groups such as the ACLJ and Focus on the Family are praising the revised policy, Jewish Week, a New

York publication, is also cheering – but for a different reason. A story in the paper says the rules "bar Christian chaplains from praying in Jesus' name during official government ceremonies and place restraints on evangelical chaplains."

The story in the weekly notes Rabbi Arnold Resnicoff, special assistant for values and vision to the secretary of the Air Force and the chief of staff of the Air Force, helped draft the new guidelines.

Saying the Air Force "beat back GOP pressure," the Jewish Week writer agrees with Klingenschmitt that the guidelines have not really changed anything:

"The bottom line has not changed – clergy may not invoke the name of Jesus Christ while offering prayers at official government ceremonies, Rabbi Resnicoff said."

"We are trying to balance the rights of people in the military with the rights of that uniform and the responsibilities that go with it," Resnicoff told the publication. "It has been very difficult. This has not been a knee-jerk reaction but rather a sincere struggle to respect the rights of those who serve our country."

Instead of using the name Jesus Christ, Rabbi Resnicoff told the Jewish Weekly, chaplains can simply say, "In Your name we pray."

Klingenschmitt says it is Resnicoff who wrote the 1998 Navy guidelines that urge inclusive prayers.

"I hope the secretary of defense does not implement these guidelines in the Navy because I will definitely sue," the

chaplain said.

"The word 'non-denominational' is just a euphemism for 'no Jesus,' and until that is removed, they are censoring the content of my prayers."

Klingenschmitt says he's working with attorney Mat Staver of [Liberty Counsel](#) on possible legal action.

Added Klingenschmitt: "I will sue if the president doesn't fix this."

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