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Chaplain May Be Disciplined for White House Prayer

by Pete Winn, associate editor

Navy lieutenant, facing possible court-martial, argues that praying in Jesus' name is not political speech and should be allowed.

An evangelical Navy chaplain stationed at Norfolk, Va., says he faces disciplinary action for appearing at a news conference outside of the White House and praying -- while in uniform.

Lt. Gordon Klingenschmitt told *CitizenLink* he had permission in writing to make the appearance -- which he said was in connection with efforts to seek a presidential order allowing chaplains to pray in Jesus' name in public. But the Navy, he said, changed its rules midstream.

"On 21 Feb, the Secretary of the Navy (Donald Winter) signed an illegal policy banning Christian prayers outside of a chapel setting, and I contested that," said the former Air Force major, who took a reduction in pay to change branches and become a Navy chaplain.

Nine days later, Klingenschmitt said he appeared in uniform in front of the White House with former Alabama Chief Justice Roy Moore and read the Prayer for the Armed Forces from the *Anglican Book of Common Prayer*, which ends, "Through Jesus Christ Our Lord, Amen."

"Now they are punishing me -- they are threatening me with court-martial -- because I said a prayer in Jesus' name, wearing my uniform, in front of the White House," he said. "They are equating my prayers to a partisan political speech, and they're saying I don't have a right to pray in Jesus' name outside of a chapel setting."

The Navy, for its part, indicated Klingenschmitt violated an order not to wear his uniform during a news event -- an act which appeared to lend the Navy's endorsement to the chaplain's political beliefs.

Klingenschmitt, however, said he limited his speech to worship -- he said only prayers.

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"I'm sorry, my prayers are not political speech," he said. "They are genuine acts of worship."

It's a complicated situation, according to Mathew Staver, president of the religious-rights law firm Liberty Counsel, but none of it would have happened if the Navy hadn't changed its position on allowing chaplains to pray in public while in uniform.

"Not only does Chaplain Klingenshmitt have an issue with the recent regulations coming from the Secretary of the Navy, but many other chaplains and concerned citizens do as well," Staver said. "The issue is whether the historic nature of prayer by chaplains will be altered so that they cannot pray in Jesus' name, in other than what's called a 'Divine service' -- for example, a chapel service on Sunday."

The fact is, he added, there have traditionally been myriad situations outside of church services where chaplains have been called upon to give prayers and other spiritual words while in uniform.

"I think what's happening is that the battle is now escalating to a new level," Staver said. "I don't believe what we're seeing now would have been an issue during World War II. It wouldn't have been an issue during Vietnam, and it wouldn't even have been an issue during the early parts of the recent Gulf War."

"This is really a recent creation by the Navy. It is certainly contrary to the long-established historical position of chaplains in the military -- and of their ability to pray as they see fit."

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