

Chaplains Battling Navy for Freedom of Religion

(Family Research Council email newsletter: Culture Facts)

The halls of Congress and America's courtrooms are not the only places where conservative Christians are becoming victims of active discrimination. Surprisingly, such discrimination is occurring even in one of society's most conservative institutions, the military, and in one of the most unlikely settings—namely, the corps of chaplains charged specifically with caring for the spiritual needs of our service members.

Some chaplains in the U.S. Navy, however, have begun fighting back. Dozens are involved in a series of lawsuits against the Navy, and another, Lt. Gordon James Klingenschmitt, has gone public with his charges in media interviews and on a new website.

Historically, Christian military chaplains have been divided into three main categories: Roman Catholics, "liturgical" Protestants (denominations with more formal rituals such as the Lutherans and Episcopalians), and "non-liturgical" Protestants (those with less formal worship, such as Baptists and Pentecostals). One of the charges levied against the Navy is that liturgical Protestants are over-represented in the chaplaincy and receive favored treatment, while the non-liturgical groups are under-represented (in comparison with the religious affiliation of naval personnel) and receive poorer treatment in assignments and promotions.

However, even more troubling than such discrimination is the limitations that the Navy is reportedly placing on the chaplains' free exercise of religion—based not on their worship style, but on their evangelical theology. For example, Klingenschmitt, who contacted FRC regarding his situation, reports that he was reprimanded while serving on the U.S.S. Anzio for reading John 3:3 (" . . . no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again") and John 3:36 ("Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life, but whoever rejects the Son will not see life . . . ") at a memorial service for a Christian sailor who had died in an accident. Meanwhile, Arthur Schulcz, an attorney who represents chaplains in several lawsuits, told Culture Facts in a phone interview that one of his clients was told he was being removed from his pulpit for "failing to preach pluralism."

Military chaplains do face a unique challenge because of the diversity of the personnel they must serve. Klingenschmitt explained to Culture Facts that a chaplain's job is to "provide for our own" (by leading worship in his own tradition); "facilitate for others" (for example, by helping them to organize their own worship using lay leaders); and "care for all." Ironically, one of the episodes that he says got him in trouble was when Klingenschmitt, an Evangelical Episcopal priest, advocated for a Jewish sailor who had requested kosher meals when his ship was at sea.

Federal law states explicitly, "An officer in the Chaplain Corps may conduct public worship according to the manner and forms of the church of which he is a member." Perhaps more to the point, the U.S. Constitution guarantees to all "the free exercise" of religion. How ironic that those who defend that Constitution—sometimes at the cost of their lives—are being denied the very rights that it guarantees.

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Chaplain Klingenschmitt's website:

<http://www.persuade.tv/>