

13 Jul 05

Dear NY Times "Corrections," or "Letters to the Editor"

I'd like to correct two small errors in Laurie Goodstein's (otherwise excellent) 12 July article on military chaplains. She wrote about me:

"Chaplain Gordon James Klingenschmitt, of the Evangelical Episcopal Church, says he was warned by commanders that his approach to the ministry was not inclusive enough. When a Catholic sailor on his ship died, Lieutenant Klingenschmitt said he preached at a memorial service and emphasized that for those who did not accept Jesus, "God's wrath remains upon him."

Without key facts, the above statement is misleading, in at least two ways:

1) I'm also a confirmed Roman Catholic lay-reader in good standing, now ordained as an Evangelical Episcopal Chaplain, and I share the same faith as the deceased Sailor. 2) At the memorial service I emphasized (saying four times) the Sailor went to heaven because of his faith in Jesus Christ, but only once (without emphasis) did I quote the Catholic scripture John 3:36, "Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life, but whoever rejects the Son will not see life, for God's wrath remains on him." This scripture was one of the Sailor's favorites, key to helping him re-dedicate his life to Christ, but since its meaning is deemed "non-pluralistic" I was later admonished in writing and relieved of duty, for quoting the Bible in the base chapel, at an optionally-attended worship service, advertised as a Christian memorial, honoring the faith of the deceased. Is he not entitled to a Christian burial? Didn't he fight to give such rights to others?

Also request a correction to the following statement:

"Chaplains are often unsung members of the clergy who pray, counsel, and go to war alongside American troops. Whatever their church or creed, when they join the military they pledge to serve the spiritual needs of every faith."

Actually this is untrue. While chaplains agree to "facilitate" for the needs of other faiths (i.e. by appointing lay-leaders who can teach those faiths), every chaplain's first moral and legal obligation remains obedience to their civilian endorsing bishop, as Congress has clearly authorized in Title 10, Section 6031, Chaplains: "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." Chaplains should never be asked to pray to a different God, or preach a watered-down message, or change how they worship, just because they put on a uniform. Military chaplains and all our troops must be guaranteed the same religious freedoms they sacrifice to give others.

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(To better understand the above letter, read the original article, in context, next page...)

Evangelicals Are a Growing Force in the Military Chaplain Corps

By [LAURIE GOODSTEIN](#)

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COLORADO SPRINGS - There were personal testimonies about Jesus from the stage, a comedian quoting Scripture and a five-piece band performing contemporary Christian praise songs. Then hundreds of Air Force chaplains stood and sang, many with palms upturned, in a service with a distinctively evangelical tone.



Jay Paul for The New York Times

Gordon James Klingenschmitt, an evangelical, says he was warned that he was not inclusive enough.



Jamie Rose for The New York Times

Brig. Gen. Cecil R. Richardson said, "We will not proselytize."

It was the opening ceremony of a four-day Spiritual Fitness Conference at a Hilton hotel here last month organized and paid for by the Air Force for many of its United States-based chaplains and their families, at a cost of \$300,000. The chaplains, who pledge when they enter the military to minister to everyone, Methodist, Mormon or Muslim, attended workshops on "The Purpose Driven Life," the best seller by the megachurch pastor Rick Warren, and on how to improve their worship services. In the hotel hallways, vendors from Focus on the Family and other evangelical organizations promoted materials for the chaplains to use in their work.

The event was just one indication of the extent to which evangelical Christians have become a growing force in the Air Force chaplain corps, a trend documented by military records and interviews with more than two dozen chaplains and other military officials.

Figures provided by the Air Force show that from 1994 to 2005 the number of chaplains from many evangelical and Pentecostal churches rose, some doubling. For example, chaplains from the Full Gospel Fellowship of Churches and Ministries International increased to 10 from none. The Church of the Nazarene rose to 12 from 6.

At the same time, the number of chaplains from the Roman Catholic Church declined to 94 from 167, and there were declines in more liberal, mainline Protestant churches: the United Church of Christ to 3 from 11, the United Methodist Church to 50 from 64.

Other branches of the military did not make available similar statistics, but officials say they are seeing the same trend.

The change mirrors the Air Force as a whole, where representation is rising from evangelical churches. But there are also increasing numbers of enlistees from minority religions as well as atheists. It has all created a complicated environment and caused tensions over tolerance and the role of the military chaplain.

Some conflicts have already become public. A Pentagon investigation into the religious climate at the Air Force Academy here found no overt discrimination, but it did find that officers and faculty members periodically used their positions to promote their Christian beliefs and failed to accommodate non-Christian cadets, for example refusing them time off for religious holidays.

Other conflicts have remained out of the public eye, like the 50 evangelical chaplains who have filed a class action suit against the Navy charging they were dismissed or denied promotions. One of the chaplains said that once while leading an evangelical style service at a base in Okinawa he was interrupted by an Episcopal chaplain who announced he was stepping in to lead "a proper Christian worship service."

There is also a former Marine who said that about half of the eight chaplains he came into contact with in his military career tried to convince him to abandon his Mormon faith, telling him it was "wicked" or "Satanic."

A Complex Religious Environment

Part of the struggle, chaplains and officials say, is the result of growing diversity. But part is from evangelicals following their church's teachings to make converts while serving in a military job where they are supposed to serve the spiritual needs of soldiers, fliers and sailors of every faith. Evangelical chaplains say they walk a fine line.

Brig. Gen. Cecil R. Richardson, the Air Force deputy chief of chaplains, said in an interview, "We will not proselytize, but we reserve the right to evangelize the unchurched." The distinction, he said, is that proselytizing is trying to convert someone in an aggressive way, while evangelizing is more gently sharing the gospel.

Certainly, the religious environment encountered by the chaplains is complex. Statistics on enlistees provided by the Air Force show there are now about 3,500 who say they are either Hindus, Buddhists, Muslims, pagans, druids or shamans. There are 1,600 who say they are atheists and about 50,000 who say they have no religious preference, out of a total of 280,000. Roman Catholics number about 60,000.

There are also growing numbers of enlistees from evangelical churches. In 2005, there were 1,794 members of the Assemblies of God in the Air Force, 597 from the Church of the Nazarene and 108 from the Christian and Missionary Alliance. Because so many churches cannot be comfortably categorized as evangelical or nonevangelical, and because so many enlistees identify themselves simply as "Christian," it is difficult to ascertain cumulative numbers.

Military officials say the government is not promoting the change in the chaplain corps. Instead religious leaders who recruit for the military attribute it to factors including the general shortage of Catholic priests, the liberal denominations' discomfort with military

interventions abroad, the "don't ask, don't tell" policy on gay men and lesbians, and evangelicals' broad support for the military.

The military is trying to grapple with the fallout. Gen. John P. Jumper, the Air Force chief of staff, sent a personal message to commanders on June 28, warning them against promoting their religious beliefs, saying, "The expression of personal preferences to subordinates, especially in a professional setting or at mandatory events, is inappropriate."

"Our chaplains," General Jumper wrote, "should set the example for mutual respect among different faiths and beliefs."

'We Are Not Generic Chaplains'

Air Force officials contend that the Spiritual Fitness Conference was not evangelical, pointing to the participation of a Catholic band leader and a Mormon expert on families. There was also an interfaith worship service in which all the chaplains planned to recite a Hebrew prayer together. They said that 10 Jewish chaplains stayed in the same hotel and were bused to the Air Force Academy for a separate program each day.

"We are not generic chaplains," said Col. Bob V. Page, who helped organize the conference. "We say, 'cooperation without compromise.' I cannot compromise my faith."

Chaplains are the often unsung members of the clergy who pray, counsel and go to war alongside American troops. Whatever their church or creed, when they join the military they pledge to serve the spiritual needs of every faith.

The military recruits chaplains through endorsing agents who work for about 100 different churches or religious denominations. The agents select potential candidates and refer them to the military, a system created to avoid the constitutional problem of government endorsement of religion.

In the Air Force, chaplain candidates must be under 40 and have a college degree. They must also have several years of ministry experience and be able to pass a physical fitness test. They also must attend an Air Force training program for chaplains.

The churches that once supplied most of the chaplains say they are now having trouble recruiting for a variety of reasons. Many members of their clergy are now women, who are less likely to seek positions as military chaplains or who entered the ministry as a second career and are too old to qualify. The Catholic Church often does not have enough priests to serve its parishes, let alone send them to the military.

There are also political reasons. Anne C. Loveland, a retired professor of American history at Louisiana State University and the author of "American Evangelicals and the U.S. Military, 1942-1993," said the foundation for the change in the chaplaincy was laid during the Vietnam War.

"Evangelical denominations were very supportive of the war, and mainline liberal denominations were very much against it," Ms. Loveland said. "That cemented this growing relationship between the military and the evangelicals."

Chaplain Edward T. Brogan, director of the Presbyterian Council for Chaplains and Military Personnel, who recruits and recommends chaplain candidates for several Presbyterian churches, calls the change "a supply and demand issue."

"I regularly am contacted by military recruiters who would like to have more Presbyterians because they need baby baptizers," he said. Many evangelical ministers, according to their tradition, only baptize older children or adults.

The Presbyterian Church USA, a more liberal denomination, has had a 10-year drop in its Air Force chaplains from 30 in 1994 to 16 in 2005. For the same period, the Presbyterian Church in America, which is more conservative, has increased the numbers of its Air Force chaplains to 15 from 4.

The Air Force had a total of 611 chaplains at the start of 2005.

Though Chaplain Brogan has had problems finding chaplains to meet demands of the military, the Rev. Maurice J. Hart, the endorsing agent for the Full Gospel Fellowship of Churches and Ministers International, an evangelical church based in Irving, Tex., has not.

"It's been easy," Mr. Hart said. "They realize the men are really stressed out and in danger and harm's way, and they just feel like, 'that's my calling - I'd like to go and be a blessing.' "

In 1994, the Full Gospel Fellowship had no Air Force chaplains, but by 2005 it had 10 (and that with only 58 members on the Air Force rolls at that time). The number is impressive because many of the 100 denominations supply only a handful of chaplains each.

The evangelical chaplains are changing the concept of ministry in the military, said Kristen J. Leslie, an assistant professor of pastoral care and counseling at Yale Divinity School, who has observed chaplains at the Air Force Academy.

Evangelicals administer "Bible-centered care" in which "the notion is that the religious message is core, and you bring everybody to it and that's how you create healing," Ms. Leslie said. If someone is struggling with a supervisor, a spouse or depression, an evangelical chaplain urges them to turn their life over to Christ and look for answers in the Scriptures, she said.

That is fine for a church setting, Ms. Leslie said, but what is required in a diverse religious environment like the military is the "pastoral care" approach: "You walk with the person in the midst of their brokenness, using the resources of their faith to help heal them."

A Push for Inclusiveness

Still, many evangelical chaplains say they understand the distinct nature of their work for the military, recounting in interviews that they have helped arrange Seders, the ritual Passover supper, for Jewish sailors or solstice celebrations for Wiccan marines.

General Richardson, the deputy chief of chaplains, said that although his faith required him to evangelize, he would help accommodate the faiths of others. "I am an Assemblies of God, pound-the-pulpit preacher, but I'll go to the ropes for the Wiccan," he said, if that group wanted permission to celebrate a religious ritual.

In the Navy some evangelical chaplains say they are the ones discriminated against. Chaplain Gordon James Klingenschmitt, of the Evangelical Episcopal Church, says he was warned by commanders that his approach to the ministry was not inclusive enough. When a Catholic sailor on his ship died, Lieutenant Klingenschmitt said he preached at a memorial service and emphasized that for those who did not accept Jesus, "God's wrath remains upon him."

After that and several other incidents, Lieutenant Klingenschmitt's commanding officer recommended that the Navy not renew his chaplain contract.

The lieutenant is fighting to remain in the military. "The Navy wants to impose its religion on me," he said. "Religious pluralism is a religion. It's a theology all by itself."

Lieut. Cmdr. David S. Wilder, a 20-year Navy chaplain who is a plaintiff in the class action suit against the Navy, said that his troubles began on Okinawa after the more senior Episcopal chaplain stepped in and interrupted his worship service. He says that that chaplain has blocked his promotion.

"There's a pecking order in the Navy chaplain corps," Commander Wilder said, "and at the very top is the Roman Catholics and just below them are the Episcopalians and Lutherans. And if you're an evangelical non-liturgical Christian of some type you're down on the bottom."

A Navy spokeswoman said that many of the chaplains in the class action lawsuit were not promoted for reasons other than religious discrimination.

For the Mormon in the Marine Corps, interactions with chaplains made him decide to become one himself. A 29-year-old who left the service in the late 1990's, he is now applying to become a military chaplain with the intent, he said, of providing the troops a more "inclusive" form of pastoring. He insisted on anonymity so as not to undermine his application.

He said that his faith was frequently denigrated by fellow marines, and even by some of his commanders.

"What compounded it was when the chaplains would agree with them," he said. "That's what makes me want to become a military chaplain - not just that my faith and other minority faiths were underrepresented, but to make it a more spiritually accepting environment."