

## Retired chaplains warn against 'don't ask' repeal

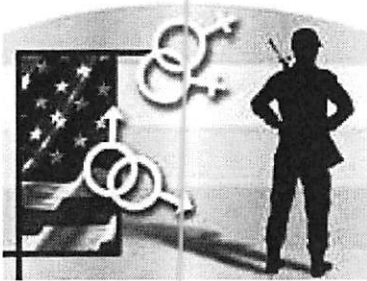
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Tom Breen - Associated Press Writer - 10/29/2010 4:15:00 PM

**AP** Associated Press

Dozens of retired military chaplains say that serving both God and the U.S. armed forces will become impossible for chaplains whose faiths consider homosexuality a sin if the "don't ask, don't tell" policy is thrown out.

If a chaplain preaches against homosexuality, he could conceivably be disciplined as a bigot under the military's nondiscrimination policy, the retired chaplains say. The Pentagon, however, says chaplains' religious beliefs and their need to express them will be respected.



Clergy would be ineligible to serve as chaplains if their churches withdraw their endorsements, as some have threatened to do if "don't ask, don't tell" ends. Critics of allowing openly gay troops fear that clergy will leave the service or be forced to find other jobs in the military that don't involve their faiths.

"The bottom line is religious freedom," said retired Army Brig. Gen. Douglas Lee, one of 65 former chaplains who signed a letter urging President Barack Obama and Defense Secretary Robert Gates to keep "don't ask, don't tell."

A federal judge threw out the policy this month, but it remains in effect while the federal government appeals the ruling. Under the 1993 law, the military cannot inquire into service members' sexual orientation and punish them for it as long as they keep it to themselves. Obama favors repealing the law but wants it done by Congress.

Opponents of the ban argue that military chaplains have a different job than ministering to a parish where everyone shares the same beliefs. They must respect all faiths and counsel all service members, from devout Muslims to atheists.

"My heart doesn't bleed for these chaplains," said Mikey Weinstein, president of the Military Religious Freedom Foundation. "If you don't like it, there's a very simple solution: Fold your uniform, file the paperwork and find something else to do."

Officials at North Carolina's sprawling Fort Bragg Army post and the Armed Forces Chaplains Board did not respond to requests to interview active military chaplains about the issue. The group of retired chaplains who wrote the letter to Obama and Gates said they were speaking out because active chaplains could be accused of insubordination if they publicly oppose repealing "don't ask, don't tell."

"Many (if not most) chaplains will confront a profoundly difficult moral choice: whether they are to obey God or to obey men," they wrote in the Sept. 16 letter.

The Department of Defense has not said specifically how it would address any potential conflicts with chaplains stemming from the end of "don't ask, don't tell," but Pentagon spokeswoman Eileen Lainez said the military would not force chaplains to keep their beliefs silent. "Chaplains are allowed to speak according to the dictates of their faith," she said.

"With great acumen, chaplains, throughout the Department's history, have found means wherein they could strike a balance between faith group requirements and Department of Defense needs," Lainez said. "Members who feel something is inappropriate may always utilize their chain of command, the inspector general or other systems already in place, to address their concerns."

Members of the clergy have been ministering to American troops since the Revolution. There are about 3,000 chaplains on active duty, most from theologically conservative faiths and organizations.

In the Army, the U.S. military's largest branch, the largest denomination is the Southern Baptist Convention, with roughly 450 active chaplains. Next is the Roman Catholic Church, with 270, followed by chaplains from the Full Gospel Pentecostal church; Presbyterian and Reformed churches; and Assemblies of God.

A spokeswoman for the Pentagon said chaplains must have the endorsement of their church or religious organization to serve the role. If a chaplain's church withdraws its endorsement, the military begins processing the chaplain to leave the military.

Several denominations have already threatened to take such a step, citing long lists of potential conflicts the chaplains could face with openly gay soldiers.

The Southern Baptist Convention, the Roman Catholic Church, the Orthodox Church in America, the Presbyterian Church in America, and the Rabbinical Alliance of America have issued statements or written to the Obama administration this year with their concerns that repealing "don't ask, don't tell" could force their chaplains to choose between serving God and serving the military.

The Orthodox Church in America, for example, condemns homosexuality and mandates that the appropriate action its ministers should take toward gay people who seek counseling is to steer them to repent and renounce the gay lifestyle.

"If such an attitude were regarded as 'prejudice' or the denunciation of homosexuality as 'hate language,' or the like, we would be forced to pull out our chaplains from military service," the church informed the Pentagon in May.

The Catholic Church likewise deems homosexual behavior a sin.

"This means that Catholic chaplains must show compassion for persons with a homosexual orientation, but can never condone - even silently - homosexual behavior," Archbishop Timothy Broglio said in a June letter calling for "don't ask" to remain in

place. Broglio leads the Archdiocese for Military Services and is the church's chief liaison to the military.

"A change might have a negative effect on the role of the chaplain not only in the pulpit, but also in the classroom, in the barracks, and in the office," Broglio wrote.

Every officer in the military, including chaplains, is evaluated in an annual report. One criterion is whether the officer supports the military's equal opportunity policy. If gays and lesbians are included in that policy, careers of chaplains who criticize homosexuality could suffer.

"As a chaplain, on religious grounds, I could not support that, meaning that as a chaplain, I'm going to face consequences," said retired Col. David Upchurch, a former Army chaplain who is now a minister at Grace Evangelical Presbyterian Church in Lawrence, Kan.

The retired chaplains' letter raises numerous potential conflicts facing conservative chaplains:

\_ As the administrators of the Army's Strong Bonds program for marriages strained by military life, would chaplains have to begin including same-sex couples?

\_ Would a chaplain be forced to allow gay soldiers to assist with lay duties at religious services?

\_ If chaplains must be available to counsel personal problems for all soldiers, will they have to remain silent on their views about homosexuality?

Retired Navy chaplain Capt. John Gundlach, a United Church of Christ pastor, supports repealing the policy and doesn't foresee the problems envisioned by some of his conservative colleagues.

"They may run into some difficulties in not being able to speak out against those who are gay or lesbian in the military, because that would be counter to good order and discipline," he said. "But chaplains have the right to preach according to their tradition in worship services they hold for those of their own denomination."

A good military chaplain must minister to everyone, said Diane Mazur, a retired Air Force captain and University of Florida Law Professor who specializes in interaction between civilian and military law. "It's really very different than in the civilian world, and repealing 'don't ask, don't tell' doesn't really change that basic difference."

Lee, however, said homosexuality creates a conflict that does not exist for chaplains even when they work with members of radically different faiths. In those cases, chaplains help service members get what they need to hold religious services but do not perform any ceremonies outside their own religious tradition.