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Chaplains offered exit plan as gay training starts

Adelle M. Banks Religion News Service | Mar. 30, 2011

WASHINGTON ? The Army has started training chaplains on the repeal of the ban on openly gay military members, saying those who are unable to follow the forthcoming policy can seek a voluntary departure.

?The Chaplains Corps? First Amendment freedoms and its duty to care for all will not change,? reads a slide in the PowerPoint presentation, released to Religion News Service Thursday (March 24). ?Soldiers will continue to respect and serve with others who may hold different views and beliefs.?

Critics familiar with the Army presentation, however, say the military is essentially telling chaplains who are theologically conservative that they are not welcome.

?U.S. Army now warning chaplains: If you don?t like the homosexual agenda, get out!? reads a headline on the website of Mass Resistance, an anti-gay group based in Waltham, Mass.

President Obama signed a law repealing Don?t Ask/Don?t Tell last December, but the new policy will not take effect until 60 days after Obama and military leaders are assured that it will not harm military readiness.

Lt. Col. Carleton Birch, a spokesman for the Army chief of chaplains, said about half of the military service?s 2,900 chaplains have received the training, which started in February and is likely to conclude in April.

?Our training is an opportunity for our senior chaplains to have an honest and open conversation about the repeal policy, its effects on them and their ministry,? Birch said. ?And it?s going very well. ... In no way are we giving the message, shape up or ship out.?

Birch said only one Army chaplain has left the service over the pending repeal of Don?t Ask/Don?t Tell.

Elaine Donnelly, president of the Center for Military Readiness, an independent group that strongly opposes gays serving openly in the military, predicts more departures when the policy is lifted.

?The training is engaging in a form of strategic deception,? she said. ?I think active-duty people are being reassured nothing will change. That is an unrealistic expectation.?

Donnelly, whose center received the presentation from a source and has distributed it among supporters, hopes an upcoming House subcommittee hearing will address questions about the effects of the policy change on chaplains.

?Many may be saying that now they will not leave voluntarily,? she said, ?but that doesn?t account for those who would be forced out involuntarily when all of these conflicts become more apparent.?

The Army slides include various vignettes, including a soldier who complains after a chaplain calls homosexuality a sin during a chapel service. Notes that accompany the presentation specify that sermons cannot be restricted ?even with regard to socially controversial topics.?

Birch said the vignette does not represent any change in policy.

?In my 23 years as a soldier in the Army, I?ve never heard a sermon specifically on homosexuality,? he said. ?So even though they have the right to do that, that doesn?t mean that it?s going on every Sunday in our chapels.?

The other military services also have begun training of chaplains, with the Navy starting in February and planning to complete it by June. The Air Force started its training in March and hopes to finish by May.

Maj. Joel Harper, a spokesman for the Air Force, said none of that military service?s 520 active-duty chaplains has asked to leave over the expected repeal. He called the training ?informative in nature? about how the policy changes will affect them.

?It is not an attempt to change anyone?s opinion about the subject,? he said.

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