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Pentagon: Chaplains can celebrate gay marriages

Adelle M. Banks Religion News Service | Oct. 3, 2011

WASHINGTON -- Military chaplains can lead same-sex marriage ceremonies on and off military bases, the Pentagon announced Friday (Sept. 30), in a move that closely followed the repeal of a ban on openly gay service members.

?A military chaplain may participate in or officiate any private ceremony, whether on or off a military installation, provided that the ceremony is not prohibited by applicable state and local law,? wrote Undersecretary of Defense Clifford L. Stanley.

Stanley?s memo was released less than two weeks after the Sept. 20 repeal of the Clinton-era Don?t Ask/Don?t Tell policy.

Stanley also said a chaplain is not required to lead or take part in such ceremonies ?if doing so would be in variance with the tenets of his or her religion or personal beliefs.?

In a separate but related memo, Jeh Johnson, the Department of Defense?s general counsel, said the use of military facilities for private functions, ?including religious and other ceremonies,? should occur on a ?sexual-orientation neutral basis.?

Tony Perkins, president of the conservative Family Research Council, decried the memos as ?outrageous? and said ?the Defense Department is already pushing the military further down the slippery slope.?

Elaine Donnelly, president of the Center for Military Readiness, said the memos raise questions about how the repeal of Don?t Ask/Don?t Tell will be implemented.

?What happens when the sort-of married couple is reassigned to a state where same-sex unions are prohibited by law?? said Donnelly, whose organization led the charge in trying to preserve the ban on gays serving openly in the military.

Freedom to Marry, an organization that supports same-sex marriage, hailed the DOD announcements, even as some gay rights groups have some of the same questions about the future after Don?t Ask/Don?t Tell.

?Discrimination has no place in the military, or in marriage?and of course people, gay or nongay, should be able to celebrate their love and commitment in ceremonies without interference by the government,? said Evan Wolfson, the group?s founder and president.

Lt. Col. Carleton Birch, a spokesman for the Army chief of chaplains, said Friday that only one chaplain has left the Army in protest of the repeal of Don?t Ask/Don?t Tell.

In both memos, DOD officials noted that the private activities do not ?constitute an endorsement? by the Pentagon.

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