

Military chaplains voice 'intense' views on gay ban

by [Adelle M. Banks](#)

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WASHINGTON (RNS) A long-awaited report on the possible repeal of the military's ban on openly gay members says the chaplains corps has "some of the most intense and sharpest divergence of views" on the issue.

The comprehensive review, issued Tuesday (Nov. 30), concluded that "special attention" should be given to the concerns among the approximately 3,000 chaplains in the military services when and if a repeal is implemented.

The report said some chaplains condemned homosexuality as a sin and said they could not support homosexuals, while others said "we are all sinners" and chaplains should care for everyone.

Nevertheless, the report concluded that existing regulations protecting chaplains' First Amendment rights are "adequate" for the ban's repeal.

"Service members will not be required to change their personal views and religious beliefs," the report said. "They must, however, continue to respect and co-exist with others who may hold different views and beliefs."

Some retired chaplains and leaders of agencies that endorse

chaplains have been outspoken against a repeal, with some predicting it could prompt an exodus of chaplains from the military.

The report said the military heard from 77 of 200 endorsing agencies, and none said they would withdraw endorsements of chaplains if a repeal occurred. It said just three of about 145 chaplains who took part in focus groups said they would seek to leave the military if there was a repeal.

Officials of some chaplains' organizations that have opposed the repeal questioned the report's claims of sufficient protections for chaplains who oppose homosexuality.

"I do not expect that anyone who holds fast with the truth as it is in the word of God ... to be allowed to continue on and to advance in their career as I did," said James Poe, a retired Navy captain and former secretary of the International Conference of Evangelical Chaplain Endorsers.

Other retired chaplains seem unwilling to suggest that chaplains should walk out on the troops if the ban is repealed.

"I have said, 'Before you consider resigning and leaving, recognize that you are there for your people in the positive and the negative,'" said Paul Vicalvi, a retired Army chaplain who directs the Chaplains Commission for the National Association of Evangelicals.

"I'm telling them not to retire. ... Now some of them may say, 'I just can't operate in this environment,' but that's not coming from me."

But with the release of the report, Vicalvi remains concerned that chaplains will be prevented from counseling military members about their biblical interpretations on homosexuality.

As the Senate began hearings Thursday (Dec. 2) to consider the repeal, other chaplains' endorsers voiced skepticism.

Ron Crews, a retired Army chaplain and an endorser for Grace Churches International, an evangelical network based in Fayetteville, N.C., hopes Congress will consider language to ensure that the religious rights of all military members -- not just chaplains -- are protected.

"There needs to be a strengthening, some addition to the code that would provide a religious exemption clause," he said.

Other religious leaders say they will wait until a repeal is enacted -- which is far from a certainty -- to determine their next steps.

"We're all going to wait to see what actually transpires," said retired Chaplain Douglas Lee, a retired U.S. Army brigadier general, who endorses chaplains for several denominations, including the Presbyterian Church in America.

"Will there be able to be open and free pluralism?"