

Air Force Academy leader admits faith bias is pervasive: Aggressive evangelicalism

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Acknowledging that a religious bias favoring evangelical Christianity has been pervasive at the U.S. Air Force Academy, the school's superintendent told a Jewish audience this month that "it's going to take a while to fix," perhaps a half-dozen years, despite an official investigation of mounting complaints.

"I will tell you as a commander, I have problems in the cadet wing," said superintendent Lieutenant General John Rosa Jr. in remarks June 3 at an Anti-Defamation League national meeting in Broomfield, Colorado. "I have issues in my staff, and I have issues in my faculty."

Rosa, a Catholic, said the academy will enforce limits on proselytizing and on-duty expressions of beliefs. Rosa's comments were his first admission of deep-seated problems. The religious bias complaints followed newsmaking scandals a few years ago when accounts of sexual assaults on female cadets resulted in a shakeup of leadership.

Not long after Americans United for Separation of Church and State threatened to sue the Air Force Academy for promoting evangelical Christianity, the air force created in early May a task force to investigate and report findings this summer.

The air force issued a new policy statement, saying in part that senior leaders at every level "must be particularly sensitive to the fact that subordinates can consider your public expressions of belief systems coercive" as well as "a misuse of office."

The academy, located on the scenic outskirts of Colorado Springs, has drawn support from evangelical Christians who say that religious freedom of expression is being unduly attacked. An executive with the conservative Focus on the Family, based in Colorado Springs, called the complaints and investigation "a witch hunt."

At a banquet in the city last month that was sponsored by the nationwide Fellowship of Christian Athletes, Bobby Bowden, football coach of the Florida State University, asked, "If you knew the cure for cancer, would you tell somebody or would you keep it a secret?"

But others say evangelicals in and out of uniform speak out too aggressively at the academy, creating an environment that Americans United described as "systematic and pervasive religious bias and intolerance at the highest levels of the academy command structure."

Rosa said in his ADL talk that he saw nothing wrong with a biblically themed e-mail message to thousands of fellow cadets sent May 31 by the top graduating senior, Nicholas Jurewicz. "He didn't say you must use this," Rosa said.

But Rosa did criticize his second in command, commandant Brigadier General Johnny Weida, for "inappropriate" actions in calling for personnel to observe the National Day of Prayer, promoted heavily by evangelical organizations, and for advising cadets that their first duty is to God.

Rosa said he also criticized air force football coach Fisher DeBerry for placing a banner reading "I am a member of Team Jesus Christ" in the athletic facilities last fall.

Most of the more than 50 complaints of religious bias since 2000 at the academy stem from "pure ignorance," Rosa said. But he also said that a new training program, titled Respecting the Spiritual Values of All People, was a "baby step" that will be followed by the same intensive and repeated training that followed the sexual-assault scandal, according to the *Colorado Springs Gazette*.

The religious complaints surfaced gradually. A pastoral care consultant from Yale University Divinity School, asked to assess the academy's chaplaincy programs, said in a report last year that there were "stridently evangelical themes" in the chaplains' programs.

In an interview with Religion News Service, report author Kristen Leslie said similar themes are found throughout the academy. "There's one religious voice, the conservative evangelical Christian voice, that has decided that it has the right to lay claim to the environment," she says, "and it is able to do that by working with the academy power structure."

Academy chaplain MeLinda Morton has been one of the most outspoken critics of the school's religious culture. She contends that her criticism of the academy is one of the reasons she received an early transfer to Japan—a charge being investigated by the air force's personnel office.

Cadets have been frequently subjected to evangelical overkill, says Casey Weinstein, a Jewish graduate of the academy. Citing one example to RNS, Weinstein, now a second lieutenant at Los Angeles Air Force Base, said an aggressive promotional campaign for Mel Gibson's movie *The Passion of the Christ* included publicity flyers placed on meal plates at one point in the spring of 2004.

As cadets ate, images from the film flashed on cafeteria screens used for official messages. The distribution of flyers ended only after Weinstein and a handful of fellow cadets complained about the campaign.