

Air force revises religion guidelines: Diverse interpretations of new rules

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The U.S. Air Force has issued revised guidelines on religious expression, reiterating its official neutrality on matters of belief but making subtle changes in language that have drawn both criticism and praise from disparate groups.

Religious activists gave diverse interpretations of whether and how the guidelines address some of the most controversial issues, such as whether Christian chaplains can evangelize and say public prayers “in Jesus’ name,” as many are accustomed to doing.

“We will respect the rights of chaplains to adhere to the tenets of their religious faiths and they will not be required to participate in religious activities, including public prayer, inconsistent with their faiths,” the new document reads.

Reduced from four pages to one, the latest “interim” guidelines were released February 9 after the air force received feedback on a previous version issued in August. Air force officials said they heard from religious groups, members of Congress and others and interviewed 500 air force personnel.

Critics of the latest version range from the head of an evangelical organization that endorses chaplains to Americans United for Separation of Church and State. On the other hand, Focus on the Family, a conservative Christian group, and a more liberal Reform Jewish organization praised the changes.

Rabbi David Saperstein, director of the Washington-based Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism, said he thinks the latest language permits chaplains to pray naming the divinity of their choice, “but they’re not going to be invited to do that with broad, inclusive groups.” He said that the guidelines achieve an “appropriate balance” for those in the military service, protecting the free-exercise rights of both chaplains and the uniformed men and women in the air force.

But Barry Lynn, executive director of Washington-based Americans United for Separation of Church and State, said the new guidelines no longer address the rights of people of minority faiths or of nonbelievers.

Although the one-page document refers to respect for chaplains' religious rights, Lynn said, "it is shocking that there is no similar provision for regular air force personnel who do not wish to participate in prayer or other religious activities."

Tom Minnery, senior vice president of government and public policy for Focus on the Family, applauded the latest rules, saying that they would "bring an end to the frontal assault on the air force by secularists who would make the military a wasteland of relativism." *-Religion News Service*