

Some military chaplains uneasy on planned repeal of 'Don't Ask' policy: Say change will infringe on religious beliefs

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As Congress and the Pentagon grapple with a proposal to allow gays to serve openly in the military, some chaplains— especially evangelicals—worry that the change will infringe on their religious beliefs.

“It’s morally wrong,” said Billy Baugham, executive director of the International Conference of Evangelical Chaplain Endorsers, saying his group believes the Bible condemns homo sexuality.

“The implication of that is that the military is going to force military personnel—both Christians and non-Christians —to accept that value.”

Defense Secretary Robert Gates, with the backing of the White House and the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, said the Pentagon will spend a year studying the ramifications of repealing the Don’t Ask/Don’t Tell policy, which has been in place since 1993.

In January, even before the change was announced, Baugham’s group huddled with military and legal experts to plan their opposition. The group said the current policy should remain intact so chaplains can “faithfully proclaim the truth presented in God’s Word” and safeguard members of the armed forces from “the unimaginable environment that open homosexual conduct would inflict upon that very close society.”

Paul Vicalvi, a retired Army chaplain who directs the Chaplains Commission for the National Association of Evangelicals, has written to the chief chaplains in the Army, Navy and Air Force, saying the military was “created to serve for the good of our

nation and not to be a social experiment or testing ground for society at large.”

Those concerns, however, are not universally shared.

John Gundlach, a minister who oversees government chaplaincies for the United Church of Christ, joined two other retired military chaplains in a letter to Obama and Gates to rebut the swirl of “false conflicts and innuendos.”

The three men also wrote an eight-page document called “What the Military Would Look Like Without ‘Don’t Ask/ Don’t Tell.’” It says chaplains can’t perform duties that violate the teachings of their faith but are “duty bound” to assist military members with referrals for requested services.

“I think there’s been a lot of jousting at straw men,” Gundlach said. “I think there’s still going to be plenty of room to provide ministries according to our own faith groups. So far [gay] marriage is not legitimate because of public laws in most places.”

But Gundlach, who comes from one of the country’s most gay-friendly denominations, said even UCC chaplains are divided over whether the law should be rescinded. “I know that our chaplains run the spectrum on this, too,” said Gundlach, a retired Navy chaplain. “We are an open and affirming denomination but, within that, we can’t speak with one voice for everybody.” *-Religion News Service*