

Wednesday, October 1, 2008

Police prayer policy assailed

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A group of Christian leaders is calling on Virginia Gov. Tim Kaine to rescind a request that state police chaplains offer only "nondenominational" prayers during department-sanctioned public events and to invite six chaplains who resigned over the policy to return to their posts.

"We're asking the governor to reverse his policy and reinstate the chaplains and let them pray in Jesus' name," said former Navy Chaplain Gordon James Klingenschmitt, founder of the Pray in Jesus' Name Project.

Mr. Klingenschmitt and representatives of groups such as the Family Foundation of Virginia, the Christian Coalition of Virginia and the National Clergy Council plan to gather at 1 p.m. Wednesday at the General Assembly Building in Richmond to publicize their efforts.

The groups are protesting a directive from state police Superintendent Col. W. Steven Flaherty in September that police chaplains offer only nondenominational prayers at public events, such as trooper graduations and annual memorial services.

Six of the 17 chaplains on the force resigned their posts after the directive was issued. The new policy also drew criticism from lawmakers as being a violation of the First Amendment, an attack on Christianity and a direct prohibition of using the name of Jesus Christ during prayers.

Mr. Kaine, a Democrat and devout Catholic, has supported Col. Flaherty's policy but stressed that his office gave no directive to the state police.

In a strongly worded letter last week to Virginia House Majority Leader H. Morgan Griffith, the Salem Republican who criticized Mr. Kaine on the issue, the governor insisted that "there is no mandate prohibiting police chaplains from mentioning Jesus Christ."

Col. Flaherty said he was acting in response to a recent 4th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals decision that dealt with sectarian prayers offered at meetings of the Fredericksburg City Council.

But in a letter delivered Friday to Mr. Kaine, Mr. Klingenschmitt said the court's decision "didn't universalize any ban on Jesus-prayers" and allowed other options.

He called on the governor to either schedule a rotating prayer policy among those practicing diverse religions or "appoint chaplains to pray as their own faith dictates."

"By defending religious discrimination, you endorse anti-Christian persecution, and prohibit free speech, literally censoring the word 'Jesus' as illegal speech by chaplains," the letter states. "Is this your intention? It has been your action."

Mr. Klingenschmitt - who was discharged from the military after a dispute surrounding the Navy's policies of encouraging generic, nonsectarian prayers in public settings - also said an e-mail from American Family Association Chairman Donald E. Wildmon was given to Mr. Kaine Friday.

He said the e-mail included a pledge by 86 Virginia religious leaders to mobilize their parishioners to vote in response to the chaplain issue.

Group leaders also are considering a Nov. 1 prayer rally in Richmond depending on the governor's response, Mr. Klingenschmitt said.

Kaine spokesman Gordon Hickey said the governor's office had received the materials and was reviewing them, but that "his position hasn't changed at all."