

Lawsuits target Navy's bias against charismatics

When charismatic believers enlist in the United States Navy, there is no way for them to register their religious preference. That oversight is just one of numerous complaints that have sparked four lawsuits charging the Navy with religious discrimination against a wide spectrum of evangelical Christians.

"I was aware of constitutional violations a dozen years ago," said Jim Ammerman, director of the Chaplaincy of Full Gospel Churches, which represents 7.5 million charismatics and Pentecostals.

"We quit recommending they go into the Navy. I told people they weren't going to be treated fairly and would get put out after three years. That's what was happening."

The Dallas-based organization filed suit in late 1999 on behalf of eight chaplains it had endorsed. The complaint charged that the five men and three women were passed over for promotions and discriminated against in performance reviews. Thirteen charismatics and Pentecostals are among 27 plaintiffs in the suits, which have been working their way through federal courts in San Diego and Washington, D.C.

Also at issue is the Navy's chaplaincy system, which the plaintiffs say is unfairly tilted toward Catholics and members

of mainline denominations. A class-action suit filed last year was consolidated with the Full Gospel case for court action. The U.S. Justice Department argues they should be dismissed. According to a court motion, the suits fail to raise constitutional questions.

“Determining what composition of faiths within the Chaplain Corps will enable it to provide for the Navy’s ministry needs entails more than simply investigating and then mirroring the breakdown of faiths within the broader Navy community,” the department’s filing said.

Regardless of the outcome, Ammerman said the lawsuits have already had an impact. Last year, the Navy altered the composition of its promotion boards, including a line officer and mixed denominational representation. In the past it was common for all five members to come from liturgical groups, Ammerman said.

Ammerman, a retired Army chaplain, also is optimistic because of last year’s appointment of Vernon Clark, an outspoken Pentecostal, as Chief of Naval Operations. These legal challenges have also increased awareness of the situation.

“Everywhere I go, people know who I am. Other endorsers have said, ‘Jim, we’re glad you filed this.’ I’ve [replied]: ‘Liberals do not understand justice, fairness or honesty. But they do understand a bump on the head.’”