

Military: Gay Pride Parades Are OK, Vacation Bible School Is Not

Bible Baptist Church in Carthage, Missouri, is a small country church bursting with American pride. Old Glory stands proudly in the sanctuary. And every morning at summer youth camp, the teenagers pledge allegiance and sing the National Anthem.

Patriotic holidays are big doings at Bible Baptist. On Memorial Day, the church ladies put out quite a spread—fried chicken, potato salad. Veterans wear their uniforms, and the preacher would salute them during the morning worship service.

“We are a very patriotic church,” Pastor Kent Hogan told a reporter. “We love America. We love this country.”

So it was not that big of a surprise when the church decided to honor the military during its annual Vacation Bible School. The theme was “God’s Rescue Squad.” And each day of the week, the church invited local “rescue squads” to visit with the boys and girls.

The paramedics came on Monday, and the fire department showed up Tuesday. The boys and girls were taught how to stop, drop and roll. On Wednesday, the Jasper County Sheriff’s Dept. brought its K-9 unit.

But our story picks up with what happened on Thursday. That was the day the church was supposed to honor the National Guard. They had invited troops from the nearby armory to drop by with one of their Humvees.

“We were going to thank them for protecting our religious liberty,” said Pastor Hogan. “It was more of a promotion for the military—to show the kids what the military does.”

But the National Guard did not visit Bible Baptist Church on Thursday night, and the reason has caused great anger and frustration among church members.

"We were told it was against military policy for National Guard troops to participate in Vacation Bible School," Pastor Hogan said. "They said if the National Guard had assets on church property, it would look like the National Guard is sponsoring the Baptist religion."

Pastor Hogan said he was dumbfounded.

"We are right in the middle of the United States of America," the pastor said. "We are part of the Bible Belt. You read about this stuff going on in big cities. But in Carthage?"

The pastor said the military was concerned about people getting offended by the sight of National Guard troops visiting a church.

"They said they didn't want to offend anybody. Well, it's offended our whole church."

So Pastor Hogan reached out to his state representative, a Republican named Mike Kelley. Kelley then called the adjunct general of the Missouri National Guard.

"They told me that federal policy prohibits them from doing anything with any specific church," Kelley said. "The guys on the state level did everything they could. I have great respect for our local Missouri National Guard. But we are dealing with an over-burdensome federal regulation."

The Missouri National Guard did not return a reporter's calls for comment—but it doesn't matter. Kelley sent me a copy of the Army regulation.

It states: "Army participation must not selectively benefit (or appear to benefit) any person, group, or corporation (whether profit or nonprofit); religion, sect, religious or

sectarian group, or quasi-religious or ideological movement.”

The policy also states that troops are to avoid any activities that might involve or appear to involve the promotion, endorsement or sponsorship of any religious or sectarian movement.

Kelley said he is incredibly disappointed with the federal policy and feels especially bad for the church.

“He (Pastor Hogan) basically got blown off by the federal government,” Kelley said.

Several members of the Missouri National Guard told me they were disgusted by what happened. They only agreed to be quoted provided their identities were not disclosed.

“I can tell you I’m ashamed and embarrassed right now,” one Guardsman said. “This isn’t the military I signed up for.”

Other soldiers said it was extremely disappointing and embarrassing.

“We had a lot of disappointed kiddos because of the National Guard being unwilling to allow a Humvee and a few soldiers to spend an hour at a Baptist Church,” another Guardsman said. “It makes we wonder what I’m actually fighting for.”

But I believe this soldier’s observations and analysis truly sum up our nation’s current state of affairs.

“I will never understand why it’s OK for the military to march in a gay-pride parade but not be allowed to spend an hour talking to children who look up to them (soldiers),” the Guardsman said. “I honestly never thought I’d see the day that this would happen in my hometown.”

In June, the Department of Defense gave permission for a military color guard to march in Washington, D.C.’s gay pride parade. It marked the first time in history that the U.S. Army

Military District of Washington participated in the parade.

Pastor Hogan said the entire incident is both appalling and ludicrous.

"I don't think most Americans realize how much their religious liberty is in jeopardy," he said. "If they did this to us, how bad is it somewhere else? This is not just a big-city issue. This is a small-town-America issue. Americans need to wake up."

Welcome to the age of enlightenment, Pastor Hogan—where the military can march in a gay pride parade but cannot hang out with 6-year-olds at Vacation Bible School.

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