

Pentagon: Service Members Can Evangelize

Christian conservatives have grown increasingly alarmed in recent weeks over reports and rumors that the Pentagon is considering new policies aimed at discriminating against Christians and disciplining or even court-martialing those who share their faith.

But the Department of Defense on Thursday sought to debunk that speculation, saying that while aggressive proselytizing is barred, evangelization is still permitted and the rights of all believers – and non-believers – will be protected.

“The U.S. Department of Defense has never and will never single out a particular religious group for persecution or prosecution,” Pentagon spokesman Lt. Cmdr. Nate Christensen said in a statement. “The Department makes reasonable accommodations for all religions and celebrates the religious diversity of our service members.”

“Service members can share their faith (evangelize), but must not force unwanted, intrusive attempts to convert others of any faith or no faith to one’s beliefs (proselytization),” Christensen added.

He also said that “when religious harassment complaints are reported, commanders take action based on the gravity of the occurrence on a case by case basis.” He did not specify what the range of penalties could be.

The latest statement was aimed at refuting widely circulated reports in conservative media outlets that Christian soldiers could be court-martialed for sharing their faith.

Whether the push back will be successful in dispelling suspicions, even within the ranks, is uncertain. Even as

Christensen released his statement Thursday, Rear Adm. William D. Lee of the U.S. Coast Guard warned of threats to faith within the military while speaking at National Day of Prayer observances on Capitol Hill.

"I am not talking about proselytizing; I am vehemently against that," the admiral said in remarks that drew a standing ovation. "I'm talking about gently whispering the gospel."

The current controversy seems to have originated with Fox News contributor Todd Starnes, who on Tuesday wrote about a Pentagon meeting on harassment and tolerance issues; among the attendees was the head of the Military Religious Freedom Foundation, Mikey Weinstein.

Weinstein is known for his inflammatory rhetoric about religious believers and Christians in particular, and he didn't disappoint this time: he told The Washington Post after the April 23 meeting that proselytizing in the military is akin to "spiritual rape," among other things.

The Fox News report on Weinstein's remarks also cited a statement from Christensen, the Pentagon spokesman, who reiterated the preexisting policy against proselytizing. But the Starnes piece went on to claim that the policy also applied to evangelizing, or sharing the gospel. In addition, the story highlighted court martial as a possible penalty.

In recent years the U.S. military has become a battleground in the culture wars as the growing pluralism of the armed forces, along with increasing assertiveness of both Christian and secular activists, have led the Pentagon to clarify and develop policies of neutrality.

Those policies often do not sit well with Christians, and the Obama administration's 2011 decision to end the military's "Don't Ask/Don't Tell" policy on gay service personnel ramped up their fears still further.

Then in early April it was reported that during a U.S. Army Reserve presentation, an outside contractor had included Catholics and evangelicals in a PowerPoint show listing possible "extremists." While the Army removed the offending slide, the incident was reported as another example of anti-Christian bias in the military.