

VA Hospital Hides Jesus Behind Curtain—In the Chapel

I may have figured out why the Department of Veterans Affairs had such difficulty finding time to treat patients. It's because it was working overtime to give its chapels a religiously neutral makeover.

But as VA officials in Iron Mountain, Michigan, learned, one man's renovation is another man's desecration.

Some folks in Iron Mountain became infuriated earlier this month when they discovered that statues of Jesus and Mary, along with a cross and altar, were hidden behind a curtain in the chapel of the VA hospital there.

The chapel still has stained glass windows, though for how long is unclear. A VA hospital spokesman told me they are still trying to figure out what to do with the windows.

The decision to hide the religious icons came after the National Chaplain Center conducted an on-site inspection and determined the hospital's chapel was not in compliance with government regulations.

Richard Riley, pastor of Our Saviour's Lutheran Church, said he was "exceedingly disappointed" by the move.

He posted photographs of the hidden religious icons on the church's Facebook page.

"We are not a politicizing kind of church," Pastor Riley told me. "But we also believe Christians have constitutional rights. We have a right to voice our opinion. Just because you are a Christian doesn't mean you lose your First Amendment rights."

Riley said the decision to turn the formerly Christian chapel

into a religiously neutral room is evidence of a bigger problem.

“Christianity, not only globally, but particularly in the United States, is really under attack,” he said. “Christianity is coming under some horrendous conflict from the media and to some degree from our own government.”

The situation in Michigan is not unique. In April something similar took place at Fort Meade Veterans Affairs Medical Center in Fort Meade, South Dakota. There was concern over a makeover to the facility’s chapel.

In a written statement to the Rapid City Journal Black Hills Health Care System Director Stephen R. DiStasio said “the VA Black Hills is sensitive to each veteran whose care often includes spiritual counseling and access to their religious symbols. ... Their [the chapels’] key purpose is to provide a designated space for a religious service at the request of the veteran and their family, a space for personal reflection and a space for community services,” he said. “This plan necessitates some changes in the appearance of the chapels, but it continues to support our ability to meet the spiritual needs of veterans and others.”

Retired Lt. Gen. Jerry Boykin of the Family Research Council called the hiding of Christian icons an “assault on the Christian faith.”

“It’s an egregious violation of tradition as well as religious liberty,” Boykin said. “Most of these hospitals were built at a time when there was no issue associated with public displays of Christianity.”

Brad Nelson, a public affairs officer for the Oscar G. Johnson VA Medical Center, told me the edict to make the chapel religiously neutral came from Washington.

“It’s a policy that’s been in place since 2008 that we were

not in compliance with," Nelson told me.

That policy mandates that "the chapel must be maintained as religiously neutral, reflecting no particular faith tradition."

"The only exception to the policy on maintaining chapels as religiously neutral are the chapels at VA facilities which were built with permanent religious symbols in the walls or windows before the establishment of the Veterans Affairs Chaplain Service in 1945," the policy states.

I suspect the only reason they granted the exemption was because of the cost they might incur by hiring demolition crews to rip crosses from the walls.

"Only these chapels and those permanent religious symbols that pre-date the Chaplain Service are allowed to remain because of their historical, artistic and architectural significance," the policy further states.

I couldn't help but notice the government policy does not mention the religious symbols' "spiritual" significance.

To comply with the government orders, Nelson told me the Iron Mountain hospital decided to erect curtains.

"We put up some nice curtains," he said. "When not being used for Bible study, prayer or services, they are closed."

As it now stands, whenever there's a Christian service, Jesus is allowed to be displayed. Otherwise, He's hidden behind the curtain.

Heaven forbid someone finds himself offended at the sight of a cross. For the record, the public affairs officer told me that 98 percent of the patients there identify as Catholic or Christian. So the curtains are for the remaining 2 percent.

Pastor Riley told me it's as if Christians are being

marginalized.

"We need to be active," he said. "As Christians, we don't throw our First Amendment rights out the door."

It's not the first time Veterans Affairs has been accused of stifling the Savior. Last Christmas a group of Georgia high school students were given a list of government-approved carols to sing at a VA hospital in Augusta. A VA hospital in Texas refused to accept holiday cards that included the phrase, "Merry Christmas."

And two Baptist chaplains told me they were forced out of a VA chaplaincy program when they refused to stop praying in the name of Jesus Christ. They said they were also told to stop using references to the Bible during classroom sessions.

While certainly not new, Boykin said the VA policy on religious neutrality is evidence of what he called a "Marxist agenda."

"Marx called religion the opiate of the masses," he told me. "This is all part of a Marxist agenda to remove God and replace God with government-government regulation, government control, government influence. The sad fact is we are letting it happen and very few of us are protesting."

Considering the VA hospital's recent troubles, you'd think they would welcome all the prayer they could get.

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