

National Conference on Ministry to the Armed Forces

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The Pentagon's Interim Guidelines for religious expression in the Air Force balances the Constitutional protection of free exercise of religion with its prohibition against governmental establishment of religion, according to the National Conference on Ministry to the Armed Forces (NCMAF).

NCMAF was invited by the Acting Secretary of the Air Force to participate in the investigation of religious policy and practices at the Air Force Academy, and its report and testimony before Congress stressing fairness, respect and cooperation was incorporated in the Interim Guidelines.

NCMAF is an interfaith, non-profit organization comprised of over 200 member religious denominations and faith groups. Representing their respective denominations/faith groups, NCMAF members serve as endorsers of clergypersons to serve as chaplains in all branches of the military.

Endorsed chaplains agree to respect and accommodate the free exercise of religion for military members and their families regardless of their religious orientation and for those with no religious affiliation.

The Air Force Interim Guidelines begin with two prominent and orienting references from the Constitution of the United States: protections for the free exercise of religion and the prohibition against governmental establishment of any religion. These Constitutional concepts are the alternating concerns these days for the practice of religion in America and in the military. NCMAF believes it is the balance of these freedoms which becomes difficult.

The Interim Guidelines warn against compulsory religious attendance and encourage discretion by superiors in expressing



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their own beliefs to subordinates. The Interim Guidelines embrace the “free exercise” clause by applying it to the protection of free expression of religion. The Air Force is to be commended for the clarification between “hypothetical” versus “real” obstacles when commanders consider approval of an accommodation and for establishing the criteria of fairness and consistency in any accommodation determination. However, in all military Services, the religious program and the accommodation for religious practices is the responsibility of the commander, who must also balance a practical consideration to mission imperatives.

The impartial and advising role of chaplains to their commanders in the provision of the free exercise of religion is affirmed again in the Interim Guidelines.

Voluntary participation in religious services is stressed in the Interim Guidelines and is “integral to the free exercise of religion.” Chaplains might arrange for religious support but they are not compelled to participate.

Public prayer, by chaplains, is also addressed in the Interim Guidelines. They note that public prayer “should not imply government endorsement of any particular religion” and should not usually be part of “routine official business.” The emphasis that, “mutual respect and common sense should always be applied” concurs completely with NCMAF’s view as stated in NCMAF’s Covenant and Code of Ethics for Chaplains of the Armed Force. The Interim Guidelines do not direct a style for the chaplain when saying prayers at a military function “when its primary purpose is not the advancement of religious beliefs.” They observe that, “military chaplains are trained in these matters.” NCMAF believes, however, that a more complete discussion of these principles and practices — with options for operational use — would be helpful. The National Association of Evangelicals (NAE) provides some helpful distinctions in its recently released Statement on the Religious Freedom of Soldiers and Military Chaplains.

Throughout its over 60-year history, NCMAF has been known for respecting and honoring religious diversity.