

Cadets for Christ: Evangelization at the Air Force Academy

by [Amy Frykholm](#) in the [January 10, 2006](#) issue

Most of the 30 new staff members gathered at the United States Air Force Academy for orientation are in their 20s and 30s. Some are air force personnel and some are academy graduates. Some are veterans of the Gulf War, while others served in Iraq. A speaker is talking to them about leadership and character. Suddenly he says, “The academy has been isolated and has drifted away from standard air force practice. If you see anything that doesn’t jibe with standard air force practice, please question it.”

He is no doubt referring to a recent series of scandals at the academy—from indecent behavior by drunken cadets to poor handling of incidents of sexual assault. Apparently his comment is the new party line: the academy has been isolated too long; the time has come for integration into broader military standards and for a significant change in culture.

The most recent controversy, however, has nothing to do with violence or drunkenness among the cadets. The academy has been accused of tacitly and sometimes explicitly promoting evangelical Christianity, of allowing inappropriate proselytizing by faculty, instructors and cadets, and of creating an atmosphere hostile to those of non-Christian faiths or no religious faith at all.

Kristen Leslie, an assistant professor in pastoral care at Yale Divinity School, visited the academy in the summer of 2004 to observe basic training and help the chaplains respond to cases of sexual violence. A report by Leslie and academy chaplain Melinda Morton questioned the evangelizing that is occurring at the academy. In one instance, says Leslie, a Protestant chaplain at a worship service told cadets that if their bunkmates were not born again, they “would burn in the fires of hell.”

At the same time, Mikey Weinstein, a 1977 academy graduate, was collecting evidence of more than 50 incidents of religious intolerance and inappropriate behavior by staff, faculty or cadets during his son’s time at the academy. Some of

these incidents have been reported in the media. Air Force Academy football coach Fisher DeBerry once hung a sign in the locker room that said, “Team Jesus Christ.” Another instructor handed out tracts to cadets who came to see him. A high-ranking officer taught his cadets a hand signal meaning “Jesus Christ” and called upon them to display it at various assemblies.

The last straw for Weinstein was the air force chaplain code of ethics, developed by the National Conference on Ministry to the Armed Forces, a private organization that supplies and accredits military chaplains. Although Weinstein agreed with one statement in the code, “I will not actively proselytize from other religious bodies,” he objected to another, “However, I retain the right to instruct and/or evangelize those who are unaffiliated.” In October 2005, following Weinstein’s complaints, the code was withdrawn for “further review.”

Discouraged by this move, and by what he saw as paltry efforts at responding to an aggressive evangelical atmosphere, Weinstein filed a lawsuit citing the academy for “severe, systemic and pervasive” religious discrimination.

There’s no doubting the evangelical atmosphere at and around the Air Force Academy. Looking out from the academy’s upper campus in Colorado Springs, one can see the 14,000-member New Life Church, pastored by Ted Haggerty. Evangelical groups meet regularly at the academy, and evangelical chaplains, who see the military as both a mission field and a stronghold of Christian values, outnumber their nonevangelical counterparts 12-1. As controversy about religion at the academy became more and more public, Focus on the Family jumped into the fray and created a video, shown at its headquarters, that attempts to frame the debate.

Colorado Springs is home to dozens of evangelical organizations whose members believe that they have a religious duty to shape and influence government and society. They see the military as a place where God, patriotism and a God-ordained social structure come together. The Air Force Academy seems to be that place: it actively recruits evangelical young people, and more than 85 percent of the cadets claim to be Christian.

In this atmosphere, the academy’s response to the accusations has been slow and tentative. The strategy of the academy and of the Department of Defense, revealed in an investigation led by Lieutenant General Roger Brady, himself an evangelical

Christian, has been to respond to instances of alleged intolerance rather than to any systemic problem. Their reluctance is understandable. After all, previous attempts at reform have led to vigorous backlash from politicians and church leaders. And if the academy acknowledged that religious intolerance is systemic and involves abuse of power, then its leaders would also have to acknowledge their tenuous position in relationship to the First Amendment, which says that the government will not use its power to “establish religion.”

This same amendment also calls for the “free exercise” of religion, and the tension between “establishment” and “free exercise” is at the heart of the debate. Some insist that the Air Force Academy must allow for free expression of religion and that telling someone about Jesus does not constitute establishment of religion. Others insist that in a government organization, free expression must always subordinate itself to the nonestablishment clause.

When interim guidelines for appropriate religious behavior in the air force were released last summer, U.S. Representative Joel Hefley (R., Colo.) complained that individuals were being deprived of the ability to express their faith. “We don’t want to do something that keeps someone from living their faith or from expressing their faith,” he argued. For evangelicals, the military is the perfect place for the expression of faith, a place where one’s duties to God and country come together. How can you ask young people to place their lives on the line and not ask them to consider questions of ultimate meaning and significance? How can you develop character and ignore religion?

But the opposition argues that with its emphasis on team unity and its role as an expression of government power, the military is no place for unbridled expression of religion, especially if such expression includes proselytizing, which undermines an atmosphere of integrity and unity in an organization with a diverse membership.

After criticizing the religious atmosphere at the academy, Morton received transfer orders to Japan. She resigned as chaplain in June. She says that when religious issues came to the surface at the academy, evangelicals took aggressive action to shape the discussion.

In all articulations of this problem, it was . . . represented as individual and personal conflicts over “opinions” about religion. By doing that, it becomes a question of personal offense, a territorial issue. We could never frame it

as a question about the use of power (cadet hierarchy or faculty-cadet). We were not allowed to talk about evangelical staff proselytizing or about leaders who used their power to promote a particular religious ideology, but only to frame this as a problem between cadets. And we were not allowed to say that this was a problem that arose specifically out of the evangelical community even though every instance had to do with evangelicals.

Brady's report notes a significant gap in perception: Christian cadets rarely perceive a problem, while non-Christian cadets cite instances of discomfort and alienation.

The academy's creation of a training program, *Respecting the Spiritual Values of All People*, suggests that it is feeling some pressure to respond to criticism. RSVP went through more than 17 revisions before it was unveiled last spring. According to its developers, evangelicals objected to various aspects of the content. Morton remembers taking one version to two-star general Charles Baldwin, chief of chaplains for the air force, in the fall of 2004. She and a Franciscan chaplain had developed training material that included film clips from movies such as *Smoke Signals*, *Schindler's List* and *The Last Samurai*. They wanted to give academy staff and cadets a look at various religious perspectives and then raise questions about behavior in a pluralistic environment. When they finished making their presentation, Baldwin asked, "Why is it, in your presentation, that the Christians never win?"

When the training program was finally developed, says Morton, the heart of it had been gutted. According to the Department of Defense report, cadets gave the training a poor review. "Of course they hated it," Morton says. "It was insipid. It was reduced to finger-wagging, a legalistic recitation."

Granted, the relationship between free expression and the nonestablishment of religion is complex. When the framers wrote the First Amendment, they were most concerned about the dangers of a church hierarchy linked to a state hierarchy. But since evangelical Christianity is largely a faith of the head, heart and mouth, questions of its accommodation and its effect on military atmosphere are difficult to track and evaluate. Evangelical faith is largely personal; evangelicals view themselves not as instruments of a church but as individuals freely expressing their faith. Its church hierarchies are often housed in organizations such as Focus on the Family and independent congregations instead of in denominations, and their relationship with government is more subtle and more private than that of mainline

denominations. When observers note abuse of power and instances of inappropriate expression of faith, evangelicals like Brady can easily claim that the problem is a matter of a few isolated cases—not a systemic problem or a problem of power.

To complicate matters, evangelicals (and other religious people) believe that the fullest expression of their faith is found in telling others about the gospel. Evangelism is the height of commitment and a primary duty. To suggest that they cannot proselytize is tantamount to suggesting they cannot practice their religion in the military. Yet critics have suggested that evangelicalism has been accommodated by the academy to the detriment of unit cohesion and morale.

When I attended an orientation for new staff to observe an RSVP training session, I didn't expect to see much change. Both Brady and Morton, who are at opposite poles of this issue, had expressed dissatisfaction with the training. Vickey Rast, a 1983 graduate, an officer in the Gulf War and an evangelical, began with a clip from the movie *We Were Soldiers*. The projector equipment was not working properly; the picture was dim and the sound muted. But a new message came through loud and clear: all military personnel are part of one team, one unit. Individuals set aside what separates them and choose unity over division. Rast ignored the series of power-point slides flashing various policies and regulations across the screen, and began to tell stories.

She moved around the room asking various airmen to stand up so that she could question them. Her method was interactive and engaging. She often repeated the goal of "unit cohesion and mission success," and referred to the problem of the misuse of power among faculty and staff, insisting that power not be used to promote one religion over another.

"Fifty-one percent nonestablishment; 49 percent free expression," she said repeatedly as she tried to clarify the constitutional issues. She told the personnel-in-training that they are not ordinary folks, but representatives of a government that cannot back any one religion. As military personnel, their primary responsibility is to uphold and defend the Constitution. They cannot risk alienating a single member of their team; they cannot use religion to create divisions and undermine unity.

After the presentation, several staff members asked questions. One young man clearly did not like the message. Invoking the term *political correctness*, he insisted that the military was caving in to cultural forces that wanted to wash religion out of

the public sphere. Rast insisted that political correctness is irrelevant, and that the issues are loyalty to the group and defense of the Constitution.

Another young man was bewildered. “Evangelizing is a huge part of my faith,” he said. “It’s required by my religion.”

“What’s your faith?” Rast asked. “I’m LDS,” he said. Rast responded: “If you must proselytize in order to express your faith, you may need to reconsider your place in the military. When you put on that uniform, you speak for 300 million Americans, most of whom disagree with you.” The young man paused. “I’ve just never looked at it that way.”

Rast says that the training is having an impact. One cadet came forward and spoke to superiors about religious behavior that he felt was inappropriate. He would never have done so, she suggested, if he had not felt that the power of the institution was behind him, that he had the right to be free of religious pressure from his immediate superiors, and that the guidelines regarding such behavior were clear.

Morton argues, however, that the military continues to place the onus of addressing these incidents on the victims. In a system of rigid hierarchies, few will report such incidents, and the abuse of power may go unchecked.

While they disagree on what can be done to shape the religious atmosphere of the academy, Morton, Rast and others I spoke with at the academy agree that the issues are about power—the power vested in the Constitution, the power residing in the military’s chain of command, and the power of individuals to shape and direct their own lives.

Despite consensus on the nature of the problem, there’s little agreement about how to handle it. Some believe that if constitutional requirements are clarified, cadets, staff, personnel and the leadership can act in accordance with those requirements. Others believe that the issue is an ignorance of religious plurality and would like to see the academy work to “dispel the ignorance” and “raise awareness” of world religions. A Phase 2 RSVP training, still in development, would teach academy personnel and cadets about world demographics, commonalities and the major world religions.

After testifying before a subcommittee of the House Armed Services Committee this summer, Leslie returned to Basic Cadet Training to observe chaplain activities and

make recommendations. This time, she and her team were closely followed. She witnessed no examples of chaplains proselytizing during worship services. Is a cultural change under way, or was the academy cleaning things up for the media and then going back to business as usual? Conservative Christians now are complaining that asking chaplains not to pray “in Jesus’ name” in some settings is “muzzling” them.

The questions the Air Force Academy faces are central to democracy. The separation of church and state and the free expression of religion both shape and transform lives. If the Air Force Academy succeeds in clarifying these issues for itself, it may bring some clarity and understanding to the rest of society.