

# Chaplains say Navy wedding policy confuses a fraught debate

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May 10, 2011

WASHINGTON (RNS) A recent Navy memo that would permit military chaplains to officiate at same-sex marriage ceremonies upon repeal of the military's Don't Ask/Don't Tell policy is creating tension amid an already fractious debate.

"It is absolutely deplorable," said the Rev. Billy Baugham, executive director of the International Conference of Evangelical Chaplain Endorsers. "It is a total surprise to us in the sense that we did not know it would really come to this."

The chief of Navy chaplains announced in an April 13 memo that training materials for the expected repeal have been changed to allow chaplains to officiate at some same-sex ceremonies.

"If the base is located in a state where same-sex marriage is legal, then base facilities may normally be used to celebrate the marriage," wrote Navy Rear Adm. Mark Tidd, who added that a chaplain "may officiate" if participation is "consistent with the tenets of his or her religious organization."

Baugham said leaders of his small, conservative Christian organization will likely assess if they want to continue sending chaplains to the Navy under such a policy, but he expects chaplains already in the services to remain.

Chaplain Mark Schreiber, director of the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod's military ministry, said chaplains who disagree with the policy will not be forced to officiate at same-sex weddings and he expects "no mass exodus."

Even so, he has registered his disapproval with the chief of chaplains, and said the policy seems to violate the federal Defense of Marriage Act, which defines marriage as between one man and one woman.

"Base property ... is under federal mandate and DOMA has not been repealed," he said. "Now we're pitting one entity against the other."

Pentagon spokeswoman Eileen Lainez disagreed, telling the Navy Times: "DOMA does not limit the type of religious ceremonies a chaplain may perform in a chapel on a military installation. Chaplains are authorized to perform religious ceremonies consistent with the practices of the chaplain's faith group in chapels on military installations."

Other chaplain endorsers who oppose the new weddings policy hope political pressure may prompt the Navy to reverse course.

Republican critics of both the Navy's action and the Don't Ask/Don't Tell repeal are expected to introduce amendments Wednesday (May 11) to the defense authorization bill when it is considered by the House Armed Services Committee.

Aaron Belkin, director of the Palm Center, which has studied gays in the military, hopes the Republican efforts will fail.

"Republican opposition is not about doing what's best for the military," said Belkin, whose think tank is based at the University of California, Los Angeles. "It is the Navy's, and not the House Republicans', policy that shows deference to the religious beliefs of the clergy."