



Chaplains Mocked, Forced out of VA Program for Their Christian Beliefs

Two military chaplains are suing the federal Veterans Affairs department after they said they were mocked for their Christian beliefs and forced out of a Veterans Affairs chaplain training program.

In 2012, Lieutenant Commander Dan Klender, a Navy chaplain, and Major Steven Firtko, a retired Army chaplain, enrolled in the VA's Clinical Pastoral Education Center program in San Diego. The class is a requirement for chaplains wishing to serve at VA hospitals. The two chaplains are members of the [Conservative Baptist Association of America](#), a denomination that places a high priority on Scripture and faith in Christ.



The two chaplains charge that they were ridiculed and taunted by the program's director, Nancy Dietsch, a VA employee with a reputation for antagonism toward evangelical Christians, charged John Wells, the attorney representing the two chaplains in the suit. "She's been very, very critical of Christians," Wells told [Fox News](#). "Instead of teaching anything dealing with faith issues, she's dealing with a holistic, humanistic approach. It's the idea that the spirit comes from within."

The [lawsuit](#), filed against Secretary of Veterans Affairs Eric Shinseki, charges, among other things, that Dietsch said VA policy forbade chaplains from praying in Jesus' name, and that chaplains could not quote Scripture in her class.

Specifically, during one class discussion on faith, Major Firtko cited the Scripture saying that "faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen." According to Fox News, "Dietsch told the chaplain he was not allowed to quote from the Bible in her classroom."

During one class session, Dietsch said that she believed God could be either man or woman. But when Firtko referred to "The Lord's Prayer," which refers to "our Father which art in heaven," Dietsch "angrily pounded her fist on the table and shouted, 'Do not quote Scripture in this class,'" the lawsuit contends.

On another occasion, according to the lawsuit, "Dietsch insisted that evolution was fact and that she believed mankind evolved. Chaplain Firtko stated he believed in the Genesis statement that 'in the beginning, God created the Heavens and Earth.' In response, Ms. Dietsch pounded her fist on the table and ordered Chaplain Firtko to not quote Scripture in the classroom."

The lawsuit charges that in January of this year Dietsch declared to the chaplains enrolled in the class that there are many ways to heaven and that one religion cannot be right while all others are wrong. When Firtko pointed out that Jesus said that "no one comes to the Father but through me," Dietsch again demanded that he stop quoting Scripture and said to him, as quoted in the lawsuit: "If you believe



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your beliefs are right, and everyone else's are wrong, you do not belong in this program.”

By February of this year Dietsch's harassment of the two chaplains had become so severe, the lawsuit claims, that Klender withdrew from the program. Meanwhile, Firtko had been placed on a six-week probation period after being threatened with dismissal. A week after Klender withdrew Firtko received a letter, signed by Dietsch, booting him from the program, with Dietsch insisting that the “probation period is not yielding” the results she had desired.

In July, Klender and Firtko, along with their denomination, filed a formal complaint against Dietsch for religious discrimination and for violating the standards of the Association of Pastoral Continuing Education. The lawsuit seeks the return of the two chaplains into the program, along with an injunction that will prevent the VA from discriminating against Christian chaplains.

“No American choosing to serve in the armed forces should be openly ridiculed for his Christian faith, and that is most obviously true for chaplains participating in a chaplain training program,” said Wells, a retired Navy officer and executive director of the group [Military-Veterans Advocacy](#). “Not only was the treatment these men received inappropriate, it was also a violation of federal law and the religious freedom guarantees of the First Amendment.”



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