



When Rights Threaten Freedom

How churches should respond

During the 2010 GARBC Conference, messengers of the General Association of Regular Baptist Churches passed a “Resolution on the Open Practice of Homosexuality in the Military,” urging churches to contact U.S. senators and representatives who are in the process of changing current policies that prohibit gays and lesbians from serving openly in the military. In the resolution, which passed unanimously, the messengers expressed our position that “no further changes to the current policy be made into law.”

The GARBC resolution recognizes that chaplains are “providing compassionate Christ-like care to all service members and their families,” even those who are practicing homosexuality. But chaplains also have a responsibility to faithfully preach and teach that homosexual practice is Biblically wrong. The resolution concludes by calling on churches in the GARBC fellowship to “express Christ-like compassion without condoning the behavior of those who proclaim a homosexual lifestyle, and to pray for our government and military leaders (I Tim. 2:1–2).”

Earlier in the year, the Armed Forces Chaplains Board invited Chaplain John Murdoch, director of Regular Baptist Chaplaincy Ministries, to write a response letter summarizing the GARBC’s position on the proposed changes. Secretary of Defense Robert Gates had established the Comprehensive Review Working Group to study how the changes would affect the military. In turn, the CRWG asked the Armed Forces Chaplains Board to request responses from each of the 202 endorsing groups. Prior to writing his response, Murdoch contacted GARBC chaplains for additional input.

“What protects chaplains from accusation of hate speech or crimes, and punishment for preaching, teaching, or counseling from their faith traditions?” Murdoch wrote in his official response. “The GARBC believes that freedom of speech and freedom of religion will be impacted significantly if the [Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell] policy is repealed.”

Murdoch is a U.S. Army veteran who was a GARBC pastor for 27 years and formerly the chief of chaplains for the Civil Air Patrol, the civilian auxiliary of the U.S. Air Force. He is actively involved in the endorsing community in Washington, D.C., where he has served on the executive committees of both NCMAF (National Conference on Ministry to the Armed Forces) and ECVAC (Endorsers Conference on Veterans Affairs Chaplaincy). He was elected president of the Military Chaplains Association for 2004–2006. As official endorser for GARBC chaplains serving in the U.S. military, his contacts on behalf of the GARBC are significant.

Murdoch expressed gratitude for the opportunity to address the issue, even if the media considers the repeal of a military ban on openly gay members a done deal. “It doesn’t matter what the outcome is; it is our responsibility to speak.”

A unified response

The GARBC's position is held by most evangelical churches, many of whom responded through the Armed Forces Chaplains Board with similar criticisms.

"Our chaplains will be forced to minister in a climate of hostility," wrote Keith Travis on behalf of Southern Baptist chaplains. The denomination also passed a resolution on June 13 criticizing the proposed changes. The Southern Baptist statement is considered significant; the group has more active-duty chaplains than any other denomination.

Chaplain Douglas E. Lee, a retired brigadier general and endorsing chaplain for the Presbyterian and Reformed Joint Commission on Chaplains and Military Personnel, responded by suggesting "chaplains may be open to the charge of discrimination or command reprimand when they preach or teach in accordance with the passages in the Bible which directly speak to the sin of homosexual practice."

A group of 40 retired chaplains from several evangelical denominations also expressed their opposition in a letter to President Obama and Defense Secretary Robert Gates, part of an effort spearheaded by the Family Research Council and the Alliance Defense Fund. One of the cosigners was Jim Ellis, a retired GARBC Navy chaplain.

"Orthodox Christianity—which represents a significant percentage of religious belief in the armed forces—does not affirm homosexual behavior," the retired chaplains wrote, suggesting that current chaplains will be forced to choose between obeying God or men if gays are allowed to serve openly in the military.

"Many of us who swim in the fundamental and evangelical fish tanks are against this," says Chaplain Murdoch, who believes it is important for evangelicals to defend the idea of religious freedom for military chaplains.

A campaign to repeal

Though popularly referred to as "Don't Ask, Don't Tell," the law is part of Title 10 of the U.S. Code (section 654), "Policy Concerning Homosexuality in the Armed Forces." The 1993 legislation was the result of President Bill Clinton's failed attempt to lift a long-standing ban on homosexuals in the military. After months of hearings, the U.S. Congress passed a law that essentially codified the pre-Clinton policy.

"Homosexuality is incompatible with military service," the 1993 policy concluded.

In reality, the ban was not new ("Americans have a short memory," says Chaplain Murdoch). A recent *Time* magazine article reported on centuries-long consistent military policy against the open practice of homosexuality, including Gen. George Washington's discharge of an American soldier in 1778, an explicit prohibition in the Articles of War of 1916, and the rejection of 4,000 conscripts during World War II.

During a 2008 campaign appearance at Rick Warren's Saddleback Church, presidential candidate Barack Obama criticized evangelicals for their views on gay rights, and promised to work actively to repeal both the Defense of Marriage Act and the military's Don't Ask, Don't Tell policy. Obama also wrote a formal campaign letter to the Lesbian Gay Biexual

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Transgender community, calling their equal rights a "moral imperative."

"If we want to repeal DOMA, repeal Don't Ask, Don't Tell, and implement fully inclusive laws outlawing hate crimes and discrimination in the workplace, we need to bring the message of LGBT equality to skeptical audiences as well as friendly ones—and that's what I've done throughout my career," Obama wrote.

The issue remained unaddressed during the first year of Obama's presidency, until he raised the issue again during his 2010 State of the Union address. In a coordinated effort to initiate repeal, Adm. Mike Mullen, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, told the Senate Armed Services Committee he believed "allowing gays and lesbians to serve openly would be the right thing to do." After significant debate, the U.S. House of Representatives passed an amendment to a defense policy bill on May 27, part of which included language to end the "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" policy.

The vote formally approved an unusual compromise plan in which the policy is not repealed outright. Rather, it directs military commanders to first complete the study that was already in progress, then certify that the changes would not be disruptive. This report, the one that John Murdoch participated in, is due to Congress on Dec. 1.

While the Senate Armed Forces Committee has also approved the amendment's language, the full Senate has yet to approve the measure. As of press time, it seems unlikely that they will pass the controversial bill before the fall elections.

Some news commentators have suggested Obama will attempt to have the measure passed during a "lame duck" session after the November elections and before the new senators are seated in January. Legislators often choose this period to approve politically controversial measures that are unpopular with voters. Because many members of Congress have been voted out of office or have retired, they have no particular accountability to enact legislation that represents their constituents.

How churches can respond

"We need to be praying," says John Murdoch when asked about the best way for individual churches to respond. "We need to be contacting our legislative representatives."

"And we need to be polite," Murdoch says, noting that the issue has produced a great deal of fiery rhetoric that sometimes ends up being ignored by decision makers. "Later, we should call them back or write to thank them for listening," Murdoch says.

Again expressing gratitude for the opportunity to formally respond to a difficult issue, Murdoch says that it was important for the GARBC to take advantage of the invitation from the Armed Forces Chaplains Board. "Or next time, they may not ask," Murdoch says.

"We're responding because our position is right, not because it is politically popular." **B**

Kevin Mungons is managing editor of the Baptist Bulletin.