



Center for Military Readiness

Elaine Donnelly
President

The Hon. Howard P. McKeon
Chairman, House Armed Services Committee
2120 Rayburn House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

Re: Same-Sex Marriage at Fort Polk

July 30, 2012

Dear Chairman McKeon,

I am forwarding to you five letters that provide insight into the circumstances surrounding what may have been the first same-sex marriage on a military base. The event took place at Fort Polk, LA, on May 19, 2012. I have omitted names in the letters, but I have the authors' permission to convey these communications with you. (Contact information on file.)

Contrary to some news accounts, the Fort Polk marriage "ceremony" has caused serious division in the faith community, due to contradictions and evasions of federal law that were instigated by the Department of Defense on September 20, 2011.

Three of the letters are addressed to you, and one is the text of a letter sent to Louisiana Senator David Vitter through his website. The fifth one is a group letter addressed to the Installation Chaplain at Fort Polk, which was signed by 20 individuals and families shortly after the ceremony occurred. (Names on request, with their approval.)

The letter writers subsequently contacted CMR by email through the "Confidential Contact" spot on our website, starting on June 12. In response to the first message received, I sent background information about the Defense Department's current policies regarding same-sex marriages. I also asked whether the incident was accepted quietly or was the source of controversy.

As you will see from the letters I am forwarding, the incident was the source of much controversy and division in that faith community. Later I spoke with one of the letter-writers on the phone. Collating what I have learned from correspondence with the letter writers, this is a summary of what happened at Fort Polk:

1. On May 19, 2012, a military chaplain conducted a marriage-like ceremony involving two lesbian women in Fort Polk's Glory Chapel, a facility reserved for religious activities conducted by chaplains of various denominations.
2. The ceremony was conducted under questionable circumstances and in a state where same-sex marriages and civil unions are not legal.

3. The presiding chaplain, who represents the Disciples of Christ, requested use of the chapel for a wedding. The letter writers understand that he did not inform the Installation Chaplain that the ceremony would involve a same-sex couple. One letter writer thought this deceitful, but another one thought that the presiding chaplain and his wife thought they had done everything they were supposed to do. One writer doubted that the Installation Chaplain was unaware, suspecting that he only said that to shift blame. I have not spoken to any of the chaplains at Fort Polk.
4. The Disciples of Christ is a more liberal denomination, and the Installation Chaplain is a Southern Baptist. Prior to this event the chaplain who performed the ceremony had ministered to the congregation without raising controversy on controversial issues.
5. A veteran who does volunteer work on the base reported that he was aware that after repeal of the 1993 law took effect, the liberal chaplain was actively looking for a same-sex-couple he could marry, in order to become the first to perform such a marriage on a military base.
6. Some of the people who attend worship services in that chapel were quite upset when they learned what had happened. An unknown number decided to leave the congregation, seeking a place of worship outside of the base. (There is no way to determine this number on a base where people move all the time.)
7. The controversy and division caused the Installation Chaplain to call a meeting to discuss the matter. The meeting, which was not widely publicized, drew about 30 congregants who expressed strong opposition for several reasons. Four chaplains were in attendance, one of whom agreed with the congregation but did not speak. The Installation Chaplain was the only one who spoke.
8. The Installation Chaplain indicated that he was not informed of the ceremony in advance. He added that the event was within DoD guidelines and he was not going to apologize to the congregation or take any action, other than referring the matter up the chain of command. Although he shared the congregation's views on same-sex marriage, his comments primarily reflected current Defense Department policy. He indicated that the ceremony was not a true marriage, but someone at the meeting said they had seen a wedding invitation. (The letter writer could not verify this.)
9. Some of the letter writers expressed dissatisfaction with the Installation Chaplain's position. One wrote a message to Louisiana Senators Vitter and Landrieu--see copy of text attached. More than one person wrote letters to the Installation Chaplain, expressing their opposition not as a legal matter, but a spiritual one.
10. The fifth letter attached was written on behalf of the "Gospel and Protestant Congregation Members in Agreement," and signed by about 20 members of the congregation. The author had researched the legal issues, but also expressed sincerely held moral views on the issues of homosexuality and marriage. The group letter was read at the meeting that took place about a week after the ceremony.
11. Some of the letter writers still maintain cordial relationships with the liberal chaplain and his wife, with no intent to infringe upon their beliefs. However, use of the dedicated

chapel for the same-sex marriage has caused others to call for the removal of the presiding chaplain as a Vacation Bible School (VBS) instructor.

12. One letter writer stressed an awareness that chaplains and other military personnel feel constrained in speaking about this and related issues. The base newspaper carries news of LGBT events, such as the recent one in the Pentagon, but does not accept advertising or news about conservative activities involving base personnel and families.

My comments:

These letters and the Fort Polk congregants they represent demonstrate the divisiveness of LGBT law and related policies. People of faith who view this issue as a matter of morality, as well as compliance with state and federal law, are frustrated by regulations that clearly are coming between them and their chaplains.

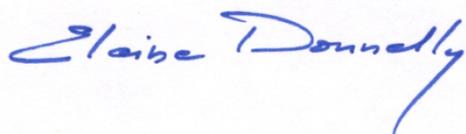
The letter writers believe that rights of conscience and religious expression are being protected for the chaplain who performed the ceremony, but they feel betrayed because their own rights are not being protected by law or by their own religious leaders. The congregation is quoting the Bible, but the Installation Chaplain seems to be quoting Defense Department policy memos that have taken sides on a matter of deep conviction for chaplains and people of faith.

It is not the role of Congress to resolve religious issues, but the problem here has been caused by the Pentagon's circumvention of the Defense of Marriage Act, and by the lack of protection for rights of conscience and religious liberty in the repeal legislation.

The incident calls into question claims that LGBT law has been universally accepted and smoothly implemented since September 20, 2011. The Pentagon is not recognizing or admitting problems because there is no way that military people can express their concerns on matters such as this.

The issues facing this congregation and probably others are important and deserving of attention by Congress. The people at Fort Polk appreciate your leadership, and hope that their letters will be helpful in the coming months.

With best regards,



Fort Polk community letters mentioned above are embedded in the links below:

[Letter from spouse of retiree, veteran, chapel volunteer, prayer team leader](#)

[Letter from retired Army Chief Warrant Officer, Vietnam veteran, military family volunteer](#)

[Text of Letter sent to LA Senators David Vitter and Mary Landrieu, though their websites](#)

[Letter from Fort Polk Church Community Volunteer](#)

[Text of Group Letter to Installation Chaplain from Faith Community \(signed by 20 members\)](#)