

Lawyer sues to end 'threat' prayer

Bid to stop group that picks military chaplains seen as a free-speech test

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A former military lawyer who served in the Reagan White House and worked for Ross Perot is suing a Dallas-based religious organization

in a case that could test the limits of free speech and prayer.

Mikey Weinstein, founder of the Military Religious Freedom Foundation, said he wants Gordon Klingenschmitt, a former U.S. Navy chaplain, to "stop asking Jesus to plunder my fields ... seize my assets, kill me and my family then wipe away our descendants for 10 generations."

The suit also asks the court to

stop the defendants — Klingenschmitt and Jim Ammerman, the founder of the Dallas-based Chaplaincy of Full Gospel Churches — from "encouraging, soliciting, directing, abetting or attempting to induce others to engage in similar conduct."

Weinstein, 54, said his family has received death threats, had a

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Men deny praying for deaths

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swastika emblazoned on their home in New Mexico, animal carcasses left on their doorstep and feces thrown at the house.

Weinstein, who is Jewish, said the harassment started several years ago when he began protesting Christian proselytizing at his alma mater, the Air Force Academy.



MIKEY WEINSTEIN says his family is threatened.



GORDON KLINGENSCHMITT says he didn't pray for violence.

from a long line of military members.

Klingenschmitt, 41, said in a phone interview that he has "never incited anybody" to hurt Weinstein.

"I never prayed for anyone's death," he said. "I never prayed for anyone's violence. All I did was quote the Scriptures." His prayers are available on his Web site and for radio broadcast.

Ammerman, an 84-year-old retired Army chaplain, declined an interview, but said in a prepared statement he "believes the allegations are unfounded."

Weinstein said he also

hopes to cripple the Chaplaincy financially and to have the organization stripped of its status with the Department of Defense.

Military chaplains

The Chaplaincy has been an endorsing or approving agency for military chaplains since 1984. Religious denominations generally endorse chaplains from their own churches, but the Chaplaincy of Full Gospel Churches represents independent churches that may not be affiliated with a denomination.

The Chaplaincy's Web site says it represents 7.5 million "Full Gospel, Spirit-filled believers" from more than 225 fellowships or associations and 1,325 churches.

The Chaplaincy says it has endorsed more than 270 military chaplains.

"The suit raises numerous free speech and religious freedom issues," Ammerman said in his statement, adding that it "incorrectly implies that endorsing agencies exercise control over those they endorse, including their independent actions and speech."

Klingenschmitt was endorsed by the Chaplaincy several years ago.

According to religious law expert Douglas Laycock of the University of Michigan, "imprecatory," or curse prayers, are considered by the courts to be protected speech. "People can pray for whatever they want to pray for," he said.

But the question of whether such speech can be used to incite others to violence has not been settled by the courts in a religious context.

Weinstein's attorney, Randall Mathis, said their biggest concern is that Klingenschmitt's audience includes a "certain number of unstable

people" who might act in the name of God.

"A threat is a threat and a call to violence is a call to violence," he said. "And those are not constitutionally protected."

Weinstein and the Foundation have protested issues such as soldiers pressured to attend religious events; distribution of Bibles by soldiers in Muslim countries; and the display of religious symbols on military equipment.

The lawsuit says the Chaplaincy is not a religious organization but "a front for anti-government extremists."

"Ammerman has made his position quite clear, in publicly available speeches and articles," the lawsuit says. "He believes that the United States government is planning to turn over sovereignty to the United Nations ... he believes that our highest government officials are traitors."

But Ammerman stops short of advocating anti-government violence in his speeches, the lawsuit says. "He whips his crowd into a frenzy and then nods and smiles while members of the audience make the actual threats of violence," the suit says.

The number and intensity of threats against him increased earlier this year, Weinstein said, after Klingenschmitt, whom the suit calls a "henchman" for Ammerman, offered several "imprecatory prayers" based on Psalm 109 and Deuteronomy 23.

Klingenschmitt called the lawsuit a publicity stunt and Weinstein a "paranoid megalomaniac who has a history of anti-Christian persecution."

He "would never pray evil upon my enemies," he said, "but the justice of God is not evil."

Does he want Mikey Weinstein to die? "I pray the Psalm that his days are few," he replied.

Klingenschmitt left the Navy with an honorable discharge after being found guilty in a 2006 court-martial for disobeying an order not to wear his uniform at a news conference. He said he ministered to Christians and non-Christians alike but said he sees "the whole world as a mission field," including the military.

'Mission field'

Weinstein said he is not opposed to chaplains in the military, as long as they minister to all faiths, but he said the military should not be a "mission field" for chaplains to proselytize for their particular beliefs.

Weinstein says, "The fight we're fighting is not a Christian-Jewish fight, it's not a Christian-Islamic fight," noting that most of his Foundation's 15,000 clients are Christians. "It's not a political spectrum left or right matter. This is a constitutional right and wrong matter."

"You cannot use your position of military authority to force the Afghans, Iraqis or people underneath you in the military to accept your specific religion," he said. "If the Jews were doing it or the mainstream Protestants or Catholics or Buddhists or Hindus, we'd be in their face."

Klingenschmitt said he may file a countersuit because Weinstein once said he "would like to beat the explosive out of him in a boxing ring or in an alley."

Weinstein, who boxed at the Air Force Academy, didn't dispute the quote, saying he has offered to meet Klingenschmitt for a "fair fight."