



DEPARTMENT OF THE AIR FORCE
HEADQUARTERS UNITED STATES AIR FORCE
OFFICE OF THE CHIEF OF THE CHAPLAIN SERVICE
WASHINGTON, DC

15 January 2000

MEMORANDUM FOR ALMAJCOM-FOA-DRU/HC
CPD/HC

FROM: HQ USAF/HC
112 Luke Ave
Bolling AFB DC 20332-9050

SUBJECT: Prayer at Staff Meetings

The July 1998 JAG memorandum entitled "Prayer at Staff Meetings" discusses the subject of prayer in military settings vis-à-vis the Establishment Clause and Federal case law. The opinion, published as an Opinion of the Judge Advocate General (OpJAGAF 1998/76), addressed only one issue: whether it is appropriate for a commander to mandate that prayers be given at routine staff meetings when a member of the staff objected to the practice.

The OpJAGAF's preface clearly delineates the import/scope of this legal opinion. As such, it explicitly states these opinions are published for "historical and reference purposes and represent "an excellent starting point for legal research." The preface ends with the caveat that opinions "should not be cited as precedent without first verifying by independent research, the validity of the conclusions." Despite this caveat, we have been advised that some staff judge advocates may have represented this opinion as a statement of Air Force policy. Although written in response to questions based on specific facts, please recognize this opinion does not constitute, nor should it be construed as, Air Force policy.

Prayer is not prohibited in a military environment. Prayers associated with significant events, i.e., death, injury, and disaster may be entirely appropriate, even in an official setting. Similarly, prayers at social or semi-official events such as luncheons, ceremonies and dedications, may be entirely unobjectionable. Prayers offered at the request of individuals being honored or recognized for their service are perfectly acceptable. In short, as with other applications of Constitutional law, it is the totality of the circumstances that will determine the appropriateness of prayer. In each case, the genre of the prayer, the nature or participation in the

event (voluntary or compelled), and the ceremonial distinctiveness of the occasion dictate whether or not prayer in that particular setting meets Constitutional muster.

Prayer has always been a vital and appropriate Chaplain Service ministry. As spiritual caregivers, chaplains must continue to avail themselves of every opportunity to offer prayer on behalf of the community. However, we must also respect the religious diversity of our Air Force communities. Therefore, commanders, chaplains, and judge advocates are urged to be sensitive to the factors identified above in evaluating whether prayers should be given at mandatory official functions when one or more individuals raise an objection.

WILLIAM J. DENDINGER
Chaplain, Major General, USAF
Chief of the Chaplain Service