

In Mannheim Germany, the smell of incense floats inside Taylor Barracks Chapel on a weekly basis. Members of the Mannheim Open Circle, a gathering of Wiccans and Neo-Pagans, celebrate the seasons under the protection of the chapel's roof. In good weather, they gather outside on the well-manicured lawn. They sing songs of the Goddess, chant and meditate. At their greatest, they have had nearly 80 show up for a special summer gathering.

Mannheim is not the only military post to see Neo-Pagan services started under the leadership of a Designated Faith Group Leader. There are over ten such services spread worldwide in all branches of the U.S. Armed Forces. The growing military Pagan population is quickly taking advantage of Department of Defense directives that ensure the free practice of religion and equality in facility use.

But this free practice has been causing distress to Evangelical and Fundamentalist Christians. In past years State Representative Bob Barr attempted congressional legislation limiting military religious freedoms after discovering that Pagans and Wiccans met at a Ft. Hood facility.

This month in Brussels, Lieutenant Colonel David Sonnier requested Roman Catholic services at a local military chapel. When he was turned down, he expressed his dissatisfaction that Wiccans and Pagans are allowed chapel use at other posts while the Roman Catholics in Brussels were not. He contacted State Representative Traficant (D-OH) who then brought this issue to the House Floor, speaking ill of the fast growing Pagan population.

What Lieutenant Colonel David Sonier and Representative Traficant do not understand is the Department of Defense and US Army regulations that govern chapel facility use. All faiths are allowed use under AR 165-1, 5.5 which governs "Designated Faith Group Leaders" (DFGLs). These DFGLs are not paid clergy, but volunteers that apply for DFGL status with the Chaplains Corp. There are certain requirements that must be met regarding ordination and organizational status, but there are no preferred religions or faiths. The Army does not endorse one faith over another.

The Chaplains Corps relies on volunteers to service not only their non-traditional faiths, but their Judeo-Christian groups as well. They face a shortage of Roman Catholic priests and have such a tight budget that they often cannot pay for contract clergy, as was the case in Brussels. There is less than a handful of Islamic chaplains, and the population depends on DFGLs for weekly services. The DFGL program is a necessity. If Lieutenant Colonel Sonier found a Roman Catholic priest willing to volunteer, they could be approved for chapel use.

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