



June 22, 2005

Group calls for end to noon prayer at Naval Academy

By Christopher Munsey
Times staff writer

The national director of the Anti-Defamation League civil rights group is calling for an end to the noon meal prayer at the Naval Academy, describing it as a mandatory prayer that violates the separation of church and state.

Abraham Foxman made the request in a letter dated June 17 to Vice Adm. Rodney Rempt, superintendent of the academy.

Interviewed by Navy Times June 21, Foxman said the noon prayer, which takes place when the 4,000-strong Brigade of Midshipmen assembles for lunch in King Hall, constitutes a mandatory prayer for midshipmen.

Foxman's letter noted that midshipmen are required to be present and standing when the prayer is delivered by a chaplain, before they can sit down and eat lunch.

"This is not a time or a place that the institution should mandate prayer, and it's inappropriate," he said.

Instead of a spoken prayer, Foxman said an acceptable alternative would be calling for a moment of silence before lunch, to give midshipmen a chance to pray on their own, if they so chose.

As of June 21, Foxman said he had not received a response from the academy.

Asked about the letter June 22, Naval Academy spokesman Cmdr. Rod Gibbons said the academy had not received the ADL's letter yet.

During the noon meal, Gibbons said, a chaplain invites midshipmen to participate in a prayer, moment of silence or devotional thought during announcements before the noon meal begins.

The prayer is rotated among the academy's staff of six chaplains, he said.

Midshipmen are expected to be quiet and respectful during announcements and the prayer, but they are not required to actively participate, Gibbons said.

"The prayer is not mandatory or compulsory ... and midshipmen are not required to participate in prayer," he said.

Concern about the Naval Academy's noon meal prayer was generated by the ongoing controversy over reports of evangelical Christians proselytizing cadets at the Air Force Academy, Foxman said.