

Pentagon tightens policy on distributing religious literature to recruits

December 29, 2008

WASHINGTON (ABP) — The Pentagon recently reversed its policy of granting religious groups like the Gideons International preferential access to provide literature to new recruits.

A new regulation distributed in November says non-federal entities can continue to receive permission to place secular or religious literature at 65 Military Entrance Processing Stations around the country, but faith-based and secular organizations must be treated alike.

The policy change followed an [investigation](#) by the American Civil Liberties Union into a complaint by a recruit in Louisville, Ky., about being approached by a representative of the Gideons, a 100-year-old organization best known for placing Bibles in hotel rooms.

The ACLU said it found evangelizing activities at up to 10 other processing centers, such as handing out religious tracts during their processing as if it were part of official military procedure and distributing New Testaments with khaki covers that suggested it was a military publication.

"Avoid any appearance of establishing religion"

The new [rule](#) recognizes the importance of accommodating the religious beliefs of military personnel but says the government must avoid any appearance of establishing religion.

Literature at processing centers must not "create the reasonable

impression that the government is sponsoring, endorsing or inhibiting religion generally, or favoring or disfavoring a particular religion."

"Under no circumstances" is a member of any non-federal entity "permitted to proselytize, preach, or provide spiritual counseling to, or otherwise communicate information of a religious nature" to applicants or federal personnel while on an MEPS site.

The centers run by the United States Military Entrance Processing Command are the last stop for armed forces recruits on their way to basic training. They receive a battery of tests and examinations, including a physical, to ensure they are fit to serve. If they are found to be qualified, they sign their entrance contract and swear an entrance oath.

ACLU hailed change

The ACLU [hailed](#) the policy change. "We applaud the Military Entrance Processing Command for recognizing that the religious freedom of all individuals joining the armed forces must be protected, including those who do not subscribe to the beliefs of the Gideons," said Jeremy Gunn, director of the ACLU Program on Freedom of Religion and Belief. "The new rule strikes the right constitutional balance by preserving religious liberty without showing governmental favoritism for one religion or belief over another."

The Gideon ministry [placed](#) Bibles only in hotels and motels between 1908 and 1940, until a member had the idea of creating a pocket-size New Testament, adding Proverbs and Psalms, and handing it out to members of the military. A test run of 10,000 New Testaments arrived in Hawaii in April 1941, a few months before the attack on Pearl Harbor.

Since then the Gideons has given away more than 45 million copies of the Bible to military personnel. Working through chaplains, the ministry offers a free New Testament to any service member who wants one.

-Bob Allen is senior writer for Associated Baptist Press.