30 September 2013

The Honorable Chuck Hagel
Secretary
United States Department of Defense
1000 Defense Pentagon
Washington, D.C. 30301

Re: Southern Baptist North American Mission Board “Guidelines” of 29 August 2013

Dear Mr. Secretary,

Thank you for your efforts to make the Department of Defense a more equal, just, and effective institution for all service members and their families. Your leadership across the branches has led, we believe, to actions by the Internal Revenue Service, Social Security Administration, and other Executive Branch agencies to treat lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (“LGBT”) Americans with full equality under the law.

We write today to request your attention and direction to a burgeoning problem that will lead to the degradation of the effectiveness of America’s Armed Forces. That problem is the effort of a few religious conservatives who are attempting to carve our special status for themselves within a military where equal codes of conduct, good force management, and paramount concerns of unit cohesion, morale, and readiness apply to all.

Specifically, we draw your attention to the Southern Baptist North American Mission Board’s (NAMB) “Guidelines” issued on 29 August 2013 which prohibit Southern Baptist endorsed chaplains from engaging in otherwise routine pastoral care – if such care is directed or connected to same-gender couples or LGB troops. Specifically, the “Guidelines” mandate that NAMB endorsed chaplains are restricted from:

1. Attending a wedding ceremony of a same-gender couple, either on or off a military installation.
2. Performing supportive pastoral counseling of a same-gender married couple.
3. Assisting or supporting contractors or volunteers leading same-gender relational events.
4. Offering any kind of relationship training, on or off a military installation that

Advocate for a Military Chaplaincy committed to free and diverse religious expression, and to the sacred traditions of personal integrity, selfless compassion, respect for others, and excellence in leadership.
would give the appearance of accepting the "homosexual lifestyle or sexual wrongdoing."
5. Participating in jointly led worship services "with a chaplain, contractor or volunteer who personally practices a homosexual lifestyle or affirms a homosexual lifestyle or such conduct."

Failure to comply with these “Guidelines” would result in removal of the chaplain’s endorsement by the denomination. As you know, loss of endorsement means a chaplain would lose his commission as a military officer, ending his military career, and in some instances, the loss of retirement benefits.1

While NAMB has the right to issue denominational guidelines to its chaplains, NAMB oversteps its authority when its directives are counter or inapposite to the Covenant and Code of Ethics for Chaplains of the Armed Forces adopted by the National Conference on Ministry to the Armed Forces (NCMAF). The Chaplains’ Code of Ethics sets forth uniform and uncompromising standards across all branches and all forces of service in the Department.2

The NCMAF Code of Ethics is consistent with your stated policies of full equality and inclusion. In contrast, NAMB’s directives are not consistent with your stated policies of full equality and inclusion, nor do they comport with military regulations on plurality.3

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1 See Southern Baptist North American Mission Board “Guidelines” dated August 29, 2013, attached hereto, at page 1 which states: "chaplains in violation of these restrictions will be subject to removal of their endorsement."

2 All Chaplains must agree to the following:

I understand as a chaplain in the United States Armed Forces that:

1. I will function in a pluralistic environment with chaplains of other religious bodies to provide for ministry to all military personnel and their families entrusted to my care.

2. I will seek to provide for pastoral care and ministry to persons of religious bodies other than my own within my area of responsibility with the same investment of myself as I give to members of my own religious body. I will work collegially with chaplains of religious bodies other than my own as together we seek to provide as full a ministry as possible to our people.

3. I will respect the beliefs and traditions of my colleagues and those to whom I minister. When conducting services of worship that include persons of other than my religious body, I will draw upon those beliefs, principles, and practices that we have in common.

4. I will, if in a supervisory position, respect the practices and beliefs of each chaplain I supervise and exercise care not to require of them any service or practice that would be in violation of the faith practices of their particular religious body.

5. I will seek to support all colleagues in ministry by building constructive relationships wherever I serve, both with the staff where I work and with colleagues throughout the military environment.

6. I will recognize that my obligation is to provide for the free exercise of religion for ministry to all members of the military services, their families and other authorized personnel.

3 Military regulations require endorsing agencies to verify that their endorsed chaplains “function in a pluralistic environment, . . . [and] support directly and indirectly the free exercise of religion by all members
In our opinion, the NAMB “Guidelines” give explicit voice to the position that Southern Baptist chaplains are NOT duty bound:

- To follow a Commander’s orders if those orders are perceived to violate NAMB’s mandatory “Guidelines.”
- To follow their sworn duty as military officers;
- To treat all equally;
- To refrain from bias and discrimination embedded in endorser regulations;
- To respect the First Amendment, due to denominational directives establishing their religious beliefs, and using DOD appropriated funds to support their salaries and faith based programs.

As a matter of policy, regulation, command and control, and operational efficiency, NAMB’s directives cannot be allowed to stand. Southern Baptists are attempting to create a separate class of chaplains – and then a separate class of troops – within our military. We cannot have some troops obey military regulations while others give priority to directives from their denominational endorsers. This is unacceptable.

All members of the military have taken an oath to support and defend the U.S. Constitution. As military officers, that is the sworn duty of every chaplain. The right of service members to their own private faith is guaranteed by Constitutional law. The laws also require that no religious group may impose its policies, practices and beliefs over the rest of the country, and certainly not over government institutions like the military.4

Mr. Secretary, we ask for your immediate action to stop the creation of a separate, privileged class of Southern Baptist Convention endorsed chaplains. The Armed Forces Chaplains Board, which falls under the purview of the Under Secretary of Defense for Personnel and Readiness, should request the NAMB to revisit and modify its “Guidelines” of 29 August 2013 so they comport with the law, military regulations and the long standing traditions of the Chaplain Corps. We call upon you to mandate good order and discipline within the Chaplain Corps through ethical standards of military courtesy, respectful cooperation and professional conduct. America's service members and their families deserve nothing less than excellence in ministry and service from all chaplains as they defend this great Nation.

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4 From its founding, members of the Chaplaincy Corps have followed the policy of “perform or provide” whereby if a chaplain cannot perform the requested service, he or she provides the service by enlisting the help of a fellow chaplain. The onus of getting the job done is on the chaplain, not on the requester of services.
Thank you for your positive consideration and immediate attention to this matter.

Very truly yours,

The Forum on the Military Chaplaincy

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Hon. Robert S. Taylor
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