

Hard-hit town enlists clergy's aid

Mayor says chaplains will get Harvey back on track, but some question plan's constitutionality

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Rev. Lance Davis now has two flocks: the worshipers at J. Claude Allen Christian Methodist Episcopal Church and residents of the 1st Ward in Harvey.

Davis is one of six Christian ministers appointed as city chaplains by Harvey's recently elected mayor; one for each of the south suburb's wards. The move – which experts say seems unprecedented for a U.S. municipality – puts Harvey on a potential collision course with civil libertarians who guard the principle of separation of church and state.

Mayor Eric J. Kellogg and his supporters say the ward chaplains are a desperately needed means for fighting crime and social disorder in a town of 30,000 that has been through some rough times.

“Last year, we had 11 murders, 42 rapes and over 800 car thefts,” said Davis. “We’re on the cutting edge of a crisis here.”

Kellogg says the usual crime-fighting tools – police, courts, prisons – are no match for the task. In fact, thinking about social problems in terms of government agencies, he says, masks the true nature of the issues.

“The major problem with contemporary society is that we’ve lost the spiritual dimension,” Kellogg said.

The municipal chaplains have two unpaid assignments in the predominantly African-American town. Alerted by police and fire departments when disaster strikes, Davis and his counterparts will offer street-level comfort to victims of crime. But they also are supposed to remind Harvey's residents of life's true meaning, at least as the mayor and his ministers see it.

“Lately, we’ve taken the attention off morality and focused on consumerism,” Davis said. “The ministry has to be an agent for social change.”

That is where the danger lies, according to Americans United for Separation of Church and State.

Governments do provide chaplains in certain circumstances, such as for prison inmates or military personnel, said Barry Lynn, executive director of the constitutional watchdog group. That is acceptable, he said, because those populations can't get to a church on their own.

But Harvey's mayor has taken the practice a large step further, Lynn argues, one that threatens the constitutional principle forbidding the establishment of an official religion.

“The idea that a mayor can decide that everybody needs spiritual help and that the government is going to furnish it – that’s unparalleled,” said Lynn, a minister in the United Church of Christ. “It’s not up to a mayor to start appointing Christian ministers to his constituents.”

All the Harvey chaplains are Christian, though Kellogg says he is looking for a rabbi and a Muslim clergyman.

Town’s growth, changes

At the end of the 19th Century, Harvey was a prosperous working-class community, locally known as the “Magic City” and home to European immigrants.

Over the years Harvey developed a blue-collar reputation supported by a dozen factories, which enabled residents to build and buy homes. It had a thriving business strip anchored by a J.C. Penney.

That department store is gone. So, too, are the factories, leaving Harvey with an 11 percent unemployment rate. Many of the remaining jobs are in the lower-paying service industry, notes Rev. James Sims, chaplain for the 3rd Ward. He reports that many of Harvey’s young people are tempted to take a short cut to prosperity by dealing drugs.

When other resources are slim, Sims adds, it is necessary for a community to fall back on its proven strengths. And Harvey has about 50 churches in or near its 6.1 square miles.

“In the black community, the church traditionally plays a formative role,” Sims said.

Some say that if black ministers took the lead in fighting segregation, they now can be point men for the war on crime and drugs in a municipality with an estimated 88 percent minority population.

James Wall, who for 28 years served as editor of *Christian Century*, a forum for mainstream churches, is sympathetic to that view. The issue of separation of church and state has been debated in the magazine’s pages.

Wall said he would leave it to the courts to decide any legal issues raised by the chaplains. He sees the mayor’s project from a different perspective.

“What’s needed in extraordinary times is extraordinary actions,” said Wall. “If the mayor feels the town’s residents need spiritual guidance, I’m not bothered by that.

Program draws fire

The American Civil Liberties Union is.

Ed Yohnka, spokesman for the organization's Chicago office, said the ACLU is not impressed with Kellogg's argument that because the chaplains are unpaid, they don't represent an unwarranted intrusion of government into the realm of religion.

"The Police Department is going to summon a clergy person, of whatever faith, to someone's home, who many not have requested that," Yohnka said. "That flies in the face of the American tradition of not having the government tell citizens how to – or how not to – observe religious traditions."

A key decision by the U.S. Supreme Court on the issue of church and state came in the 1971 case of *Lemon vs. Kurtzman*, he noted. The court found it unconstitutional for the state to reimburse parochial schools for the non-religious portion of their students' education. Because parochial schools propagate a specific faith, giving them money creates an improper "entanglement" of church and state, the court said.

"Under our system, the choice has been made that government is to be entirely excluded from the area of religious instruction and churches excluded from the affairs of government," wrote Chief Justice Warren Burger.

Yohnka argues that Harvey's program seems to run counter to that decision because it aims to fight crime by having government chaplains preach a return to religion.

The mayor counters that the concept of separation of church and state isn't a cure-all; if anything, it is part of the problem his community confronts. Kellogg, also an assistant school superintendent, noted that court decisions have banned classroom prayers in public schools.

"Our children are denied spirituality and lead stunted lives," he said. "I feel that it's the responsibility of the schools and the government to provide knowledge in this area. That's what the chaplains program is about."