

FREEDOM FROM RELIGION *foundation*

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September 21, 2010

**SENT VIA MAIL AND FAX
(910) 432-0520**

Lieutenant General Frank Helmick
Commanding General
XVIII Airborne Corps and Fort Bragg
2175 Reilly Road, Stop A
Fort Bragg NC 28310

RE: "Fort Bragg Rock the Fort" a First Amendment Violation

Dear Lieutenant General Helmick:

I am writing on behalf of complainants who are service members at Fort Bragg, as well as on behalf of the national membership of the Freedom From Religion Foundation, to alert you to serious concerns with an upcoming evangelical Christian event on your base. The Foundation is a nationwide nonprofit educational organization more than 15,500 members, including currently active service members and veterans of the Army. FFRF's purpose is to safeguard the constitutional principle of separation between church and state, as well as the rights of nonreligious Americans.

It is our information and understanding that the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association and the Fort Bragg Garrison Religious Support Office are co-sponsoring "Fort Bragg Rock the Fort," on September 25, 2010. This event is scheduled to include a Christian concert, soul-winning speakers and devotional activities aimed in part at children and converts on the Main Post Parade Field. The overt purpose of this event is described by the association as sharing "a clear presentation of the Christian Gospel" and bringing "the Christian message to all of Fort Bragg and the surrounding community." While directed at military personnel it is also open to the public, and 10,000 people are expected to attend.

Fort Bragg is not an appropriate venue to host a proselytizing, evangelical festival. "Fort Bragg Rock the Fort" places the Army's imprimatur on a strictly evangelical Christian message. Fort Bragg, where our brave Army servicemen and women train and live, should not be used as a platform for outside sectarian religious organizations. The Billy Graham Evangelical Association has every right to privately conduct its evangelical mission. But it is incumbent upon Fort Bragg that it take every precaution to avoid the distasteful appearance that it is advancing, endorsing or preferring one religious belief over others, or religion over non-religion. The Billy Graham Evangelistic Association and Fort Bragg Religious Support Office are using

the Fort Bragg facilities and personnel to try to convert people of other faiths and nonbelievers to evangelical Christianity.

Service members are concerned about this event not only because its occurrence on base signifies the Army's inappropriate support of evangelical Christianity, but also because of the explicit calls for proselytizing. The promotional materials for "Rock the Fort" include information on "Christian Life and Witness Courses" that advocate preaching at nonbelievers, and a "God Rocks concert." The webpage for the event includes a page promoting "Five ways that Rock the Fort can benefit your church." That page includes the following statements:

"The Christian Life and Witness Course will teach members of your congregation how to effectively share their faith and serve as counselors and disciple-makers for Rock the Fort."

"Jesus' mandate to disciple the nations is still in effect (Matt.28:19). The Rock the Fort outreach is designed to channel new believers into your church, so you can encourage them to further spiritual growth. The future of the church lies in reaching and discipling the next generation."

"Participate in Bring a Friend, a simple plan to reach those who need Jesus Christ."

Service members should not feel pressured into particular religious beliefs with the tacit approval of the Army. Our country and our military include many nonChristians and nonbelievers, whose freedom of conscience must be respected. The nonreligious population of the U.S. is 15% (American Religious Identification Survey 2008) and 23.4% of all military personnel identified as atheist, agnostic or have no religious preference (2010 MAAF study based on Department of Defense data). While nonChristians and nonbelievers are fighting to protect the freedoms for all Americans, it would appear their freedom of conscience is being trampled upon.

Military chaplains in the Fort Bragg Religious Support Office are employed to *accommodate* the religious practices of service members, not to *impose* religious practices on the public at large and servicemen and women at large. The Fort Bragg Rock the Fort webpage advertises: "Attendees will have an opportunity to respond to the Gospel Evangelistic message, be encouraged by Fort Bragg Chaplains and trained counselors from off post Churches and on post Chapels, and then be offered ongoing Biblical Spiritual Resiliency training at our military chapels and local churches." This gives the unfortunate appearance that Fort Bragg itself is part of not only one soul-winning event, but ongoing religious indoctrination of military staff and the public at large.

It is troubling that children are a target of Fort Bragg Rock the Fort events. Not only is there a "family fun event" and a large area designated as "Kiddie Land," but a presentation by "God Rocks," described as a "children ministry" created to "Energize

Kids with the Good News!" and teach "kids important lessons from the Bible in a fun way." Clearly, there should be no perception of military involvement or endorsement of the Christian proselytization of children, something which properly should be the role only of parents or private religious agencies.

This event does not appear to be in compliance with all Department of Defense policies. It is impermissible for the Army to give any form of preferential treatment to the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association. *See* 5 C.F.R. § 2635.101(b)(8); *see also* DoD Directive 5410.18 (4.2.4.1.5). "Rock the Fort" materials show that the event will be taking over the entire Main Post Parade Field, complete with space for a stage, tents, vendors, dumpsters, toilets, etc. The event also invites thousands of off-base civilians to attend. We question whether any other private organization would be granted similar license to use Fort Bragg facilities to further a personal and exclusionary religious agenda. Consider the cost to taxpayers of thousands of outside vehicles undergoing the required security search at several access points, and the cost of monitoring up to 10,000 visitors who must present an ID card and vehicle registration to gain admittance.

It is noteworthy that the website promoting "Rock the Fort," www.grahamfestivals.com, is directly affiliated with Franklin Graham, son of Billy Graham. Franklin Graham was disinvited from speaking at a Pentagon event earlier this year because of inflammatory comments Graham made about Islam, calling it an "evil" and "wicked" religion. Army co-sponsorship of events tied to the divisive views of Franklin Graham should be of concern to our military leaders, given the current theo-political climate.

We respectfully request that you take immediate steps to investigate how the event was approved for Fort Bragg facilities, and why Fort Bragg personnel are allowed to partner with a Christian evangelical group to openly proselytize. Immediate action is necessary to end impermissible preferential treatment, and the inevitable appearance of military sponsorship and endorsement of a Christian evangelical event.

May we hear from you in writing at your earliest convenience about what steps you are taking to cancel Fort Bragg's inappropriate partnership with the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association and ensure there is no such future entanglement?

Very truly



Annie Laurie Gaylor
Co-President

cc: Secretary Robert Gates