

# Escondido

**BIBLE**

## ESCONDIDO: Veterans Affairs police chief wins fight over religious expression



17 HOURS AGO • BY TOM PFINGSTEN FOR THE NORTH COUNTY TIMES

The chief of police for San Diego's Veterans Affairs health care system is back on the job after being suspended for sharing two Bible verses during a staff meeting in February, prompting a professional inquiry, and then a backlash over the boundaries of religious expression in a federal workplace.

Alvin Pittman, who describes himself as an African American Messianic Jew, said the row started after a morning meeting with three subordinates ---- all of whom he said

had previously professed to be Christians.

Although serving as the English-speaking pastor of a Korean church in La Mesa, Pittman said he had never shared Scripture in a work meeting before, and soon received a cease-and-desist letter. The notice was followed by his suspension as chief and an inquiry by the VA's Administrative Investigation Board.

Pittman assumed command of security at all of the county's Veterans Affairs facilities in 1999. He said he took pride in his leadership and was blindsided by the allegations that he had discriminated against anyone, especially given the nature of the verses he read that morning.

"They dealt with character building and encouragement ---- nothing negative, more like motivational," Pittman said during an interview with the North County Times. "That's who I am as a person, and ... it's what I believe has made me an effective police chief."

A husband and father of two grown children, including a son in the Army, Pittman has lived in Escondido for six years.

He returned to his post in June after being cleared of all charges.

Veterans Affairs spokeswoman Cindy Butler confirmed that Pittman is the acting chief of police, but declined to comment for this article, citing personnel privacy rules.

"There is, generally in our culture, and definitely in the federal government, increasing hostility toward religious expression ---- but that doesn't make it right," said Dean Broyles, president of the National Center for Law & Policy in Escondido, who took Pittman's case

and helped him get the charges rescinded. "Whatever the current climate is, we have something called the Constitution."

Broyles said he was especially startled when the investigation board refused to reveal the specific charges behind the investigation: "They basically said, 'You're going to have to figure it out from the questions we ask him,'" recalled Broyles. "We asked in writing ... and they did not respond. They claimed that was part of the process."

"The questioning was really focused on his religious expressions in the workplace, including the proverbs he cited and his own personal devotions before he started work," he said.

So Broyles drafted a demand letter with allegations of his own ---- specifically, that the VA had violated Pittman's First Amendment rights.

"The First Amendment explicitly protects individuals from the federal government," Broyles said. "So if you have somebody in a federal workplace expressing their beliefs in a nice, respectful way, that is not forbidden. You can't use religion as a weapon, so to speak, but you clearly can express religious speech."

Broyles called the case an example of overreaction based on exaggerated religious sensitivity.

"It's one thing to say, 'So-and-so used their religion as a hammer in the workplace' or 'He's beating me over the head with a Bible verse.' It's another thing for his supervisors to take that claim and then kick him out of his office, suspend him and treat him like it's some nasty sexual harassment claim," Broyles said. "I was surprised that the VA did this to him, with his 22 years of service in the system."

Meanwhile, after his first few days back on the job, Pittman said he was treading lightly around the office.

"I think it will take a while to get back to normal, because it was a very humiliating and embarrassing thing," he said. "We're figuring things out and readjusting. I'm just kind of being very careful what I do and what I say, because I don't think this is the end of this chapter."

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