

Two San Diego court employees suing over Bible study

by Greg Moran & Angelica Martinez

SAN DIEGO, Calif. - Two San Diego court employees are suing the Superior Court because they say they have been prohibited from holding a lunch-hour Bible study in the courthouse.

The federal civil rights suit alleges court officials unfairly denied the group's request to meet in an empty courtroom or jury deliberation room.

The lawsuit says the Bible study group had met in the courthouse regularly since 2000, but in April 2006, court officials banned the meeting, saying it violated court policy.

Mindy Barlow, one of two plaintiffs, said Tuesday that the lawsuit isn't about money.

"I'm simply asking the judicial system to allow my co-members of our Bible study to meet as we are constitutionally guaranteed to meet," Barlow said.

The court is reviewing the complaint, said Michael Roddy, the court's executive officer.

Barlow, a court reporter at the courthouse since 2000, said the group was given verbal permission to meet for Bible study once a week when it first started its meetings.

Last spring, the group of about 10 people was abruptly told that its members - including courthouse employees and nonemployees - were no longer permitted to meet in the courthouse, Barlow said.

The lawsuit, filed Tuesday by lawyers with the national religious-liberties law firm Advocates for Faith and Freedom, says that it was only after Barlow asked to see the court's policy that the court adopted a written policy on the use of court facilities by outside groups in November 2006.

When the Bible study group applied to use a courtroom under that policy, its request was rejected. Court officials first said the request was denied because allowing the group to meet would violate the constitutional separation of church and state, according to the suit.

Jennifer L. Monk, an attorney with Advocates for Faith and Freedom, said that argument wasn't valid because other government buildings are used as meeting sites for Bible study.

Court officials later changed their reasoning. In a letter sent to one of the plaintiffs in March, the court said the group couldn't meet in the courthouse because "the premises of the court are not public" and because the Bible group doesn't "advance the administration of justice."

But the court allows other groups, such as Weight Watchers, to use court facilities for meetings, the lawsuit contends.

The Bible group now meets in Barlow's small, private office at the courthouse.

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