

EEOC accuses Catholic college of discrimination in health care plan

WASHINGTON - The U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission has sided with claims from eight employees at Belmont Abbey College in Belmont, N.C., that the institution's 2007 decision not to offer employees coverage of prescription contraceptives discriminates against women.

The July 30 letter from the EEOC effectively reverses an earlier ruling in March, when the commission issued a "Dismissal and Notice of Rights" determination letter stating it was closing its file on the discrimination charge.

The new letter said that "by denying prescription contraceptive drugs," the Catholic college "is discriminating based on gender because only females take oral prescription contraceptives. By denying coverage, men are not affected, only women."

Belmont Abbey President William K. Thierfelder issued a statement Aug. 14 expressing his disappointment in the EEOC determination, but said he was confident the college will be vindicated in the long run.

The EEOC wants the college to work out an amicable solution with the complainants or suggested court action could be taken. The college wants the EEOC to reconsider its most recent findings.

Thierfelder said the college is adhering to Catholic teaching against artificial contraception and exercising the freedom of religion guaranteed by the U.S. Constitution.

The North Carolina college - founded by Benedictine monks - made changes in 2007 in its health care coverage, which now excludes oral contraceptives, abortions, vasectomies and tubal ligations, prompting eight employees to file a discrimination complaint with the EEOC.

The employees also said the college had retaliated against them, because Thierfelder

sent out an e-mail message to faculty, staff and students identifying by name the people who had filed the complaint, according to a published report. The complainants are six men and two women.

In a March 5 letter, the EEOC determined that e-mail could be construed as retaliation, because “a chilling effect was created on the campus whereby other faculty and staff members would be reluctant to file a charge of discrimination with the commission against the respondent for fear that their name would be in a memo from the president to faculty and staff at the college.”

The EEOC has urged the college to work out an agreeable solution with the employees who complained, or face “court enforcement alternatives.”

In his statement, Thierfelder said the college’s administration, the board of trustees and the monastic community all agree with the school’s initial decision not to offer or subsidize abortion, voluntary sterilization and prescription contraceptives in its health care coverage.

“Belmont Abbey College rejects the notion that by following the moral teachings of the Catholic Church we are discriminating against anyone,” his statement reads. “We are simply and honestly exercising the freedom of religion that is protected by the Constitution.”

Catholic teaching rejects artificial contraception as the obstruction of the natural, divinely willed life-giving power of the conjugal act. According to that teaching, the only morally acceptable methods of birth regulation are those which utilize the woman’s natural periods of infertility.

Belmont Abbey will be asking the EEOC to reconsider each of the current determinations it has made in connection with the charges filed against the college, an official statement from the college said.

“The college is confident that its actions ultimately will be found to be in compliance with all federal and state laws and with the U.S. Constitution,” the statement said.

“We remain committed to ensuring that all of the college’s policies and practices follow the teachings of the Catholic Church, which includes valuing all life and

treating individuals with dignity and respect, and providing equal opportunities for all," it said.