

Aptos fire chief fails to snuff out Christmas candles

By MARY BETH LIBBEY

Candle lighting may be a symbol of hope and peace in the Christian faith, but in Aptos it violates the fire code.

And one pastor, who had his parishioners hold lighted candles while singing "Silent Night" on Christmas Eve, will have to explain the practice to the district attorney next week.

The Rev. John K. Tritenbach, pastor of St. Andrew Presbyterian Church, was cited by two Aptos firemen after the Christmas Eve service at his church on Monroe Ave. for violation of both the Aptos fire code and the state code covering public safety. The Rev. Mr. Tritenbach violated a state fire code section, adopted by the Aptos fire district in 1974, which requires that candles used in "religious or ritualistic ceremonies in churches or lodge halls shall be limited to areas that are out of reach or way of the occupants," according to Fire Captain Jack Sperow, one of the two firemen who served the citation.

And Sperow said because the church's ceremony required that everyone in the church hold candles during the ceremony, the Rev. Mr. Tritenbach was in violation of the code.

Sperow said when the fire department was contacted about the nature of the ceremony about a week before Christmas, Fire Chief Richard Chinn contacted the pastor. The pastor told him that he intended to go through with the ceremony as planned.

(This version of their conversation was confirmed in a letter the Rev. Mr. Tritenbach sent to his parishioners. Both Chinn and the pastor were out of town and could not be reached for comment this morning.)

Then Chinn called the state fire marshal's office on the matter and a deputy marshal visited the Rev. Mr. Tritenbach a few days before Christmas and again advised him of the state code.

Chinn then notified the pastor in writing that he would be cited if he went through with the candle lighting ceremony as planned and Sperow visited the pastor again the

day before Christmas Eve, reiterating the code provisions.

On the night of the service, Sperow and Capt. Bob Thompson watched the service as those attending were handed unlighted candles as they entered the church. Sperow said at a point in the service, two candlelighters went down the aisle lighting the candle held by the person standing next to the aisle in each pew. That person then lit the candle of the next person in the pew until all the candles were lit, Sperow said. Then, the congregation of about 175 sang "Silent Night" and blew out the candles, according to Sperow.

Sperow and Thompson waited until everyone left and served the citation on the Rev. Mr. Tritenbach.

In the letter to church members, the Rev. Mr. Tritenbach said that he does not deny what the law says nor "Mr. Chinn's duty to enforce that law as he interprets it."

However, the pastor added, "My point is simply that when the issues focus on traditional forms of public worship, the fire chief and any other government official oversteps his or her responsibilities by attempting to impose unusual restrictions."

"... The basic issue," he continued, "is one of freedom to worship within our tradition quite aside from the highly distasteful experience of being threatened with having a sheriff at the church door. It has been a unique experience for me, in this Christmas season, to have received this citation..."

The Rev. Mr. Tritenbach said the church had gone to considerable trouble and expense in the past year to bring the building up to the standards of the fire code, such as fire-proofing drapes, posting no-smoking and room capacity signs, etc.

Last year about this time, some controversy over Chinn's administration erupted after the fire department inspected Poor Clare's convent in Aptos and told the sisters they must stop carrying candles in the processions as well as make some costly improvements to the convent for fire safety reasons.