

PRAY TO PLAY

Christian coaches and chaplains are converting football fields into mission fields

Executive Summary

In its “Pray to Play” report, the Freedom From Religion Foundation exposes the embedded chaplaincies within public university football programs. Through extensive public records requests and research conducted over the past year, FFRF analyzes the religion problem within some of the major football programs in the country.

The report highlights the unique player-coach relationship and the coercive power that college football coaches wield when it comes to religion. Coaches control scholarships, playing time, and prospects for future careers. FFRF interviewed one atheist player for the report who said “there is so much competition and everybody’s so talented, that you look for the littlest thing to give you an edge.” At some schools, entire teams participate in prayers and attend chapel services because of coach control. One atheist player said he was scared not to go to chapel services and reported wanting “to make sure I had my face there.”

Evangelical Christian coaches at many schools have created religious chaplaincies. These coaches portray chaplains as members of the coaching staff. Chaplains themselves take on this powerful position, mixing the roles of coach, parent, and minister, all while promoting their personal religion to athletes.

Public Universities are bankrolling Christian ministers

FFRF uncovered the extent of school compensation given to religious leaders through public records requests. Whether through direct payments, school-financed travel, or special perks, chaplains receive publicly-subsidized compensation.

At **Georgia Tech**, Chaplain Derrick Moore was paid \$7,500 under his contract for the 2014 season. Based on school records, it appears that he has received more than \$43,000 from Georgia Tech since 2011. At the **University of South Carolina**, Chaplain Adrian Despres is paid \$4,500 despite a school policy that says “A chaplain may not be remunerated by the Athletics Department...” **Clemson** Coach Dabo Swinney made arrangements with a donor in 2011 to provide \$2,500 annually for a chaplain.

Chaplains also have been granted lucrative per diem payments. At the **University of Missouri**, the chaplains and their wives received per diems totaling \$840 for meals at the Cotton Bowl in 2014. In addition, the school provided team flights to both chaplains, their wives, and six children. **Virginia Tech’s** chaplain received \$475 for meals at the 2013 Sun Bowl for himself, his wife, and daughter. He signed a statement certifying that such meals were “incurred on official business of the Commonwealth of Virginia and included only such expenses as were necessary in the conduct of that business.”

In order to bolster chaplain compensation, public universities have become willing participants in fundraising for chaplains. A Fellowship of Christian Athletes report submitted to the **University of Washington** detailed a plan for the university to give FCA donors “soft credit for the donation” since “FCA essentially gives the money back to the university by supplying” religious programming. The report called for 10 donors to give \$10,000 each. “Investors” would be “invited to partake in a chapel session and a team meeting the night before team competition.”

Ole Miss Coach Hugh Freeze helped hawk Ole Miss licensed gear to raise money for the chaplain. In a letter to fans, he noted that 30% of Ole Miss products purchased at www.alumni-shop.com would be donated to an FCA chaplain fund.

Chaplains are integrated into teams

No matter how chaplaincies are set up, the chaplains are treated as an official part of the university and team. Chaplains often attend team events, host team chapel services, lead teams in prayers, travel with the team, patrol the sideline, wear team apparel, have special access to coaches and players, help with recruiting, and have athletic department offices. The player interviewed by FFRF said the chaplain at his school is 100% “fully integrated member of the football team itself.”

At **Auburn University**, Chaplain Chette Williams even has his own webpage on the Auburn Football website. Williams has bragged about baptizing Auburn players, including baptizing more than 20 players during his first six years.

Using religion as a recruiting tool

To bolster recruiting, some schools give the chaplain a formal, paid position or other contract. Former Clemson Coach Tommy Bowden noted that having a Christian message “was a tremendous recruiting advantage.” Chaplains at **Clemson** and **South Carolina** are specifically paid for recruiting duties. This is no doubt to help shield the school from NCAA violations if unofficial chaplains had unpermitted contacts with recruits. A Pac-12 compliance official noted this concern to **Washington** athletic staff: “We’ve had a violation before when a team chaplain who was not an institutional employee met with a PSA [prospective student-athlete]’s parents during a[n] official visit weekend.”

Bobby Bowden, Tommy Tuberville, and the FCA: an unholy alliance

FFRF’s report includes an in-depth review of the spread of chaplains in collegiate programs. The modern college football chaplain comes from Bobby Bowden, Tommy Tuberville, and the Fellowship of Christian Athletes. Together, they spawned many college football chaplaincies including Georgia, Clemson, South Carolina, Mississippi State, Ole Miss., Auburn, and are even responsible for training many other school chaplains.

The effect of chaplaincies is to impose religion on players

The words of coaches and chaplains make clear that their purpose is to instill Christianity in vulnerable young men. **Georgia** Chaplain Kevin Hynes has said, “Our message at Georgia doesn’t change, and that’s to preach Christ and Him crucified, it’s to win championships for the state of Georgia and win souls for the Kingdom of God, so we’re going to continue down that path.” **Ole Miss** Coach Hugh Freeze’s wife has commented that his passion “is to use football to reach others for Christ.”

Lack of school policies and model policy proposed

Most universities do not have policies regarding chaplains. They set no limitations, guidelines, or expectations for their coaches or chaplains regarding religious activities. Chaplains who appear to be school employees, are given access as school employees, and act as school employees inflict the same legal liability on schools as any other employee. FFRF’s report cautions that it is in the best interest of public universities to adopt policies that protect student athletes from discrimination and unlawful religious coercion. FFRF provides a model proposed policy to protect student rights of conscience and to protect public universities from legal liability.