

FREEDOM FROM RELIGION *foundation*

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July 3, 2019

**SENT VIA EMAIL AND U.S. MAIL: mayorlewis@mtvernon.com,
councilmanbotch@mtvernon.com, councilmanrippy@mtvernon.com,
councilmanmoore@mtvernon.com, councilmanyounge@mtvernon.com**

The Honorable John Lewis
Mayor, City of Mt. Vernon
City Hall
1100 Main Street
Mt. Vernon, IL 62864

Re: Unconstitutional Promotion and Endorsement of Christianity

Dear Mayor Lewis and City Council Members:

I am writing on behalf of the Freedom From Religion Foundation (FFRF) regarding a proclamation issued by the City of Mount Vernon on June 20, 2019 that promoted and endorsed Christianity, as well as, a specific Christian revival event, "Fire in the Heartland." FFRF is a national nonprofit organization with more than 31,000 members across the country, including more than 1,000 members in Illinois. Our purposes are to protect the constitutional principle of separation between state and church, and to educate the public on matters relating to nontheism.

Multiple concerned area residents have reported that on June 20, 2019, the City of Mount Vernon issued an official proclamation that promoted and endorsed Christianity, a Christian organization, and a Christian revival event:

Whereas the City of Mount Vernon, Illinois **stands with the church and the outside entity of Groundbreaker International**, and;

Whereas the City of Mount Vernon, Illinois **recognizes the biblical five-fold ministry of apostles, prophets, teachers, pastors, and evangelists**, and;

Whereas the Mayor and the City Council welcome our guests from all over the United States **to freely reach the lost, hurting, sick, and afflicted with the gospel of Jesus Christ**, and;

Whereas on this day of the twentieth of June in the year 2019, **we renounce the spiritual attacks over this city, Mount Vernon Illinois, and we give spiritual authority to [sic] back to God who created us**, and;

Whereas we proclaim this day, a day of freedom as **we recognize God in our City and the ministries that have come to serve**, and;

Now, Therefore I, John Lewis, Mayor of the City of Mt. Vernon, Illinois, welcomes “Fire in the Heartland” to our community.

“Fire in the Heartland” is a religious revival hosted by Groundbreaker International. Groundbreaker International “is all about spreading the fire of revival to every tribe, tongue, and nation.”¹ Its mission “is to dig new wells of revival and help cultivate and stone the fires that already exist...” by “winning the lost, seeing the demoniacs delivered, the sick healed, and the Holy Spirit being poured out on all flesh.”²

Groundbreaker International reports that during this event, which was promoted and endorsed by the City of Mount Vernon through this proclamation, four people were “filled with the Holy Spirit with the evidence of speaking in tongues.” Groundbreaker International also reports that many people were healed during this revival event including people suffering from “thyroid lumps, fibromyalgia pain, bronchitis, and many other ailments.” We also understand that organizers of this event prayed over Mayor Lewis after this proclamation was signed. Please see the enclosed screenshots.

While we recognize that the City may acknowledge local organizations and events, it cannot explicitly promote and endorse Christianity, a Christian organization, and a Christian revival event.

After this proclamation was issued, Groundbreaker International, posted a photo celebrating the proclamation on its Facebook page. Many community members commenting on its posting clearly viewed this proclamation as an endorsement of the organization and Christianity:

So happy to see Mayor Lewis of Mt Vernon stepping out in faith and upholding Christian values, in the State of Illinois

Love it! May God pour out His unfathomable blessings on this city that publicly honors Him!!!!

Very cool. If only we could get other mayors across this nation to do the same. It starts with one. All glory to God.

This proclamation alienates nonreligious and non-Christian citizens in Mount Vernon by turning them into political outsiders in their own community, including the 24% of

¹ <https://www.ericburtonministries.org/copy-of-about>

² *Id.*

Americans, and 38% of Americans born after 1987, who do not identify with any religion.³

The City's official endorsement of Christianity and the views of a Christian organization and revival event is a serious constitutional separation of state and church violation. The Establishment Clause of the First Amendment to the United States Constitution prohibits the government from endorsing, advancing, or promoting religion. Therefore, it is illegal and inappropriate for the City to proclaim its official support for Christianity and specific Christian organizations. The Supreme Court has said time and again "mandates government neutrality between religion and religion, and between religion and nonreligion." *McCreary Cnty., Ky. v. Am. Civil Liberties Union of Ky.*, 545 U.S. 844, 860 (2005); *Wallace v. Jaffree*, 472 U.S. 38, 53 (1985); *Epperson v. Ark.*, 393 U.S. 97, 104 (1968); *Everson v. Bd. of Educ. of Ewing*, 330 U.S. 1, 15-16 (1947).

The separation between state and church is among one of the most fundamental principles of our system of government. The United States Supreme Court has held that public officials may not seek to advance or promote religion. The Supreme Court has specifically stated, "If there is any fixed star in our constitutional constellation, it is that no official, high or petty, can prescribe what shall be orthodox in politics, nationalism, religion, or other matters of opinion or force citizens to confess by word or act their faith therein." *W. Va. Bd. of Educ. v. Barnette*, 319 U.S. 624, 642 (1943).

As elected officials, you are charged with great responsibility and have been given significant trust by your citizens, including those citizens who may not share your religious viewpoints. We ask that the City of Mount Vernon refrain from issuing proclamations that endorse a specific religious viewpoint or religious organization again in the future. Please inform us in writing of the steps you are taking to uphold the constitutional separation between state and church.

Sincerely,



Christopher Line
Patrick O'Reiley Legal Fellow
Freedom From Religion Foundation

Enclosures

³ Robert P. Jones & Daniel Cox, *America's Changing Religious Identity*, PUBLIC RELIGION RESEARCH INSTITUTE (Sept. 6, 2017), available at www.prii.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/PRRI-Religion-Report.pdf.

CITY OF MT. VERNON

PROCLAMATION

WHEREAS the City of Mount Vernon, Illinois stands with the church and the outside entity of Groundbreaker International, and;

WHEREAS the City of Mount Vernon, Illinois recognizes the biblical five-fold ministry of apostles, prophets, teachers, pastors, and evangelists, and;

WHEREAS the Mayor and the City Council welcome our guests from all over the United States to freely reach the lost, hurting, sick, and afflicted with the gospel of Jesus Christ, and;

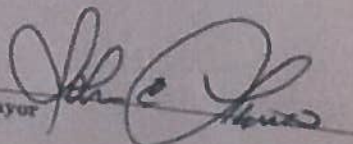
WHEREAS on this day of the twentieth of June in the year 2019, we renounce the spiritual attacks over this city, Mount Vernon Illinois, and we give spiritual authority to back to God who created us, and;

WHEREAS we proclaim this day, a day of freedom as we recognize God in our City and the ministries that have come to serve, and;

NOW, THEREFORE I, John Lewis, Mayor of the City of Mt. Vernon, Illinois, welcomes "Fire in the Heartland" to our community.



Witness whereof I have hereunto set my hand and caused the seal of this City to be affixed.

Mayor 

FIRE IN THE HEARTLAND IGNITES IN THE HEARTS OF SOUTHERN IL!

I am really at a loss for words as to what occurred this past weekend. Here are some quick stats:

- At least 13 answered a salvation altar call (includes baseball clinics)
- 4 filled with the Holy Spirit with the evidence of speaking in tongues
- Mayoral proclamation signed has reached over 60,000 people as of this post
- Many people's bodies were healed including, thyroid lumps, fibromyalgia pain, bronchitis, and many other ailments
- Prophetic words for the region flowed
- Several reports of deliverance from their past
- The region has been ignited in outpouring

There has been much more occur as well. Thank you to all that helped, supported, gave, and labored. This region will never be the same!

We will be going back in two weeks for outpouring services in the region! July 7th! More to come! Woowowowowowo! Praise God!



