

FREEDOM FROM RELIGION *foundation*

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June 18, 2019

VIA EMAIL & U.S. MAIL: assemblymember.dahle@assembly.ca.gov

Senator Brian Dahle
California State Capitol
P.O. Box 942849
Sacramento, CA 94249-0001

VIA EMAIL & U.S. MAIL: jwinter@cityofredding.org

Mayor Julie Winter
City of Redding
P. O. Box 496071
Redding, CA 96049-6071

Re: Faith and Values Town Hall

Dear Senator Dahle and Mayor Winter:

I am writing on behalf of the Freedom From Religion Foundation (FFRF). FFRF is a national nonprofit organization with more than 31,000 members nationwide, including more than 4,000 members in California. FFRF's purposes are to protect the constitutional separation between state and church, and to educate the public on issues relating to nontheism.

Several citizens reported to us that you organized and participated in a "Faith & Values Town Hall" held in the Little Country Church in Redding on Thursday, June 13, 2019 at 5:30 – 7:00 pm. At that time, Mr. Dahle had already been sworn in as a state senator and Ms. Winter was acting in her capacity as Mayor of Redding. A Christian flag flanked the stage. The invite to the event read:

Christians from local churches are invited to a Faith & Values Town Hall with your newly elected Senator, Brian Dahle, moderated by Redding Mayor, Julie Winter.

There are particular values that those of the Christian faith care deeply about as they shape the society and culture of our cities, states, and nation. Because it can be difficult to know who our elected officials are, and what

policies and legislation they are voting for on our behalf, many Christians have chosen to simply pray for the nation. Prayer is vital, but in addition to prayer, all citizens — including those of faith — are encouraged to be informed as they participate in the basics of their civic duties.

Whether you consider yourself Republican, Independent, Democrat, or unaffiliated, bring your questions or come hear the conversation at this unique and respectful gathering.

At the forum itself Senator Dahle said, “I did not win this race. God won this race. If I wasn't supposed to be in the Senate, I wouldn't be in the Senate.”

We write to you both because this town hall was divisive, inappropriate, and projected an intent to deliberately discriminate against non-Christians. We've seen your attempts to claim the event was open to all, but they are belied by location and invitation. The event was held in a church and the invitation invited “Christians from local churches.” It focused on “faith and values” and “Christians” who were mentioned three times in the invitation.

The Supreme Court has said time and again that the First Amendment “mandates governmental neutrality between religion and religion, and between religion and nonreligion.” *McCreary Cty., 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. Arkansas*, 393 U.S. 97, 104 (1968); *Everson v. Bd. of Educ. of Ewing*, 330 U.S. 1, 15–16 (1947). Holding a town hall for citizens of one particular religion runs afoul of this simple principle. Both of you were elected to represent “We the People,” not “those of the Christian faith,” as the invitation put it.

Anyone is free, of course, to attend church, worship, and even speak at a church as a private citizen. But neither of you appeared at this event as a private citizen and the event itself was organized so private citizens could meet their elected representatives. Dividing those citizens along religious lines—into a favored class of church-going Christians with everyone else as second class citizens—is wildly inappropriate and shows poor judgment that bodes ill for your constituents.

According to reports, Senator Dahle also said, “We have freedom of speech and I think they have the right as well as I have the right to promote the things that I believe in.”¹ This is true to a certain extent, but not absolute. You cannot use a government office to promote your personal religious beliefs.

¹ “Redding Town Hall receives criticism after “Christian Only” meeting.” 14 Jun. 2019, <http://www.actionnewsnow.com/content/news/Redding-Town-Hall-receives-criticism-after-Christian-Only-meeting-511306862.html>. Accessed 18 Jun. 2019.

You would both do well to remember this: In your personal capacity you can freely exercise your religion as you see fit. In your official capacity as officers of the government, you are bound by the Establishment Clause and cannot abuse that office to promote your personal religious beliefs. The power, title, resources, and prestige of those offices belong to all the people—not to Christians and not to the temporary occupant of that office. You are but stewards.

I look forward to your written assurances that future events you organize, host, or attend will not divide citizens along religious lines and that you will not use public offices to promote your personal religions.

Sincerely,



Andrew L. Seidel
Director of Strategic Response