

# FREEDOM FROM RELIGION *foundation*

P.O. BOX 750 · MADISON, WI 53701 · (608) 256-8900 · WWW.FFRF.ORG

March 24, 2016

**SENT VIA EMAIL AND U.S. MAIL:  
commissioners@crawford-co.org**

Crawford County Commissioners  
Crawford County Courthouse  
112 E Mansfield St. Ste. 304  
Bucyrus, OH 44820

Re: Religious email signature

Dear Crawford County Commissioners:

I am writing on behalf of the Freedom From Religion Foundation (FFRF) to alert you to unconstitutional religious statements in an official government email signature. FFRF is a national nonprofit organization with more than 23,000 members across the country, including more than 500 members in Ohio and a local chapter, Northern Ohio Freethought Society. Our purpose is to protect the constitutional principle of separation between state and church.

A concerned local resident informed us that Crawford County Commissioner Jenny Vermillion has two inappropriate signature lines for her county email address (jennyv@crawford-co.org). The first of these is an Old Testament verse, Jeremiah 1:5,<sup>1</sup> along with the politically charged commentary, "Choose LIFE!!" The second is a quote that promotes religion over nonreligion and disparages atheists:

Atheism substitutes men for the Supreme Creator and this leads inevitably to domination and dictatorship. But we believe – and it is because we believe that God intends all men to be free and equal that we demand free government. Our Government is servant, not master, our chosen representatives are our equals, not our czars or commissars.  
Dwight D. Eisenhower 10/24/1954.

We are writing to request that these messages be removed from Vermillion's County email signature immediately.

First and foremost, the Establishment Clause of the First Amendment prohibits government sponsorship of religious messages. The Supreme Court has said time and again that the "First Amendment mandates government neutrality between

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<sup>1</sup> "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet to the nations." NRSV.

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. Arkansas*, 393 U.S. 97, 104 (1968); *Everson v. Bd. of Educ. of Ewing*, 330 U.S. 1, 15–16 (1947). This principle is violated when a government employee promotes religious messages on behalf of the County.

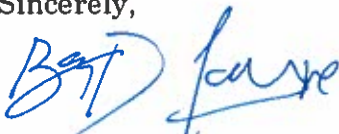
The statements of a County Commissioner, through her government email, are attributable to Crawford County. It is inappropriate and unconstitutional for the County or its agents to promote a religious message because it conveys government preference for religion over nonreligion. The Supreme Court has ruled, “[t]he Establishment Clause, at the very least, prohibits government from appearing to take a position on questions of religious belief.” *Cnty. of Allegheny v. Am. Civil Liberties Union Greater Pittsburgh Chapter*, 492 U.S. 573, 593–94 (1989).

The 23% of nonreligious American adults, including 35% of millennials,<sup>2</sup> should not be made to feel offended, excluded, and like “outsiders, not full members of the political community,” *McCreary*, 545 U.S. at 860 (citations omitted), because Crawford County employees are professing their personal religious preferences while speaking on behalf of the County. Religion is a divisive force and there is no reason to entangle it with official County business.

Besides endorsing religion over nonreligion, the signature lines at issue are inappropriate because they are politically charged and discriminatory, in violation of County policy. The statement “Choose Life!!” along with Jeremiah 1:5 sends a clear anti-abortion message, a political statement that encourages County residents to adopt Vermillion’s political cause. The other quote at issue directly disparages atheists. County policy prohibits employees from “Soliciting or recruiting others for . . . religious or political causes,” or from “disparaging others based on . . . religion . . . or political beliefs,” with their County email.<sup>3</sup> These are well-reasoned policies to avoid situations just like this.

Please ensure that Ms. Vermillion removes all religious references from her email signatures. We request written assurances that this violation has been resolved so that we may notify our complainant.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Ryan D. Jayne". The signature is stylized and cursive.

Ryan D. Jayne, Esq.  
Diane Uhl Legal Fellow  
Freedom From Religion Foundation

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<sup>2</sup> *America’s Changing Religious Landscape*, PEW RESEARCH CENTER (May 12, 2015), available at [www.pewforum.org/2015/05/12/americas-changing-religious-landscape/](http://www.pewforum.org/2015/05/12/americas-changing-religious-landscape/).

<sup>3</sup> Policy Manual, Section XXII(C), “Prohibited Use of Computers and Information Systems.”