

FREEDOM FROM RELIGION *foundation*

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SENT VIA EMAIL & U.S. MAIL

jyamashiro@dixieschooldistrict.org

Dr. Jason Yamashiro
Superintendent
Dixie School District
380 Nova Albion Way
San Rafael, CA 94903

Re: Unconstitutional Religious Field Trip

Dear Dr. Yamashiro:

I am writing on behalf of the Freedom From Religion Foundation regarding a problematic field trip planned by Dixie School District schools. We were contacted by a concerned district parent. FFRF is a national nonprofit organization with 30,000 members across the country, including 4,000 members in California and a chapter based in Sacramento. Our purposes are to protect the constitutional principle of separation between state and church and to educate the public on matters relating to nontheism.

It is our understanding that the district is planning a field trip for all district 5th graders to Alliance Redwoods Conference Grounds, a religious site. We understand that the issues in this letter—taking public schools to a retreat at an explicitly Christian camp—may have been raised to the Vallecito administration and that the school was not concerned. We write to point out the extensive facts that should concern any public school district contemplating a multi-day field trip to such a site.

ARCG has an overtly religious mission and discriminates against non-Christians.

ARCG is very clear that its mission is to provide a place “where our guests meet the Creator in his Creation.”¹ This is something the camp director reiterates in the promotional video.² It touts itself “as the perfect way to reconnect with God.”³ This is a religious goal, a ministerial goal. Indeed, ARCG considers itself a ministry.

To achieve this goal, ARCG discriminates in its hiring, refusing to hire any non-Christian. All ARCG employees “Must be in harmony with ARCG statement of faith and code of conduct.”⁴ Among other things, this statement includes claims such as: “The *Old and New Testaments*, inerrant as originally given, were verbally inspired by God and are a complete revelation of His will for the salvation of men. They constitute the divine and only rule of Christian faith and practice.”

¹ “Our Mission” <http://allianceredwoods.com/about-us.shtml>

² <https://youtu.be/FEHRZmuwEY?t=1m6s>

³ “Overview” <http://allianceredwoods.com/about-us.shtml>

⁴ See, e.g., Job Description for Front Desk Assistant, <http://www.allianceredwoods.com/pdfs/FirstAidProvider-FTBenefited-Sept201502.pdf>

In fact, the camp does not just discriminate against non-Christians, one must be the right kind of Christian, a “born-again Christian with a Biblical lifestyle and an interest in maturing in his/her faith.”⁵

On its website, ARCG requires applicants to disclose “any doctrinal beliefs or practices that might be considered controversial or questionable by ARCG or the Christian & Missionary Alliance as they relate to the Alliance Perspectives of Christian Faith” mentioned above.⁶ There is also a Statement of Faith reproduced on this page, which includes this: “All men are born with a sinful nature, are separated from the life of God, and can be saved only through the atoning work of the Lord Jesus Christ. The portion of the impenitent and unbelieving is existence forever in conscious torment; and that of the believer, in everlasting joy and bliss.”

Even the ARCG naturalists who teach public school students are required to be the right kind of Christian and subscribe to the Statement of Faith. This makes ARCG a troubling partner for school-sponsored retreats since, as you know, California Education Code § 220 prohibits discrimination on the basis of disability, gender, gender identity, gender expression, nationality, race or ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation.

An in-depth video produced by ARCG explains that it deliberately targets children for conversion. After showcasing personal stories of people whom the camp has converted, the video explains that “statistics clearly point out that 85% of those who come to Christ today are doing so under the age of 15. We want to change the world [so] we’re going to focus our efforts on those who are responding to the Gospel and camping is a safe place and a vehicle that accomplishes that.” A new speaker continues, “They’re going to come face to face with God that week. They’re going to have an opportunity to worship and they’re going to have an opportunity to build relationships with other Christians and hopefully they’re going to draw closer to the Lord and it’s going to take them back home changed and in a way that they’ll be able to take a piece of Alliance Redwoods with them home and share that, whether it be at school or in their neighborhoods—that piece of Jesus.”⁷

The atmosphere of the camp is deliberately religious and full of religious displays.

The camp promotional information is clear about the camp atmosphere and environment: “It will change your life because it’s a place that represents God first and foremost.”⁸

In keeping with this admission, many of the seemingly mundane aspects of the camp are infused with religion. Trail markings feature bible verses. These are prominently featured on the “about us” section of the ARCG website. One of these trail markers reads: “Ezekiel 43:2 And I saw the glory of the God of Israel coming from the east. His voice was like the roar of rushing waters and the land was radiant with His glory. #26” The dedication plaque on the Big Rock Lodge reads: “Dedicated to the LORD JESUS CHRIST ‘The Rock of our Salvation’ . . .” One of the zipline features is the “Leap of Faith.” In addition to selling candy and other mementos, the ARCG store sells religious paraphernalia, including religious t-shirts with Christian crosses. We even understand that the original sign for the camp reads: “Alliance Redwoods Christian Conference Grounds.”

⁵ See, e.g., job description for summer staff, http://www.allianceredwoods.com/pdfs/SummerStaffInl_ASTCrewnJobDescription.pdf or http://allianceredwoods.com/pdfs/Summer_Staff_Job_Description.pdf

⁶ <http://allianceredwoods.wufoo.com/forms/application-for-employment/>

⁷ <https://youtu.be/1oXsgBGY-F0> from 3:40 to 4:35

⁸ <https://youtu.be/1oXsgBGY-F0> at 9:15

The bridge that leads into camp is referred to as the “Bridge to Life” and the camp brags that tens of thousand of people cross the bridge each year and thousands “of them depart with new life in Christ.” In a video explaining the bridge and the camp, the indelibly religious aspects are made clear:⁹

Speaker 1: Twenty thousand people a year cross that bridge and a thousand of them return back across that bridge having found hope and new life in Christ.

Speaker 2: They sense something different here, it’s a spiritual element.

Speaker 1: That’s what we call the “Bridge to Life.” Something happens to them when they cross that bridge in this environment. God reveals himself through his creation, he reveals himself through other believers, and he reveals himself through his word.

Speaker 2: Thousands of people come across that bridge, come to know Christ.

Whatever secular education the camp provides is done in service of its religious mission.

All this makes it difficult to believe that the Christian staff in this deliberately Christian atmosphere will refrain from using their position as educators to attempt to sway children toward their religion. Our skepticism appears warranted. One promotional video includes testimony from children who said:¹⁰

- “I would definitely want to talk about Jesus because if they’re not Christians and they look at all the stuff, they will see, wow, maybe he really is real.”
- “You get to meet Jesus there and you get to hang out with your friends.”
- “You learn more about God or, if you’re not Christian, then you might go and become a Christian and have a new life with God.”
- “When you go to this camp, Jesus, if you give you’re heart to him, he’ll save you.”

In one newsletter, the executive director of the camp, Jim Blake, explains that ARCG hosts public schools for the evangelism opportunities:

This spring Alliance Redwoods ran Outdoor Education camps for over 4,000 public school students. When asked why we do this as a “Christian” camp I picture the scene in John Chapter 4. . . . In addition to teaching Creation stewardship, God often allows us to participate in our campers’ spiritual journeys as illustrated by the following . . . a family whose son attended an Outdoor Education camp this spring stopped to talk. . . . The Dad chimed in and said, “Our son has stopped his swearing...’cuz the Naturalist shared that Christians don’t talk like that. My wife and I have been so amazed by his change that we took our family to church on Easter Sunday and are starting to go to church. . . . You are an integral part of the support team helping to make it possible for us to “look at the fields” that Jesus said are “ripe for harvest!”¹¹

In another newsletter Blake reiterates this:

⁹ “Bridge to Life (2 min)” video, at <https://youtu.be/UTik0IP2dIQ>

¹⁰ <https://youtu.be/loXsgBGY-EO> from 3:43 to 5:05

¹¹ August 2011 Bridge to Life newsletter, <http://allianceredwoods.com/pdfs/BTL-1-LookattheFields.pdf>

This summer I overheard two adult cabin counselors discussing how their week at camp was going. Kevin was explaining that he was a middle school teacher who has attended outdoor education camp at Alliance Redwoods with his public school students for many years. He was now volunteering as a counselor with his church's youth group. He was telling the other counselor that he called the parents of three of his former middle school students to invite them to attend high school camp. The parents all basically responded, "*if that is the place you took them for science camp that would be great*". At this point I spoke up and asked if I could share what I was overhearing. One of Kevin's former students accepted Christ early in the week, another did business with God by midweek and the third, who arrived with false perceptions about Christians, met Christ in a life changing way by week's end! Kevin went on to tell me that he also brings students here for our canopy tour because our guides "*do a fantastic job of modeling Christ*". He expressed that Alliance Redwoods sets the stage for the kinds of spiritual breakthroughs he prays for! he prays for! Brian, the other counselor in the conversation, is a public school football coach and wondered if he could do team building here utilizing our canopy tour and other outdoor activities. Guess what I said? **God has entrusted Alliance Redwoods with powerful "pre-evangelism" tools, so together with volunteers like Kevin and Brian we can introduce searching students to the Creator in His Creation!**

Taking public school classes to this camp raises serious constitutional concerns.

It is well settled that public schools may not advance or promote religion. *See generally, Lee v. Weisman*, 505 U.S. 577 (1992); *Wallace v. Jaffree*, 472 U.S. 38 (1985); *Epperson v. Arkansas*, 393 U.S. 97 (1967); *Sch. Dist. of Abington Twp. v. Schempp*, 374 U.S. 203 (1963); *Engel v. Vitale*, 370 U.S. 421 (1962). Moreover, "the preservation and transmission of religious beliefs and worship is a responsibility and a choice committed to the private sphere." *Santa Fe Indep. Sch. Dist. v. Doe*, 530 U.S. 290, 310 (2000) (quoting *Lee v. Weisman*, 505 U.S. at 589).

Bringing public school students on a field trip to a religious camp promotes the religious message of that camp. "School sponsorship of a religious message is impermissible because it sends the ancillary message to . . . nonadherents 'that they are outsiders, not full members of the political community and an accompanying message to adherents that they are insiders, favored members of the political community.'" *Santa Fe*, 530 U.S. at 309-10 (2000) (quoting *Lynch v. Donnelly*, 465 U.S. at 668 (O'Connor, J., concurring)).

The fact that participation or attendance on these field trips is voluntary is not a valid safeguard. Courts have summarily rejected arguments that voluntariness excuses a constitutional violation. *See, generally, Lee*, 505 U.S. at 596 ("It is a tenet of the First Amendment that the State cannot require one of its citizens to forfeit his or her rights and benefits as the price of resisting conformance to state-sponsored religious practice."); *Schempp*, 374 U.S. at 288 (Brennan, J., concurring) ("Thus, the short, and to me sufficient, answer is that the availability of excusal or exemption simply has no relevance to the establishment question"); *Mellen v. Bunting*, 327 F.3d 355, 372 (4th Cir. 2003) ("VMI cannot avoid Establishment Clause problems by simply asserting that a cadet's attendance at supper or his or her participation in the supper prayer are 'voluntary.'"); *Jager v. Douglas County Sch. Dist.*, 862 F.2d 825, 832 (11th Cir. 1989) (" . . . whether the complaining individual's presence was voluntary is not relevant to the Establishment Clause analysis . . . The Establishment Clause focuses on the constitutionality of the state action, not on the choices made by the complaining individual.").

Certainly, the religious content of ARCG would not be permitted to exist in a public school. Likewise, facilities used for school activities must not contain proselytizing messages. “Regardless of the purpose of school administrators in choosing the location, the sheer religiosity of the space [can create] a likelihood that . . . students . . . [will] perceive a link between church and state. That is, the activity [will convey] a message of endorsement.” *Doe v. Elmbrook Sch. Dist.*, 687 F.3d 840, 853 (7th Cir. 2012), *cert. denied*, 134 S. Ct. 2283 (2014).

Similarly, the sheer religiosity of the ARCG space—a religiosity ARCG has actively cultivated and markets to religious clients—makes it inappropriate for public schools.

A Christian camp with an evangelistic mission that discriminates against non-Christian job applicants is a poor choice for a public school-sponsored field trip. The choice of this camp excludes non-Christians and nonreligious students. This presents a significant problem given that 35% of millennials are not religious.¹²

We ask that you investigate this immediately and inform us in writing of the steps you are taking to ensure that students rights of conscience are not violated. Thank you for your time and attention.

Sincerely,



Elizabeth Cavell
Associate Counsel

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¹² *America's Changing Religious Landscape*, PEW RESEARCH CENTER (May 12, 2015), available at www.pewforum.org/2015/05/12/americas-changing-religious-landscape/.