

# FREEDOM FROM RELIGION *foundation*

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January 9, 2019

The Honorable Henry McMaster  
The Office of the Governor  
1100 Gervais Street  
Columbia, South Carolina 29201

Dear Governor McMaster:

I am writing on behalf of the Freedom From Religion Foundation (FFRF) to inform you of our objections to your decision to organize prayer before two news conference last fall. We were contacted by concerned South Carolina residents. FFRF is a nonprofit educational association of more than 31,000 nonreligious members across the country, including members in South Carolina. FFRF's purpose is to protect the constitutional principle of separation between state and church.

At the news conference about the government's response to and status of Hurricane Florence on September 13, 2018, you invited South Carolina National Guard Captain/ Chaplain John Denny to begin the press conference with a prayer. A transcript of part of Denny's prayer follows:

Proverb 6:6-8 says, 'Go to the ant, consider her ways and be wise. Without having any chief, officer, or ruler she prepares her bread in Summer and gathers her food in harvest.'

Let us pray. Gracious God we humble ourselves to you and ask for your help. Help us to exercise sound judgment in our preparations for the storm. Help us to be wise in our decisions. Help draw us closer to each other and strengthen our bonds within our communities and as a state through our care for one another. Help us to use this event as a rallying point for unity. Help keep us safe O Lord. Help us to honor and praise you even in the midst of the storm. Lastly, help us to remember that the same God that created the heavens and the earth is the same God that is with us and will see us through the storm. We ask all these things in your gracious name god. South Carolina strong, South Carolina proud. Amen.

Denny was again asked to deliver a prayer before a press conference about the progress of Hurricane Florence on September 16, 2018. It is unfortunate that a still frame of a photograph of this prayer appears as the header photo on your Twitter page, reminding us forcefully of the great Robert Ingersoll's quote, "The hands that help are better far than lips that pray."

As governor, you represent a diverse population that consists not only of religious individuals, but of atheists and agnostics who do not believe in a deity, much less the power of prayer. The decision to deliver a prayer at an official state news conference sends an unfortunate official message of endorsement of religion over non-religion by the highest executive office in the state — a message that inevitably excludes many of your constituents, and has a proselytizing intent. Asking Denny, who is affiliated with Christianity, to preside over the prayer also signals an

official message of endorsement of Christianity over other religions, thereby excluding followers of minority religions. A message to encourage safety and show governmental concern in a time of hardship could have been effectively conveyed without prayer and the unnecessary entanglement of government and religion. Therefore, we urge you in the future to refrain from promoting religion in your official capacity as governor of South Carolina.

Non-religious Americans make up the fastest growing segment of the U.S. population by religious identification – more than one in five Americans now identifies as nonreligious.<sup>1</sup> Among millennials, those born after 1981, about 35 percent have no religious preference.<sup>2</sup> Beginning a televised gubernatorial news conference with a prayer signals to this sizeable minority “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.” *Lynch v. Donnelly*, 465 U.S. at 668, 688 (1984) (O’Connor, J., concurring).

Further, governmental chaplains were intended to lighten any governmental-imposed “burden” on religious exercise. Government chaplains may only exist as an accommodation of a public employee’s religious beliefs when the government makes it difficult or impossible to seek out private ministries. This prayer did not lighten a government-government imposed burden on religion, rather it *imposed* a governmental religion on every citizen.

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus condemned public prayers as hypocrisy: “when you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the street corners to be seen by others.” Matthew 6:5.

It also seems an odd choice to quote the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament as a source of solace in the wake of a hurricane when, in that volume, the biblical god himself is responsible for destructive hurricanes: “God . . . Your thunder was heard in the whirlwind, your lightning lit up the world; the earth trembled and quaked.” Psalm 77:16-18. In Jeremiah 23:19, it is written that “the storm of the Lord will burst out in wrath, a whirlwind swirling down on the heads of the wicked” (a verse that the televangelist Pat Robertson seems all-too-familiar with). Quoting from a religious text with such primitive and objectionable verses is especially offensive to non-believers.

We note that the chaplain himself felt it necessary to edit the “Word of God,” apparently determining that the actual quote was unfit for the occasion. However, we sympathize, as the full Proverbs quote calls the reader “sluggard,” “lazybones,” “slacker,” and “lazy bum,” depending on the translation.<sup>3</sup> If the chaplain needs to remove insults from the “Word of God,” is it really worth quoting from in the first place?

In conclusion, we ask that you, as governor of South Carolina, remain cognizant that you have taken an oath to uphold and defend the U.S. Constitution — an entirely godless and secular document, and are charged with great responsibility over citizens, including those citizens who may not share your personal religious viewpoints. Leaving religion as a private matter for private

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<sup>1</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>2</sup> *Id.*

<sup>3</sup> <https://biblehub.com/proverbs/6-6.htm>

citizens is the wisest public policy. Observing a strict separation of church and state offends no one and honors the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution.

We appreciate the courtesy of your attention to this matter and encourage you to stand up for the precious constitutional principle of the Establishment Clause, which unites and protects all citizens, believers and non-believers alike.

Very truly,

Handwritten signatures of Annie Laurie Gaylor and Dan Barker in blue ink.

Annie Laurie Gaylor & Dan Barker  
Co-Presidents