

FREEDOM FROM RELIGION *foundation*

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January 30, 2018

Sent via U.S. Mail and Email governor@ky.gov

The Honorable Matt Bevin
Governor
700 Capitol Avenue Suite 100
Frankfort, KY 40601

Re: Inappropriate Day of Prayer for school shooting

Dear Governor Bevin:

We are writing on behalf of the Freedom From Religion Foundation and our Kentucky members, who emphatically object to the governor's office calling upon citizens to pray. FFRF is a nationwide nonprofit educational association, which works to uphold the constitutional principle of separation of church and state, and to educate the public about nontheism. FFRF represents more than 31,000 members across the country, including more than 200 members in Kentucky.

Like you and the rest of the nation, we are appalled and saddened by the Marshall County High School shooting. We join with others in decrying this senseless violence and in demanding *meaningful* reform to protect innocent lives—something you could use your office to bring about.

Senseless and tragic violence is not an excuse to disregard the Constitution by your declaration of January 23, 2018, as “a day of prayer for Marshall County.” Your proclamation appropriately invoked Kentucky's state motto, “United We Stand. Divided We Fall.” But by unnecessarily inserting religion into a gubernatorial proclamation, you ended up excluding many citizens.

Calling upon citizens to pray is divisive, not unifying. Nationally, 21 percent of younger Americans—those born after 1999, i.e., the students who are most impacted by this violence—identify as either atheist or agnostic.¹ Overall, 24 percent of Americans identify as religiously unaffiliated and nearly 6 percent identify as non-Christians practicing a minority religion.” Your proclamation unfortunately excluded these citizens at a time when the community should indeed “come together to comfort one another, relying on their love for each other, their school, [and] their community.”

Proclaiming days of prayer is not only exclusionary, but it is beyond the secular authority of governmental officials. Thomas Jefferson, when asked as president to declare a day of prayer, refused. Jefferson noted that he had no authority over religious exercises: “Civil powers alone have been given to the President of the United States, and no authority to direct the religious exercises of his constituents” (Letter to Rev. Mr. Millar, January 23, 1808).

What Jefferson had no authority to do, the governor of Kentucky likewise should not do. Your prayer proclamation violates the spirit of Article 2, Section 5 of the Kentucky State Constitution, which bars any preference for any religion, creed or mode of worship, and bars governmental actions that in any way diminish or enlarge the civil rights, privileges or capacities of citizens on account of “belief or disbelief.”

Nothing fails like prayer. Our cemeteries are full of people who prayed to live. Wishful thinking cannot suspend the natural laws of the universe. FFRF pointed out the uselessness of prayer when you proposed it as a crime-fighting strategy barely seven months ago, citing several studies as to its ineffectualness. Clearly your strategy of prayer walks did not make things better in Marshall County. Action is needed, not more meaningless “thoughts and prayers.”

To that end, FFRF has just donated \$1,000 to the Marshall Strong Victims Fund to help the families of Bailey Nicole Holt, Preston Ryan Cope, and the 18 others who were injured. (All donations are passed on directly to victims and their families via the Kentucky Lake Visitors & Convention Bureau and the Rotary Club.)

Finally, we’d like to point out that prayer not only conflicts with the Constitution, but with biblical teachings. Christians who know their bible are familiar with the injunction of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount, condemning public prayer as hypocrisy. “Enter into thy closet and when thou hast shut the door, pray to thy Father which is in secret.” (Matthew 6:5-13).

To avoid the constitutional concerns and the divisiveness governmental calls for prayer cause within the community, *the solution is simple: discontinue using your government office to promote prayer and religion.* Public officials should get off their knees and get to work. Please do something practical to help prevent other such crimes.

Very truly,


Dan Barker and Annie Laurie Gaylor

ⁱ *Atheism Doubles Among Generation Z*, The Barna Group (Jan. 24, 2018), <https://www.barna.com/research/atheism-doubles-among-generation-z/>.

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