

FREEDOM FROM RELIGION *foundation*

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

April 8, 2020

SENT VIA EMAIL ONLY: ltgov@ltgov.alabama.gov

The Honorable Will Ainsworth
Office of the Lt. Governor
11 S. Union Street
Montgomery, AL 36130

Re: Unconstitutional “Ring for the Resurrection” Easter Sunday Campaign

Dear Mr. Ainsworth:

We are writing on behalf of the Freedom From Religion Foundation (FFRF) and our Alabama membership to object to the egregious misuse of your office to promote Christianity. FFRF’s purposes are to protect the constitutional principle of separation between state and church and to educate the public on matters relating to nontheism.

We request that you immediately cease endorsing Christianity and your “Ring for the Resurrection” campaign through your position as lieutenant governor, using the imprimatur of the state of Alabama. Your social media posts must be removed. There is no clearer violation of the Establishment Clause than a government official using his government office to request that churches and citizens celebrate the resurrection of Jesus.

On April 8, you used your official social media accounts to ask that all churches and citizens ring bells at noon on Easter Sunday, April 12, “to celebrate the resurrection of Jesus Christ following his crucifixion”:

Join me celebrating the hope, unity, and love shared among all Alabamians during this difficult time by ringing your church bell or a bell at your home this Easter Sunday at noon. We CAN stand together in unity - even as we’re staying apart. Matthew 28:6 proclaims the hope that lives with the resurrection of Christ - “He is not here; He has

risen, just as He said. Come and see the place where He lay.” Share this post to help us get the word out!

Please see the enclosed screenshot, which shows that this message includes the official seal of the Office of the Lieutenant Governor of Alabama, attached. We understand that many other government officials throughout the state of Alabama have shared your message with its official endorsement of Christianity.

It is particularly dismaying to see your promotion of religion, in your official capacity, come under the guise of the pandemic. Your call to “Ring for the Resurrection” claims “that the simple act of ringing a bell can allow us to remain physically distant while being united in spirit.” Your official call to “Ring for the Resurrection” also talks about “the miracle of Easter. While Gov. Ivey’s stay-at-home order, the public’s health and safety, and simple common sense prevent Christians from gathering in large groups even on the holiest of days, *all* of us can join together in spirit as we ring a bell to recognize that Christ has risen. [emphasis added]” In fact nothing is more divisive than religion. You represent *all* constituents, not just church-going Christians who believe in “miracles” and that “Christ has risen.”

That diverse population consists of not only Christians, but also atheists, agnostics, and those who subscribe to minority religions that do not believe Jesus is lord or resurrected.. Urging churches and citizens to ring bells to celebrate the resurrection of Jesus Christ promotes Christianity, sending an official message of endorsement of religion over non-religion and Christianity over all other faiths. This excludes the 30 percent of Americans who are non-Christian and are not able to “stand together in unity.”¹ It alienates non-Christians and nonbelievers in Alabama by turning them into political outsiders in their own community.

The First Amendment wisely prohibits government sponsorship of religious messages. The Supreme Court has said time and again that the “First Amendment mandates government 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); *see also Wallace v. Jaffree*, 472 U.S. 38, 53 (1985); *Epperson v. Ark.*, 393 U.S. 97, 104 (1968); *Everson v. Board of Educ. of Ewing*, 330 U.S. 1, 15-16 (1947). When a lieutenant governor or other government official

¹ In U.S., Decline of Christianity Continues at Rapid Pace, Pew Research Center (Oct. 17, 2019), available at <https://www.pewforum.org/2019/10/17/in-u-s-decline-of-christianity-continues-at-rapid-pace/>.

associates his office with an exclusively religious, exclusively Christian message, he violates this essential constitutional principle.

A government official can acknowledge holidays but must stop short of promoting a holiday's religious message. As the Supreme Court has stated, "[t]he government may acknowledge Christmas as a cultural phenomenon, but under the First Amendment it may not observe it as a Christian holy day by suggesting people praise God for the birth of Jesus." *Cty. of Allegheny v. ACLU of Pittsburgh*, 492 U.S. 573, 601 (1989). The same holds true for celebrating Easter. Your social media posts violate this constitutional restriction by using your government position to promote your personal religious beliefs and encourage citizens to join you in celebrating your beliefs. Your message excludes those who observe Easter without subscribing religious meaning to the holiday, as well as those who do not celebrate the holiday at all.

Your "Ring for the Resurrection" campaign in fact violates not only the Establishment Clause of the First Amendment, but the Free Exercise Clause by misusing your governmental authority to tell churches what to do.

In conclusion, we ask that you 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 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 your attention to this matter, and encourage you to stand up for the constitutional principle of the separation between state and church, which unites and protects all citizens, Christians and non-Christians alike.

Very truly,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Annie Laurie Gaylor Dan Barker". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Annie Laurie Gaylor & Dan Barker
Co-Presidents



Will Ainsworth

6 hrs · 🌐



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Share this post to help us get the word out!

#RingForTheResurrection



*Ring for the
Resurrection*

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bell at home this
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Sunday at Noon

