

# FREEDOM FROM RELIGION *foundation*

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November 8, 2019

**SENT VIA EMAIL & U.S. MAIL: [jbertrang@newulm.k12.mn.us](mailto:jbertrang@newulm.k12.mn.us)**

Jeff Bertrang  
Superintendent  
New Ulm Public Schools  
414 S Payne Street  
New Ulm, MN 56073

Re: Religious Speaker in Public School

Dear Superintendent Bertrang,

I am writing on behalf of the Freedom From Religion Foundation (FFRF) regarding a constitutional violation that occurred in New Ulm Public Schools. FFRF is a national nonprofit organization with more than 30,000 members across the country, including more than 600 members and a two chapters in Minnesota. Our purposes are to protect the constitutional separation between state and church, and to educate the public on matters relating to nontheism.

A concerned District parent has reported that New Ulm Public Schools hosted multiple assemblies by a preacher named Bob Lenz. Mr. Lenz is associated with Life Promotions, an evangelistic organization that seeks to convert young people to Christianity. While Mr. Lenz's presentation may appear to be secular, he uses these "secular" school assemblies to recruit students for religious events later in the evening. We understand that during his evening event at New Ulm Middle School, Mr. Lenz preached and proselytized before Gideons handed out bibles to everyone in attendance.<sup>1</sup>

Life Promotions' website lays bare Mr. Lenz's proselytizing agenda. The site explicitly states that the group "partner[s] with ministries to promote life in Christ and present the Gospel through faith-based community outreaches."<sup>2</sup> A promotional video claims that America's youth are experiencing a "spiritual poverty," lamenting that less than 18% of youth attend church regularly. "Two out of three people who begin their relationship with Christ and fill that spiritual void will do so before they're 18," says the video, assuring watchers, "We can reach them before it's too late." It also touts that Mr. Lenz travels the country "sharing life principles and the love of Jesus."<sup>3</sup>

It is inappropriate to take away instructional time from students to expose them to a proselytizing speaker, regardless of any secular message he claims to be promoting. It is well settled that public schools may not advance or promote religion. *See generally, Lee v.*

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.marshallindependent.com/news/local-news/2019/10/christian-speaker-all-are-made-in-the-image-of-god/>

<sup>2</sup> <https://lifepromotions.org/who-we-are/>

<sup>3</sup> [https://www.youtube.com/watch?t=11&v=\\_4G1i-buV2M](https://www.youtube.com/watch?t=11&v=_4G1i-buV2M)

*Weisman*, 505 U.S. 577 (1992); *Wallace v. Jaffree*, 472 U.S. 38 (1985); *Epperson v. Ark.*, 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*, 505 U.S. at 589). In *Lee*, the Supreme Court extended the prohibition of school sponsored religious activities beyond the classroom to all school functions, holding prayers at public high school graduations an impermissible establishment of religion. Thus, allowing recruitment for religious programming as part of a school assembly is in violation of the Establishment Clause.

Students, particularly younger students, are a vulnerable and captive audience, and the District cannot allow Lenz to take advantage of the students’ captivity to recruit or proselytize to students. This “[s]chool sponsorship of a religious message is impermissible because it sends the ancillary message to members of the audience who are 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 (quoting *Lynch v. Donnelly*, 465 U.S. 668, 688 (1984) (O’Connor, J., concurring)).

We are aware that some Christian missionaries insinuate themselves into public schools by camouflaging their purposes. It is incumbent that public officials do due diligence when approached by outside groups with vested interests in pitching their messages to a captive audience of public school students. However, in this case, it would only take a cursory glance at Life Promotions’ website to verify Mr. Lenz’s religious agenda. It is difficult for us to understand how this event could have been approved. Your community has many secular experts who have experience, training, certification, and/or degrees and who would be delighted, usually at no cost to the District, to discuss “alcohol or drug abuse, bullying and suicide prevention” before your student body, and whose presence would not raise constitutional red flags.<sup>4</sup>

We request that the District refrain from hosting guest speakers who use the opportunity to recruit students for religious events and ensure that no future assemblies featuring outside groups contain an underlying proselytizing message or agenda. Speakers must not be permitted to recruit public school students for religious events. Please notify us in writing of the steps you take to ensure this constitutional violation does not occur.

Sincerely,



Christopher Line  
Staff Attorney  
*Freedom From Religion Foundation*

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<sup>4</sup> <https://lifepromotions.org/community-outreaches/>