

FREEDOM FROM RELIGION *foundation*

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

January 27, 2016

SENT BY MAIL AND EMAIL to chiefmcalpin@yahoo.com

J. Burton McAlpin
Chief of Police
Post Office Box 126
Sneads, Florida 32460

Re: Christian Images on Sneads Police Dept. Facebook

Dear Chief McAlpin:

I am writing on behalf of the Freedom From Religion Foundation to alert you to the presence of inappropriate religious images and posts on the Sneads Police Department Facebook page. FFRF represents more than 23,000 members across the country, including more than 1,000 members in Florida, and a local group, the Central Florida Freethought Community. Our purpose is to uphold the constitutional principal of the separation of state and church.

We have been informed that the Sneads Police Department Facebook page regularly displays overtly Christian images and posts, including:

- a cover photo of what appears to be a Department police cruiser with the phrase “IN GOD WE TRUST” illuminated by a ray of light;^a
- a profile picture of a police officer with ‘stars-and-stripes’ angel wings comforting a young girl;^b
- Jesus Christ at prayer;^c
- Jesus Christ saving a drowning man, which quotes Matthew 14:30-31;^d
- a translucent image of Jesus looming over a sunset with a comment added by the Department which states a belief in the efficacy of prayer and asks viewers to “try it sometime.”;^e
- Jesus Christ with welcoming arms with a comment added by the Department which says “[t]here is nothing wrong with stepping out on faith, as long as you step toward the right way.”;^f
- Linus, from “A Charlie Brown Christmas”, saying “For unto you is born this day in the City of David a Savior, which is Christ the Lord[.]” with a comment from the Department that states: “Linus has said more [sic] than a million times and it still is worth hearing a million more.”;^g
- a picture of a sunset quoting Psalm 27:1 “The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear? [.]”;^h
- and many others.ⁱ

We are writing to inform you that, as a government entity, the Sneads Police Department

cannot endorse Christianity or any other religious faith via social media. The Department's repeated use of Facebook to endorse Christian belief violates the Establishment Clause by favoring a specific religious worldview. These Christian messages and posts must be removed.

It is a fundamental principle of Establishment Clause jurisprudence that the government cannot in any way promote, advance, or otherwise endorse religion. The Supreme Court has said, "The touchstone for our analysis is the principle that the 'First Amendment mandates governmental neutrality between religion and religion, and between religion and nonreligion.'" *McCreary County v. ACLU*, 545 U.S. 844, 860 (2005), (quoting *Epperson v. Arkansas*, 393 U.S. 97, 104 (1968); *Everson v. Bd. of Educ. of Ewing*, 330 U.S. 1, 15-16 (1947); *Wallace v. Jaffree*, 472 U.S. 38, 53 (1985)).

The Department's repeated use of Christian images, comments, bible verses, and religious allusions create the distinct impression that the Sneads Police Department supports and endorses particular religious beliefs. This sends the impermissible 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..." *Id.* (citations omitted). If members of the police department wish to disseminate these messages they must do so on their own, personal Facebook pages: they cannot use the machinery of the government to spread their favored religious belief.

We ask that all images and posts that appear to endorse Christianity be removed from the Sneads Police Department's Facebook page. These posts risk alienating members of your community, including the 30% of American adults who are non-Christians, practice a minority religion, or identify with no religion at all.¹ Please inform us in writing of the steps you intend to take to address this constitutional concern. Thank you for your time and attention.

Sincerely,



Andrew L. Seidel

Staff Attorney

ALS:scw

¹ *America's Changing Religious Landscape*, Pew Research Center (May 12, 2015), available at www.pewforum.org/2015/05/12/americas-changing-religious-landscape/.



a



b



c

posted November 20, 2015;



d

posted October 6, 2015;



c

posted October 5, 2015;



Sneads Police Department

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You will be surprised how well prayer really does work; It does, it may not come when you want it, but believe this it does. Faith can turn a mountain to climb into molehill, and bring rain to a dying crop. Try it sometime.



f

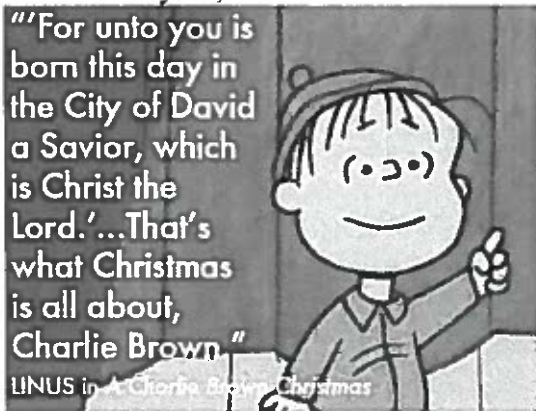
posted January 11, 2015



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There is nothing wrong with stepping out on faith, as long as you step toward the right way.



g

posted December 22, 2014



Sneads Police Department

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Linus has said more than a million times and it still is worth hearing a million more.



h posted September 20, 2014;

ⁱ See also <https://www.facebook.com/380423745359226/photos/pb.380423745359226.-2207520000.1453834969./630509603683971/?type=3&theater> (Jesus); <https://www.facebook.com/380423745359226/photos/pb.380423745359226.-2207520000.1453834969./629789340422664/?type=3&theater> (Jesus portrait); <https://www.facebook.com/380423745359226/photos/pb.380423745359226.-2207520000.1453834979./626619560739642/?type=3&theater> (Jesus hugging child); <https://www.facebook.com/380423745359226/photos/pb.380423745359226.-2207520000.1453834980./624985597569705/?type=3&theater> (Jesus holding out hand); <https://www.facebook.com/380423745359226/photos/pb.380423745359226.-2207520000.1453835213./620842377984027/?type=3&theater> (Angel carrying police officer); <https://www.facebook.com/380423745359226/photos/pb.380423745359226.-2207520000.1453835246./611740685560863/?type=3&theater> (“Blessed are the peacemakers” inscription); <https://www.facebook.com/380423745359226/photos/pb.380423745359226.-2207520000.1453835246./613679875366944/?type=3&theater> (Jesus holding out hand 2); <https://www.facebook.com/380423745359226/photos/pb.380423745359226.-2207520000.1453835276./607346632666935/?type=3&theater> (Jesus on cross).