

# FREEDOM FROM RELIGION *foundation*

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

July 12, 2019

**SENT VIA EMAIL & U.S. MAIL:**

aebert@sturgisps.org

Art Albert  
Superintendent  
Sturgis Public Schools  
107 W. West St  
Sturgis, MI 49091

Re: Religious Assembly in Public School

Dear Superintendent Albert:

I am writing on behalf of the Freedom From Religion Foundation (“FFRF”) regarding a constitutional violation that occurred in Sturgis Public Schools (“District”). FFRF is a national nonprofit organization with over 31,000 members across the country, including nearly 800 members in Michigan. FFRF’s purposes are to protect the constitutional separation between state and church and to educate the public on matters relating to nontheism.

It is our understanding that Wall Elementary School invited The Conquerors International Strength Team to perform at a school assembly on April 11. Wall Elementary School posted a live stream of the assembly to the official Wall Elementary Facebook page. The video shows members of The Conquerors performing feats of strength and discussing their group’s message. At the end of the video, The Conquerors Team Captain Mike Benson brings up Youth Pastor Erick Penn of Riverside Church to invite the students to an event happening later in the week.<sup>1</sup> Please see the enclosed images.

The assembly at Wall Elementary was part of The Conquerors’ “week of ministry” at Riverside Church in Three Rivers, Michigan. The group performed assemblies at 11 schools in the greater Three Rivers area that week. In video from The Conquerors’ final performance at Riverside Church, Mike Benson explains how the church funded all the team’s school visits, saying “these school assemblies cost money, but because of this church’s generosity, they sponsored every single one of the 11 school assemblies. They paid for everything that you see.” Benson also says that Pastor Jamie Smith of Riverside Church attended each of the 11 school assemblies with The Conquerors. Youth Pastor Erick Penn also attended multiple assemblies.<sup>2</sup> Benson goes on to say that “The Conquerors International Strength Team exists for one purpose and one purpose only, and that is to

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/170509319803660/videos/362216024383144/>

<sup>2</sup> [https://livestream.com/riverside/events/8639416/videos/189966557?fbclid=IwAR2LhSVZIJ3p3o7jUaKvINwqj7ORDZOPL9LcCYgh6Hak0NEYEPA\\_CpBSexs](https://livestream.com/riverside/events/8639416/videos/189966557?fbclid=IwAR2LhSVZIJ3p3o7jUaKvINwqj7ORDZOPL9LcCYgh6Hak0NEYEPA_CpBSexs)

transform communities worldwide with the gospel of Jesus Christ.”<sup>3</sup> It is without a doubt that The Conquerors’ visit to Wall Elementary School was part of a week-long trip to proselytize students in the greater Three Rivers area.

We write to request assurances that The Conquerors Strength Team will not be invited back to Sturgis Public Schools in the future.

**The District failed to exercise due diligence.**

The Conquerors operate according to a familiar playbook for evangelist groups of its kind: first, hold a nominally secular assembly in a public school, usually something with an entertaining gimmick, such as feats of strength; second, during the in-school assembly, advertise for a separate after-school event, typically at a local church; third, use the opportunity to convert those children to Christianity. As shown above, The Conquerors openly admit that this is how they operate.

We are aware that many Christian missionaries insinuate themselves into public schools by camouflaging their purpose. However, in the case of The Conquerors, it would only require a cursory Google search to verify their proselytizing agenda. The Conquerors are a self-proclaimed “team of athletes who use displays of strength to captivate audiences worldwide and deliver the Gospel message of Jesus Christ to a lost and dying world, one community at a time.” On the official website of The Conquerors, their stated mission is “to transform communities worldwide, through the power of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, the distribution of God’s Word to every child, and salvation for the entire family.”<sup>4</sup>

The Conquerors’ in-school assemblies are simply a means to an evangelistic end. The group regularly posts videos of such performances at school assemblies on Facebook. One video posted on The Conquerors Strength Team Facebook, for example, shows their 2011 performance at Bangor Middle and High School. In the video, Benson says, “we’re gonna hit a morning assembly and an afternoon assembly, and we’re gonna be distributing God’s word in this school. We’re praying and getting warmed up today, it’s gonna be an awesome day, kids are gonna get saved today through the written word of God.”<sup>5</sup> At each school assembly, The Conquerors also hand out free copies of their “Book of Hope” to students and record how many books are distributed.

Make no mistake: The Conquerors are, first and foremost, missionaries. They regularly make international mission trips to “dispel the darkness with the light.”<sup>6</sup> On their most recent trip to Pakistan at the end of March, the Conquerors conducted a multitude of “open air crusades.”<sup>7</sup> In a March 27th tweet, The Conquerors claimed “66,550 people made Jesus Lord of their lives” in “one of the most dangerous [countries] in the world.”<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>3</sup>[https://livestream.com/riverside/events/8639416/videos/189966557?fbclid=IwAR2LhSVZIJ3p3o7jUaKvlNwqj7ORDZOPL9LcCYgh6Hak0NEYEPA\\_CpBSexs](https://livestream.com/riverside/events/8639416/videos/189966557?fbclid=IwAR2LhSVZIJ3p3o7jUaKvlNwqj7ORDZOPL9LcCYgh6Hak0NEYEPA_CpBSexs)

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.theconquerors.net/about.php>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=10150160540342734>

<sup>6</sup>[https://livestream.com/riverside/events/8639416/videos/189966557?fbclid=IwAR2LhSVZIJ3p3o7jUaKvlNwqj7ORDZOPL9LcCYgh6Hak0NEYEPA\\_CpBSexs](https://livestream.com/riverside/events/8639416/videos/189966557?fbclid=IwAR2LhSVZIJ3p3o7jUaKvlNwqj7ORDZOPL9LcCYgh6Hak0NEYEPA_CpBSexs)

<sup>7</sup> <https://twitter.com/Conquerorsteam/status/1109194932609269760>

<sup>8</sup> <https://twitter.com/Conquerorsteam/status/1111145852247126016>

In sum, there is an astonishing amount of publicly-available information, much of which comes from The Conquerors themselves, showing that they are unapologetic Christian missionaries. Considering this glut of information, coupled with The Conquerors' endorsement and accompaniment by members of Riverside Church, we do not understand how this event could have been approved.

**The District violated the Establishment Clause by inviting The Conquerors and Riverside Church to hold an assembly at Wall Elementary School.**

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

A child's religious or nonreligious upbringing is a personal matter between the child and their parents. *See Santa Fe Indep. Sch. Dist. v. Doe*, 530 U.S. 290, 310 (2000) ("the preservation and transmission of religious beliefs and worship is a responsibility and a choice committed to the private sphere.") (quoting *Lee*, 505 U.S. at 589). The Supreme Court has repeatedly held that public schools may not be co-opted, either by staff or outside adults, to proselytize students. *See, e.g., Edwards v. Aguillard*, 482 U.S. 578, 584 (1987) ("[f]amilies entrust public schools with the education of their children, but condition their trust on the understanding that the classroom will not purposely be used to advance religious views that may conflict with the private beliefs of the student and his or her family."); *McCollum v Bd. of Educ.*, 333 U.S. 203, 210 (1948) (holding that the Constitution forbids the "utilization of the tax-established and tax-supported public school system to aid religious groups to spread their faith").

Allowing a self-proclaimed group of evangelists and an accompanying cohort of church representatives even one-time access during school hours to preach and recruit students for religious events is a violation of the Establishment Clause. The courts have protected public school students from overreaching outsiders in similar situations. *See, e.g., Berger v. Rensselaer School District*, 982 F.2d 1160 (7th Cir. 1993) (holding that distribution of bibles by Gideons in school violated Establishment Clause). Accordingly, courts have granted injunctions against schools for their complacency in these matters. *See, e.g., Roark v. South Iron R-1 Sch. Dist.* 540 F. Supp.2d 1047, 1059 (E.D. Mo., 2008); *upheld in relevant part by* 573 F.3d 556, (8th Cir. 2009) (holding that school policy allowing evangelical Christian organization to distribute bibles in school violated Establishment Clause).

**Request for Public Records**

In order to better understand why the District allowed a group of missionaries into its schools, we request copies of the following records from January 1, 2019 to the present pursuant to Michigan's Freedom of Information Act (MCL §15.231-15.246):

- 1.) Any contracts or agreements between the District and The Conquerors or any representative of The Conquerors;
- 2.) Any contracts or agreements between the District and Riverside Church or any representative of Riverside Church;

- 3.) Any records (including emails, brochures, letters, etc.) received or sent by District staff regarding The Conquerors;
- 4.) Any school policies related to the promotion of religion in the District, including by outside visitors;
- 5.) Any financial records related to performances by The Conquerors, including invoices, checks, and receipts;
- 6.) Any materials (books, handouts, worksheets, pamphlets, leaflets, or the like) provided to students in relation to The Conquerors' assembly.

**Conclusion**

We request that Sturgis Public Schools refrain from sponsoring inappropriate and unconstitutional assemblies moving forward, and that the District ensures that assemblies from outside groups or speakers do not contain an underlying proselytizing message or agenda. **We request specific assurances that The Conquerors will not be invited to speak at any District schools in the future.**

Please respond to this request within five days as required under Michigan law. If your office does not maintain the requested records, please direct me to the proper custodian. Any records available in electronic format may be emailed to [colin@ffrf.org](mailto:colin@ffrf.org). Should you deny this request, please provide a written explanation, including references to any statutory exemptions upon which you rely. If I can provide any clarification that will expedite your attention to this request, please contact me at (608) 256-8900.

We request a reply in writing detailing the steps you are taking to remedy this violation.

Sincerely,



Colin E. McNamara, Esq.  
*Robert G. Ingersoll Legal Fellow*  
*Freedom From Religion Foundation*

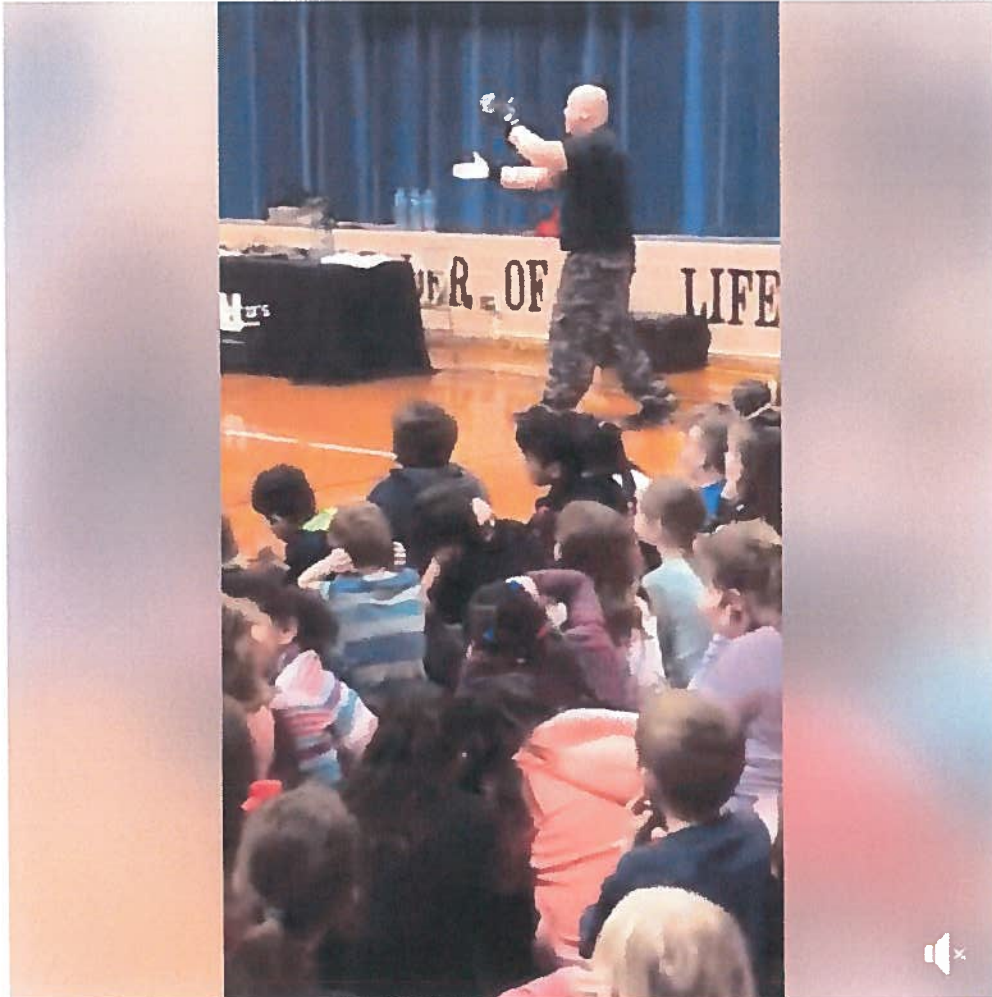
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Enclosures



Wall Elementary was live.

April 11 · 🌐



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35

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**The Conquerors**  
@Conquerorsteam

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Today The Conquerors International Strength Team did school assemblies at Wall Elementary, School Craft Middle and Constantine High. These Principals LOVE their students and we were honored to be able to serve them!!!

12:30 PM - 11 Apr 2019

