

FREEDOM FROM RELIGION *foundation*

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

August 25, 2017

SENT VIA EMAIL AND U.S. MAIL:

larry.mattson@yvcog.org

Larry Mattson
Executive Director
Yakima Valley Conference of Governments
311 North 4th St., Ste. 204
Yakima, WA 98901

Re: Government funding of religion

Dear Director Mattson:

I am writing on behalf of the Freedom From Religion Foundation to alert you to constitutional violations regarding YVCOG's funding of a religious ministry. FFRF is a national nonprofit organization with more than 29,000 members across the country, including more than 1,200 members in Washington and two chapters in the state. 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.

A concerned local taxpayer contacted us to report that YVCOG recently granted \$416,000 to Transform Yakima Together (TYT) for TYT to operate a temporary homeless shelter, known as "Camp Hope," and for a housing project.

TYT is a religious organization whose six-point stated mission¹ is entirely dedicated to promoting Christianity, including a disturbing emphasis on using the government to do so:

- "... demonstrating the gospel of the Kingdom with character and supernatural power in the Yakima Valley,"
- "Establish the government of the Lord in the Valley . . . while establishing 24/7/365 prayer, praise and worship,"
- "Plant or launch resource centers, schools, city prayer centers, or other auxiliary or ministry expression that supports the advancement of the gospel of the Kingdom,"
- "support local leaders in their efforts to make disciples who are Kingdom transformers"
- "Empower the Church through a revelation of God's name as the Lord of Hosts to mobilize as a spiritual army of the Lord to project power to bring about the will of King Jesus in the Valley," and
- "Publish the gospel of the Kingdom our Lord Jesus Christ through every media possible."

Besides TYT's one-track evangelical mission, TYT brags about converting residents of Camp Hope and invites churches to send "ministry teams" to the camp.² TYT plainly views Camp Hope as a government-funded opportunity to advance religion.

¹ See transformyakima.com/about/.

² transformyakima.com/teams/ministries-services/camp-hope/ ("We have seen 14 individuals make decisions for Christ while at Camp Hope.").

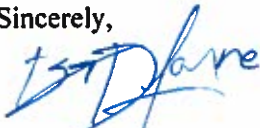
Prior to giving a religious ministry hundreds of thousands of taxpayer dollars, YVCOG must take appropriate steps to ensure that the activities it funds will be entirely secular. While providing housing for the homeless is obviously laudable, it is unconstitutional for a taxpayer-funded homeless camp to include religious exercises, or for the group managing the camp to invite “ministry teams” to proselytize camp residents. It makes no difference whether these government-funded religious activities are voluntary. We request that YVCOG take immediate action to ensure that Camp Hope and TYT’s taxpayer-funded housing project are not used to advance religion. We also request assurances that YVCOG take appropriate steps to ensure that this flagrant constitutional violation does not recur with future grants.

The Establishment Clause of the First Amendment prohibits the government from financially supporting churches. *See, e.g., Comm. For Pub. Educ. & Religious Liberty v. Nyquist*, 413 U.S. 756, 778–79 (1973) (striking down government-subsidized maintenance and repair of nonpublic schools); *Lemon v. Kurtzman*, 403 U.S. 602, 625 (1971) (holding that government aid to nonpublic education impermissibly entangled the government with religion, even when limited to secular subjects). Just as YVCOG could not conduct worship services itself, YVCOG-funded projects may not be used to advance religious activities.

Additionally, the Washington State Constitution specifically states, “No public money or property shall be appropriated for or applied to any religious worship, exercise or instruction, or the support of any religious establishment.” WASH. CONST., Art. I § 11. Appropriating public money for the support of a religious establishment is exactly what YVCOG does by granting funds to TYT for projects that TYT uses to advance its religious mission. The U.S. Supreme Court has upheld enforcement of this provision of the Washington State Constitution, which goes above and beyond the anti-establishment guarantees of the U.S. Constitution. *Locke v. Davey*, 540 U.S. 712 (2004).

Washington taxpayers have a religious liberty right guaranteeing that their government will not use its coercive taxation power to advance religion. YVCOG must ensure that programs it funds do not include religious exercises, do not aid a church’s evangelical mission, and do not otherwise promote religion in general or any one religion in particular. Additionally, YVCOG should adopt policies that will ensure grant recipients understand that they are running government programs that must remain entirely secular. Please investigate these concerns and respond in writing detailing the steps taken to resolve this issue.

Sincerely,



Ryan D. Jayne, Esq.
Elaine & Eric Stone Legal Fellow
Freedom From Religion Foundation