

# FREEDOM FROM RELIGION *foundation*

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April 29, 2014

SENT VIA U.S. MAIL AND FAX TO: (985) 624-3108

The Honorable Donald J. Villere  
City of Mandeville  
3101 E. Causeway Approach  
Mandeville, LA 70448

Re: National Day of Prayer - May 1, 2014

Dear Mayor Villere:

I am writing on behalf of the Freedom From Religion Foundation (“FFRF”), to urge you to immediately discontinue using Mandeville City (“City”) resources and taxpayer funds to plan, organize, and promote the upcoming National Day of Prayer. FFRF is a national nonprofit organization with more than 20,000 members across the country, including members in Louisiana. Our purpose is to protect the constitutional principle of separation between state and church.

It is our understanding that the City intends to celebrate the National Day of Prayer on May 1, 2014 from 11:30 am -12:30 pm on the front steps of Mandeville’s City Hall. This information is prominently displayed on the City’s homepage under the section titled “Mayor’s Message.”

## **The National Day of Prayer is a Sectarian Religious Event**

As you may be aware, the National Day of Prayer was designed and is operated as an exclusively Christian event. The National Day of Prayer originated with Rev. Billy Graham during his religious crusade in Washington, D.C. in 1952. He expressed an openly Christian purpose, seeking such an annual proclamation by the President because he wanted “the Lord Jesus Christ” to be recognized across the land. Congressional sponsors likewise openly expressed an agenda of promoting Christianity and belief in a god. Christian evangelical lobbies were behind the 1988 change in law designating the first Thursday in May as the annual National Day of Prayer. Subsequently, the National Day of Prayer Task Force, which is private but sounds official, was created with the stated goal to pressure as many elected officials as possible to issue National Day of Prayer proclamations. Coordinators, volunteers, and speakers at task force events must share the view that the bible is inerrant and “there is only one Savior and only one gospel.”

### **The Mayor's Office and City May Not Host a Religious Event**

As mayor, your participation in this annual event, and the City's apparent coordination of the event, pose serious constitutional concerns. The Establishment Clause of the First Amendment prohibits the government from endorsing religion. It is grossly illegal and inappropriate for the City to be organizing and promoting a patently religious event, such as a National Day of Prayer celebration outside City Hall. The event sends the message that the City not only prefers religion over non-religion, but Christianity over all other religions. This event also alienates non-Christians and non-believers in Mandeville by turning them into political outsiders in their own community, in violation of the Constitution, which requires government neutrality toward religion.

In 1993, FFRF won an injunction against the mayor of Denver, Colorado, over his promotion, endorsement, and sponsorship of a "Day of Prayer." See *FFRF v. Denver*, No. 93 CV 6056 (District Court, City and County of Denver, Colorado 1993). In that case, Mayor Wellington Webb designated December 5 as a "city wide day of prayer . . ." His office held a press conference announcing the event, issued a press release on official government stationery, and formed an interfaith committee to work on the day of prayer. The court granted an injunction that enjoined Mayor Webb and other City officials "acting in an official capacity, from promoting, endorsing, or supporting the Day of Prayer. . . ." *Id.* at 5. It reasoned:

"Since prayer is exclusively a religious act, the endorsement of a Day of Prayer would logically be interpreted by a reasonable person as an endorsement of religion. Because from all appearances Mayor Webb was acting in his official capacity in issuing the press release and conducting the press conference endorsing the Day of Prayer, the Court concludes that a reasonable person would interpret his conduct as governmental endorsement of religion. As such, it violates the Establishment Clause." *Id.*

### **A Mayor May Not Officially Endorse a Religious Event**

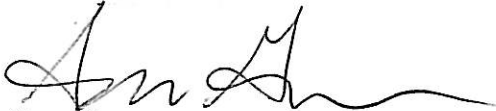
It is not uncommon for ministerial associations or private groups to host prayer events and to invite public officials, who attend as individuals. This is the case at the "National Prayer Breakfast" in D.C., for example. FFRF's lawsuit in Denver did not prevent Mayor Webb from attending privately sponsored prayer events in his personal capacity and we do not ask you to avoid attending privately sponsored religious events either. But it is unlawful under the First Amendment for a mayor's office itself to promote such an event or for a mayor to attend such an event in his or her *official* capacity.

Currently, you appear to be promoting and attending the National Day of Prayer event in your official capacity as Mayor of Mandeville. This cannot continue. As an elected official of Mandeville, you are charged with the responsibility to represent the citizens of your city, including those citizens who may not share your religious viewpoints. Even were this National Day of Prayer event hosted by an outside religious organization or church, any insinuation that you attend and 'bless' that religious event in your official

capacity as Mayor would raise grave Establishment Clause concerns. Therefore, we strongly urge you to consider your status as the highest elected official in Mandeville, and the oath you took to uphold our secular Constitution, before you agree to attend or promote any future religious functions in your official capacity as Mayor.

The City must cease all sponsorship, organization, and/or promotion of the National Day of Prayer event. The promotion in the "Mayor's Message" section of the City's website must be removed. We request an immediate response in writing about what steps you are taking to disassociate the Mayor's office from this sectarian event.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Sam Grover", with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Sam Grover  
Staff Attorney  
Freedom From Religion Foundation

STG:jki