

Freethought Today

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Oklahoma AG smears FFRF, misleads public

After the Freedom From Religion Foundation sent letters to 26 Oklahoma school districts about illegal bible distribution, state Attorney General Scott Pruitt went on the offensive (you can take that two ways).

Staff Attorney Andrew Seidel's February complaint letters objected to letting Jamison Faught (son of state Rep. George Faught) and other Gideons International members distribute bibles to fifth-grade students during the school day. FFRF educated the districts on the law and advised them that if they continued to allow third-party distributions, FFRF would seek to distribute its literature.

Faught had bragged on Facebook about being allowed to distribute bibles "at every school in McIntosh, Okmulgee and Ofuskee counties except one or two. Last year, the Checotah principal not only personally took us to each classroom, but he helped us hand them out!"

In response to the letter, several schools ended their open forum policies, with at least one superintendent confirming he did not know the Gideons had been allowed into the schools. Gideons typically operate by deliberately avoiding superintendents and school boards, seeking permission from lower-level, less-informed staff.

In his response letter April 14 to superintendents statewide, Pruitt smeared FFRF and trumpeted false claims about government's hostility toward religion.

"Schools have a right to enact neutral policies that allow all viewpoints on religion to thrive," Pruitt wrote. "As the Attorney General of Oklahoma, I will not stand idly by while out-of-state

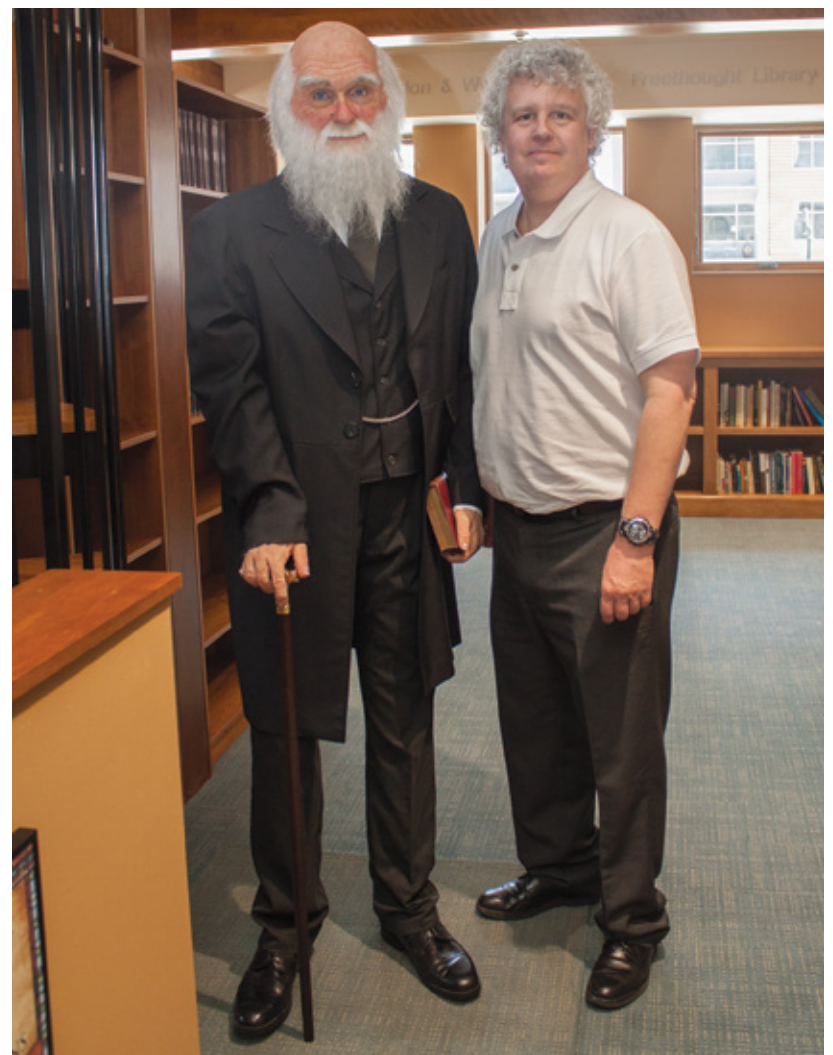
organizations bully you or any other official in this State into restricting the religious freedom the Founders of this country held dear."

Seidel responded to Pruitt the next day, informing him that several districts contacted by FFRF already had such policies, but decided to "revisit the wisdom of these forums" after FFRF asked for equal time.

"It is obviously far easier for an Oklahoma student to get hold of a bible than it is to get hold of criticisms of the bible, which FFRF will seek to pass out in every public school forum that is opened under your offer," Seidel wrote. "If the goal of the Oklahoma Attorney General's Office is to allow public schools to be used to distribute atheist messages, then this is a brilliant idea."

However, he added, "FFRF prefers that public schools focus on education rather than serve as a venue for divisive religious debates."

It's not the first time Pruitt has smeared FFRF. Last year, in discussing the Internal Revenue Service's inaction against pulpit politicking, he claimed FFRF "is unabashed in its desire to destroy" free speech and the First Amendment's free exercise clause.



Jake Swenson Photo

Home, sweet home

Shown in his new home at FFRF's Freethought Hall, "Mr. Darwin" has evolved from an idea by his creator Csam Wheatley into reality. See page 9 for the story.

Marshall enforces law without a badge

City Hall in Warren, Mich., got a lot more reasonable on April 28 thanks to activist and FFRF member Douglas Marshall, who was finally allowed to set up a "reason station" in the building atrium after a legal battle for equal treatment.

For years, the city let volunteers at a "prayer station" inside City Hall distribute religious pamphlets and offer to pray and discuss their religious beliefs with passersby. Marshall submitted an application in April 2014 to city officials to reserve atrium space two days a week for a reason station, where he would offer to engage in philosophical discussions with those who expressed an interest in a secular belief system.

But less than two weeks after it was submitted, Marshall's application — although nearly identical to the one submitted by the church sponsoring the prayer station — was rejected by Mayor James Fouts. In his rejection letter, Fouts accused Marshall of "intending to deprive all organized religions of their constitutional freedoms or at least discourage the practice of religion." (Fouts called FFRF "un-American" after FFRF sued him and the city in late 2011 over a nativity scene.)

Noting that the atrium was established as a public forum, FFRF, Americans United for Separation of Church



Photo by C & G Newspapers

and State and the American Civil Liberties Union filed suit on behalf of Marshall in July 2014. The suit was settled in February, with the city agreeing to treat nonbelievers and believers equally.

The reason station will be open and staffed from 11 a.m. to 3 p.m. Tuesdays and Thursdays. On opening day, about eight people expressed interest, Marshall said. "One lady thanked me for my persistence. One man said he was

glad we were there and said he specifically came to welcome us. A few others came up and stated that they were also nonbelievers."

Local and major media, including the Detroit Free Press, covered the opening. Linda Jackson, 74, told the Free Press she stopped to pray but said, "It's a public place. I guess all are welcome, whether they believe Jesus is the reason or they don't."

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bark less
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Meet a legal staffer



Elizabeth Cavell

Name: Elizabeth Cavell.
Where and when I was born: New York, N.Y., in July 1983.
Education: B.A., University of Florida; J.D., Tulane University Law School.
Family: Spouse, Andrew Seidel; son, Oliver; and Moose, our dog.
How I came to work at FFRF: I worked as a public defender in Colorado after law school. After a couple of years there, my husband Andrew had an opportunity to work for FFRF so we moved to Madison. I took the Wisconsin bar exam and was working part-time providing legal support at FFRF when the former intake attorney left to take a job at a local firm. I was hired to replace her.
What I do here: I am the intake attorney, which means I supervise the processing of complaints by our administrative assistant. I also process incoming complaints myself. I speak with complainants who contact FFRF about potential state/church violations, assess each complaint and assign complaints to attorneys for further action

when appropriate.
I also handle my own substantive caseload, which includes complaints involving governmental “In God We Trust” displays, public parks, post offices and civil rights/public accommodations complaints.
What I like best about it: Working with my friends, practicing constitutional law and screwing with the government.
What gets old about it: The daunting volume of complaints, working with limited resources and people threatening to kill us.
I spend a lot of time thinking about: Places I’d like to travel, how to better myself, home improvement projects.
I spend little if any time thinking about: Sports and fantasy sports.
My religious upbringing was: Catholic. I attended Catholic school until my family moved to Florida when I was in fifth grade.
My doubts about religion started: I was never very engaged with religion as a kid. Homilies never made sense to me, and I never felt socially or intellectually connected to my church, but I was expected by my family to participate in the rituals and sacraments.
Like many Catholics, hypocrisy and abuse made me lose all respect for the church. And like many Catholics, as an adult I did not practice Catholicism in any way. Once I was in college and law school, reading the religious skepticism of others, I gave up any religion.
Things I like: Summer in Madison, visiting new places, laughing with my husband, narrating my dog’s thoughts.
Things I smite: Bullying, violence and corruption.
In my golden years: I hope to be traveling with my husband or living at my future beach or lake house.

Welcome to ‘After-Lifer,’ 29 Life Members

The Freedom From Religion Foundation is delighted to welcome Jack Pedigo as our newest “After-Life Member,” a tongue-in-cheek category for those who’d like their membership to live on after them.
FFRF also gratefully announces 29 new Life Members (two prefer anonymity): Sally Alger, Aubrey Ayash, Stephen Davis, Joellen de Berg, Oak DeBerg, John E. Fenn, M.D., Robert Field, Paul Freemont Smith, Jr., Michael Halderman, Mark Hall, Dr. David Allen Herbert, Nicholas Hilpipre, James Kauffman, Durl Kruse, Janice E. Myers, Rahn Pitzer, Patrick Poe, Johnny Poole, Richard Ralston, Kenneth Rowe, James West Ruffin, Steve South-

ern, Debbra Ward, John E. Wiley, Mary E. Will, Dr. Jeffrey Lee Wolfgang and Karl Womer.
States represented are Arizona, California, Colorado, Connecticut, Florida, Georgia, Hawaii, Illinois, Kentucky, Massachusetts, Maine, Nevada, New York, Ohio, Oklahoma, Tennessee, Texas, Virginia, Washington, West Virginia and Wisconsin.
Individual Lifetime Memberships are offered for \$1,000 as a membership or membership renewal, and individual After-Life Memberships are \$5,000. They mean never another renewal notice and go into a rainy-day reserve fund. All dues and donations to FFRF are tax-deductible.



Freethought Hall visit
New York members Joan Reisman-Brill and Leon Brill visited FFRF on April 20 while touring the University of Wisconsin-Madison, which is one of the schools that accepted Leon as an incoming freshman. Joan, who occasionally lends her wit and wisdom to FFRF’s “Ask a Skeptic,” says Leon has tentatively decided to attend Skidmore College in Saratoga Springs but could change his mind, pending other offers. As evidenced by his Harry Potter Hogwarts sweatshirt, Leon is interested in literature, film, video and computers.

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The only freethought newspaper in the United States

A Note to Members

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FFRF’s ‘Nonbelief Relief’ donates \$10,000 to Nepal

The Freedom From Religion Foundation has made a \$10,000 donation from its new Nonbelief Relief Fund to help earthquake-ravaged Nepal. FFRF is evenly splitting the donation between the United Nations World Food Program and Doctors Without Borders, both of which rate well as secular charities.

The death toll from the 7.8-magnitude earthquake April 25 and aftershocks moved past 8,000 in early May. More than 8 million people were affected. On May 12, a magnitude-7.3 quake was centered near the Chinese border followed by at least five aftershocks measuring from magnitude-5.6 to magnitude-6.3. Within a few hours, the government confirmed 36 people were killed and at least 1,117 injured.

FFRF is launching Nonbelief Relief so that its members and other nonreligious donors have the opportunity to give under a secular umbrella. As the Richard Dawkins Foundation for Reason and Science has long pointed out, nonbelievers are as (or more) generous as the religious, but have lacked infrastructure to give as a group under the secular name.

“The hands that help are better far than lips that pray,” said Co-President Dan Barker, quoting Robert G. Ingersoll.

“There are many established secular charities that respectfully serve people in need regardless of religion, whose purposes are to help — no religious questions asked, no bibles thumped or other hidden-agenda proselytizing,” noted Co-President Annie Laurie Gaylor.

Nepal is 80% Hindu and 20% Buddhist, all the more reason to avoid any hint of proselytizing by U.S.-based charities, she added.

While FFRF chose the UN World Food Program and Doctors Without Borders for its donation, FFRF reserves the right, as the Nepalese disaster and needs unfold, to designate donations for Nonbelief Relief for another or additional secular relief charities helping the Nepalese.

Generous nontheists who’d like their donation to be made under such a secular umbrella may select “Nonbelief Relief” under FFRF’s donation dropdown at ffrf.org/get-involved/donate/. Donations, fully tax-deductible, will be forwarded as promptly as possible to a secular charity meeting real needs in the real world.

FFRF legal activism

Florida council nixes godly motto

After protests by local activists and a letter from FFRF, the Venice, Fla., City Council voted 5-2 on April 28 against displaying “In God We Trust” in its chambers.

David Williamson, head of the Central Florida Freethought Community, a chapter of FFRF, spoke at the meeting, as did Marie Glidewell of the Gulf Coast Humanists Association. The Sarasota Herald-Tribune reported that about 20 supporters of the display also showed up.

“This is not a chamber of the majority, it is a chamber of all,” Williamson told the council.

FFRF Co-President Annie Laurie Gaylor sent the council a letter April 27: “Posting ‘In God We Trust’ interferes with citizens’ rights of conscience and is a misuse of city property for the benefit of a system of religion.”

The proposal was just the latest in a series of nearly identical efforts pushed nationally by a California-based group called In God We Trust ~ America Inc. Its aim is to display the phrase “in every city and county chamber in America.”

Such campaigns show why the phrase, adopted by Congress in 1956 at the height of the McCarthy era, should not be a national motto because it excludes a large percentage of the population, Gaylor said.

FFRF, Dawkins group expel creationism

The Freedom From Religion Foundation and the Richard Dawkins Foundation for Reason and Science were successful in getting a science teacher in Arroyo Grande, Calif., to stop teaching creationism. The groups sent a letter that sparked an investigation by the Lucia Mar Unified School District into lessons on creationism by Brandon Pettenger at Arroyo Grande High School.

In an April 29 email to Staff Attorney Andrew Seidel, Assistant Superintendent for Human Resources Chuck Fiorentino reported that he and the school principal met with Pettenger on April 23 and told him “to immediately cease using [creationist materials] and not to instruct at all on the topics of creationism, intelligent design, or anything related.”

They also told Pettenger he must adhere to state-adopted science standards and that anything outside those standards needed approval. Creationist material was also removed from his school district Web page.



Vatican vanquisher
Dan Salemsen puts the squeeze on St. Peter’s Basilica. Dan and his family live in Rome and can see St. Peter’s (the world’s tallest dome at 448 feet from basilica floor to the top of the cross) from the roof of their apartment building. Steve Salemsen, Dan’s dad, is FFRF Executive Board treasurer.

In addition, the district “will be reminding all teachers of their legal obligation to teach only material that is in the State adopted Standard, or Curriculum, or Board approved.”

Dawkins Foundation CEO Robyn Blumner praised the anonymous student for bringing the situation to light. “That student helped bring evidence-based science back into a public school classroom hijacked by religious teachings.”

FFRF weighs in on California prayer case

FFRF filed an amicus brief April 22 in a case over government-sponsored prayer in Eureka, Calif. In *Beaton v. Eureka*, city resident and atheist Carole Beaton filed suit over prayers that start

city council meetings. FFRF’s “friend of the court” brief supports Beaton’s position that prayers at government meetings violate the Constitution.

FFRF argues that the California Constitution provides extensive protection of state/church separation, broader than that required by the Establishment Clause, and that the government should refuse to lend its “prestige and power” to religion by endorsing religious practices.

The brief also criticizes U.S. Supreme Court decisions in *Marsh v. Chambers* and *Greece v. Galloway*, which upheld legislative prayer. The cases reject legal principles in favor of relying on a misguided view of history, alleges FFRF, urging California courts to refuse to incorporate flawed reasoning into state law.

Florida students support FFRF bible verse protest

Gator Freethought and Humanists on Campus, two student groups at the University of Florida in Gainesville, sent a letter to university President W. Kent Fuchs in support of FFRF’s April 13 objection to a bible verse inscribed on a new business school building.

Heavener Hall has a bible verse on an archway reading, “He has shown you, O man, what is good. And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your god. Micah 6:8.”

In an April 23 letter, the two groups said, “We, as students and staff of the University of Florida, feel that the quote promotes Judeo-Christian beliefs over all other beliefs on campus, and that this alienates members of the University of Florida community, such as ourselves, who do not hold the same beliefs and encourages discrimination against ourselves and other individuals of different faiths, creeds and beliefs.”

The organizations, which have about 45 active members total, requested the verse be replaced with “a more secular, encompassing inscription.”

Church signs down at L.A. high school



Church advertising at University High School in Los Angeles.

The Los Angeles Unified School District removed church advertising from school grounds after Staff Attorney Andrew Seidel informed the district March 6 that four permanently posted signs at University High School on Texas Avenue near Santa Monica Boulevard violated the Constitution.

“When a school permanently displays a banner on its property advertising a church, it has unconstitutionally entangled itself with a religious message, here a Christian message,” Seidel wrote.

FFRF’s local complainant reported on March 27 that the banners had been removed.

Include FFRF In Your Estate Planning

Arrange a bequest in your will or trust, or make the Freedom From Religion Foundation the beneficiary of an insurance policy, bank account, or IRA. It’s easy to do. For related information (or to request a bequest brochure), please phone Annie Laurie Gaylor at (608) 256-8900.

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Freedom Depends on Freethinkers



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What is the Freedom From Religion Foundation?

Founded in 1978 as a national organization of freethinkers (atheists and agnostics), the Freedom From Religion Foundation, Inc., works to **keep state and church separate** and to educate the public about the views of nontheists.

The Foundation’s email address is info@ffrf.org. Please include your name and physical mailing address with all email correspondence.

Foundation members wishing to receive online news releases, “action alerts” and “Freethought of the Day” should contact info@ffrf.org.

Heads Up

A Poetry Column by Philip Appleman

Serpent

The delicate backbone smashed,
it lived till sundown; then
its mate came for revenge.
The long muscle
glistened:
“Your eyes shall be opened,
you shall be
as gods, knowing good
and evil.”
“You are no snake,”
she told him. “You
are pure superstition—go
hypnotize a bird
or suck the milk from goats. Go,
or I’ll give you a backache, too.”
He slithered off, limp as liver,
swearing to find some weaker time
out there in the orchard,
and the storms he would conjure then
would wreck that greenery
and stand a guard there, blazing,
with a sword.

© Philip Appleman.
From the book *New and Selected Poems, 1956–1996*

Philip Appleman is a Distinguished Professor Emeritus at Indiana University. His published volumes of poetry include *Perfidious Proverbs and Other Poems: A Satirical Look at the Bible* (2012), *Darwin’s Ark* (new 2009 edition) and *Karma, Dharma, Pudding & Pie* (2009). His nonfiction work includes the widely used *Norton Critical Edition, Darwin, and the Norton Critical Edition of Malthus’ Essay on Population*. His poetry and fiction have won many awards, including a fellowship in poetry from the National Endowment for the Arts, the Castagnola Award from the Poetry Society of America, the Humanist Arts Award from the American Humanist Association and the Friend of Darwin Award from the National Center for Science Education. His work has appeared in *Harper’s Magazine, The Nation, The New Republic, The New York Times, The Paris Review, Partisan Review, Poetry, and The Yale Review*.

He and his playwright wife, Marjorie Appleman, are both “After-Life” Members of the Freedom From Religion Foundation. Phil’s books: ffrf.org/shop.

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Slightly irreverent views, news, music and interviews

Overheard

I began to fear for mine and my son’s safety when I read “run her out of town” and “snitches end up in ditches.” I have the comments in an email, but I’d have to go through hundreds of comments to find them. I feared for my son when the parents all had their kids carry their bibles to school one day, to prove a point. Kids are mean. I couldn’t let my son face that kind of ridicule for not having a bible.
“Lea,” mother of a third grader in Duncan, Okla., who received death threats after complaining to the school when her son came home with a Gideon bible his teacher distributed in class
Atheist Analysis, 4-28-15

Sorry, Mayor Nenshi, but faith has no role in the public square. None. The public square is made up of a widely diverse group of people, of various or even no faiths.
Columnist Naomi Lakritz, taking issue with the Calgary mayor’s support of government prayer after the Canadian Supreme Court banned it
Calgary Herald, 4-16-15

Could we start with a poem? Could we start with a K’naan [rap] song? I don’t know.
Calgary Mayor Naheed Nenshi, after the council voted 11-4 to abide by the court’s decision
Calgary Herald, 4-27-15

Our state’s oath of office — the same one these lawmakers swore to uphold upon their inauguration — condemns this silent boycott. By taking office, all public servants promised to “faithfully and impartially” support both the U.S. and Iowa constitutions. In this case, lawmakers may have done what they felt was faithful. But their statement, far from impartial, was an embarrassment to the religious tolerance they should be upholding.
Editorial, “Lawmakers’ walkout over Wiccan prayer is shameful hypocrisy,” berating the boycott of a pagan invocation by half of the Iowa House Republican caucus
Council Bluffs Daily Nonpareil, 4-15-15

Religious leaders of all faiths are struggling to find ways of keeping their institutions going, and one of the themes emerging from the surveys they conduct is that creed should be de-emphasized and loyalty and community should be fostered.
Daniel C. Dennett, Tufts University Center for Cognitive Studies co-director, “Why the Future of Religion Is Bleak”
Wall Street Journal, 4-26-15

In 1990, there were 316 priests in active ministry in the Diocese of Scranton. Today there are 130. In 1990, there were 44 men preparing for priesthood. Today, there are nine. There will be one ordination to the priesthood in the diocese this year and five retirements.
Pennsylvania Catholic Bishop Joseph Bambera, video address to parishes
Hazleton Standard Speaker, 4-14-14

A survey by the German bishops’ conference this summer found that weekly Mass attendance is now a mere 10.8%,

having halved from 22% as recently as 1989. This is a lower participation rate than in England and Wales, and is not much higher than in anti-clerical France. The number of marriages celebrated in German Catholic churches, meanwhile, fell from 116,000 in 1990 to 44,000 in 2013.
News story, “Why the German Church is rich and arrogant”
UK Catholic Herald, 12-11-14



The line I’m drawing is that there are religions and belief systems, and objective truths. And if we’re going to govern a country, we need to base that governance on objective truths, not your personal belief system.
Astrophysicist Neil deGrasse Tyson, interview in which he says Scientology makes as much sense as Christianity
The Daily Beast, 3-31-15

During one lecture, a student asked a question I’ve heard many times: “If we evolved from monkeys, why are there still monkeys?” My response was and is always the same: We didn’t evolve from monkeys. Humans and monkeys evolved from a common ancestor. One ancestral population evolved in one direction toward modern-day monkeys, while another evolved toward humans. The explanation clicked for most students, but not all, so I tried another. I asked the students to consider this: Catholics are the oldest Christian denomination, and so if Protestants evolved from Catholics, why are there still Catholics? Some students laughed, some found it a clarifying example, and others were clearly offended. Two days later, a student walked down to the lectern after class and informed me that I was wrong about Catholics. He said Baptists were the first Christians and that this is clearly explained in the bible. His mother told him so. I asked where this was explained in the bible. He glared at me and said, “John the Baptist, duh!” and then walked away.
James Krupa, University of Kentucky biology professor, “Defending Darwin”
Orion Magazine, April 2015

When a legislative body is endorsing a practice that is so heavily associated with religion, it can certainly make people nervous.
Andrew Hoover, American Civil Liberties Union of Pennsylvania legislative director, opposing a state Day of Prayer resolution by Rep. Thomas Caltagirone, D-Reading
phillymag.com, 4-7-15

For now, it seems like the majority of Indians are destined to spend their lives singing songs in praise of various gods. I’m happy to be in the tiny minority of those who call themselves atheists. It doesn’t bother me that I am in disagreement with about 200 family relations. Einstein, Feynman, Hawking and Weinberg are some of the physicists who share my lack of belief, while most prisoners in America believe in god. Needless to add, the figure is probably even higher in Indian prisons.
Writer Sachi Mohanty, “Difficult to be unbeliever in religious India”
Hindustan Times, 5-3-15

Meet a ‘couple’ of members

Kendal J. Taylor

Name: Kendal J. Taylor.

Where I live: In Petoskey, on the northern tip of the Lower Peninsula of Michigan.

Where I was born: My family was living in Leslie, Mich., but I was born at Mercy Hospital in Jackson. Under Catholic rules of the day, if there had been a problem during my birth and the choice came down to saving my mother or me, I would never have known her.

Family: My partner and wife, Christine, lets me live with her and for that she should receive some important award like the Nobel Peace Prize. We each have children and grandchildren by previous marriages but they are all off doing their own thing.

Education: Leslie High School, graduated in 1957. I took a couple of stabs at community college but had a hard time staying centered. Then in the 1960s, I came face to face with conservative, fundamental Christianity and embraced it warmly. I enrolled in an Independent Fundamental Baptist seminary in 1967 and threw myself into it completely: student body president and yearbook editor and graduated second in my class.

Occupation: Through the years, I have had more occupations that I can count on all my fingers and toes, but currently, at age 75, I work full time for the family division of circuit court in the county where we live.

Military service: I volunteered for the U.S. Army in 1958 and spent two years at Fort Knox, Kentucky. After basic training. I spent a few months as a broadcast specialist, producing broadcasts about Fort Knox for local radio stations.

One cold and rainy morning, the headquarters company was standing at attention as the commanding officer barked orders. From a window in the building behind us came a call, “Hey, could you hold it down out there; we’re sleeping in here.” It was a building occupied by the 158th Army Band. I said, “That’s where I want to be.” I asked my mother to send me my trumpet, practiced up, auditioned and got a transfer to the band and spent my remaining Army time with the band.

How I got where I am today: My mother’s father was a Methodist evangelist, so when she married my dad she went in the opposite direction. You know, the really bad stuff like drinking alcohol, dancing and playing cards. She occasionally sent me to Methodist Sunday school down the block.

Even during the time I was in seminary, I began to have doubts about what I was being taught. Some of it made no sense at all to my logical side. I told myself it was just the old devil whispering in my ear. I would have to exercise faith and put the doubts out of my mind. I learned to ignore the thoughts that said to me, “This is a bunch of baloney.”

After graduation and ordination, I began to pastor Baptist churches and eventually found my way to Ventura, Calif. The doubts continued, so I decided to keep track of answered prayer (mine and others’) to prove God’s existence and omnipotence. What happened was quite the opposite. What my study revealed was that *no* prayers were being answered. In the cases where something happened after a prayer, it was pure coincidence and logically would have happened without a single

prayerful word.

I remember the night it all came apart for me. I lived in the parsonage next door to the church, and on a Saturday night I went to the church to pray for the Sunday morning service. I left the lights off and knelt at the altar at the front of the auditorium. It was a large, cavernous building and as I prayed, my words echoed around the high ceiling and came back to me. I thought, “No one is listening to this, I’m talking to myself!” I stopped speaking, stood and walked out the door with just one thought in mind, “I have to get out of this business.” And in 1976 I did.

I stumbled along for years never feeling quite comfortable with my decision to ditch God. Then, somehow, about 10 years ago, I came across Richard Dawkins’ wonderful book *The God Delusion*. At last I saw what I had done was not a horrible mistake for which I would spend an eternity in hell. I had made a conscious decision to embrace truth and escape a world of falsehoods and deceit. What a relief! I could look at the beauty of the sky and not worry that Big Daddy was scowling back.

I began to wonder if there were others who had taken a similar path or, perhaps, had never believed the big lie. I searched online and found the Freedom from Religion Foundation. I joined immediately and began to talk to my Catholic wife about my thrilling discoveries. A few months after joining, we enlisted FFRF’s help to spread the word and held the first meeting of the Freethought Association of Northern Michigan (FANM) on April 10, 2011.

Where I’m headed: At that first FANM meeting, five brave people showed up, having no idea what they were getting into or where it might go. We went around the table and told our stories of nonbelief. We have been meeting the second Sunday of each month ever since and have added a monthly meeting called “Skeptics in the Pub.”

For two years, Christine and I led FANM as it took surprisingly steady baby steps. We have twice outgrown our meeting space. I still serve on the board.

Person in history I admire: I would have to choose Richard Dawkins. His works define humankind and evolution. *The God Delusion* changed my life.

A quotation I like: “Don’t tell your problems to people: 80% don’t care and the other 20% are glad you have them.” — Lou Holtz, ESPN sportcaster and retired football coach

These are a few of my favorite things: Playing golf with my wife, ballroom dancing, kayaking and cruising in our beautiful yellow 2003 Chevrolet SSR with the top down.

These are not: Pet peeves — the older I get, the fewer there are.

My doubts about religion started: Shortly after I entered seminary.

Before I die: Shucks, if I live long enough there will be nothing left on my bucket list.

Ways I promote freethought: Maintain membership in FFRF, support and work with FANM and be a good example of a nonbeliever.

I wish you had asked: Now that you have come to an understanding of the truth, how do you feel about your years in the religion business? I am ashamed, ashamed that I could have been so gullible.



Christine and Kendal Taylor are also involved with community theater. Here they were part of a video promotion for a historical tour of the cemetery in which they played a pioneer couple.

Christine Taylor

Name: Christine Taylor.

Where I live: Petoskey, Mich.

Where I was born: South Haven, Mich., the oldest of six children.

Family: Husband Kendal, the love of my life, and two sons.

Occupation: I have worked for many years in the behavioral health care management and human resources fields. I have my eye on retirement in a few years. My favorite job has been and will always be, mother to my wonderful two boys.

How I got where I am today: I was raised in a strict Catholic family with frequent contact with both sets of grandparents and extended family. My mother’s people were Catholic, so holidays were big celebrations at our house and included going to Mass. My father’s people were various Protestant denominations.

When I was younger, I would visit my father’s mother in the summer and she would invite me to go to church. I started to notice the pastor often said derogatory things about Catholics in his sermons. One time after services, I was standing next to my grandmother and one of her friends came up and asked her if I was one of the “lost souls.” (Grandmother had introduced me as one of her Catholic grandchildren.) I was only 11 but I understood that I was not really welcome there. That was the last time I went to church with her.

I attended Catholic elementary, high school and even four years of at a Catholic university. I thought about becoming a nun. That was probably due to being the wallflower, ugly duckling, “no date for prom” type of girl, that is until I got to college. Once I started dating, I determined that being a nun would not be a positive thing for me — something about that vow of chastity.

It was an all-girls college. Freshman year (1969) was all about succeeding in a learning environment for women. But by sophomore year, the college allowed 10 Catholic seminarians to come on campus for classes. By my junior year, the college went co-ed and campus life was never the same.

A quotation I like: “Knowing what’s right doesn’t mean much unless you do what is right.” Teddy Roosevelt is credited with this quote, which mirrors what I strive to do in my personal and professional life.

My doubts about religion started: In my adulthood. I had stepped away from the Catholic Church in my 20s. But once I had children, I felt the need to bring them us as Catholic. I felt that

they needed a “moral compass” and could choose their own direction later on. I had also determined that the local Catholic school was much better academically than the public schools.

When my youngest son was in fifth grade, he started some discussions with me and then the priest about the existence of god. It was conflicting with his desire for logical thinking. Both my sons stopped practicing Catholicism when they were in high school.

After my first husband initiated a divorce, I turned to the church even more, adding volunteer activities and Pentecostal services. A year later, I determined that in spite of doing everything that I was told I was doing right, my divorce was final. All my prayers and church-centered activities hadn’t saved me from this fate. I was mad at god and abandoned the Catholic faith. My Catholic friends and family still hope that I will someday get over this phase, but I will never return to religion.

A few years later, I met my second husband. Based on Catholic doctrine, I knew that if I married this divorced man I would be excommunicated. I was not going to allow anyone to tell me not to marry this wonderful, loving man. So I decided to step away from Catholicism and gradually accepted that I am a nonbeliever.

Over the years, occasionally I was visited by different church missionaries (Jehovah’s Witness, Baptist, etc.). They always started out, “Are you saved?” I usually responded, “Yes, I am a recovering Catholic and I am not interested.”

A couple years ago, a local pastor knocked on my door and asked if I went to church. I replied, “No, my husband and I are both atheists.” He reacted like I had hit him and said that he had never met an atheist before and made a hasty retreat to his car. I felt satisfied with finally admitting to someone that I was not a believer. What a relief!

Before I die: On my bucket list is travel to Europe. I enjoy cooking and would love to cook my way across Italy and France. I would love to learn more about those cultures.

Ways I promote freethought: My husband and I started talking about our respective nonbelief early in our marriage. I was very supportive of his idea to start a freethought group in our community. That group’s first meeting was a positive, yet scary, statement for both of us.

I am happy to report that we are still active with this group as well as others supporting the separation of church and state, locally and nationally.

A Christian nation? Since when?



Kevin Kruse will be speaking at FFRF's upcoming convention. Turn to back page for details.

The following was first published March 14 in The New York Times Sunday Review and is reprinted with permission.

By Kevin M. Kruse

America may be a nation of believers, but when it comes to this country's identity as a "Christian nation," our beliefs are all over the map.

Just a few weeks ago, Public Policy Polling reported that 57% of Republicans favored officially making the United States a Christian nation. But in 2007, a survey by the First Amendment Center showed that 55% of Americans believed it already was one.

The confusion is understandable. For all our talk about separation of church and state, religious language has been written into our political culture in countless ways. It is inscribed in our pledge of patriotism, marked on our money, carved into the walls of our courts and our Capitol. Perhaps because it is everywhere, we assume it has been from the beginning.

But the founding fathers didn't create the ceremonies and slogans that come to mind when we consider whether this is a Christian nation. Our grandfathers did.

Back in the 1930s, business leaders found themselves on the defensive. Their public prestige had plummeted with the Great Crash; their private businesses were under attack by Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal from above and labor from below. To regain the upper hand, corporate leaders fought back on all fronts. They waged a figurative war in statehouses and, occasionally, a literal one in the streets; their campaigns extended from courts of law to the court of public opinion.

But nothing worked particularly well until they began an inspired public relations offensive that cast capitalism as the handmaiden of Christianity.

The two had been described as soul mates before, but in this campaign they were wedded in pointed opposition to the "creeping socialism" of the New Deal. The federal government had never really factored into Americans' thinking about the relationship between faith and free enterprise, mostly because it had never loomed that large over business interests. But now it cast a long and ominous shadow.

Accordingly, throughout the 1930s and '40s, corporate leaders marketed a new ideology that combined elements of Christianity with an anti-federal libertarianism. Powerful business lobbies like the United States Chamber of Com-

merce and the National Association of Manufacturers led the way, promoting this ideology's appeal in conferences and public relations campaigns. Generous funding came from prominent businessmen, from household names like Harvey Firestone, Conrad Hilton, E.F. Hutton, Fred Maytag and Henry R. Luce to lesser-known leaders at U.S. Steel, General Motors and DuPont.

In a shrewd decision, these executives made clergymen their spokesmen. As Sun Oil's J. Howard Pew noted, polls proved that ministers could mold public opinion more than any other profession. And so these businessmen worked to recruit clergy through private meetings and public appeals. Many answered the call, but three deserve special attention.

'Pagan statism'

The Rev. James W. Fiffeld — known as "the 13th Apostle of Big Business" and "Saint Paul of the Prosperous" — emerged as an early evangelist for the cause. Preaching to pews of millionaires at the elite First Congregational Church in Los Angeles, Mr. Fiffeld said reading the bible was "like eating fish — we take the bones out to enjoy the meat. All parts are not of equal value." He dismissed New Testament warnings about the corrupting nature of wealth. Instead, he paired Christianity and capitalism against the New Deal's "pagan statism."

Through his national organization, Spiritual Mobilization, founded in 1935, Mr. Fiffeld promoted "freedom under God." By the late 1940s, his group was spreading the gospel of faith and free enterprise in a mass-circulated monthly magazine and a weekly radio program that eventually aired on more than 800 stations nationwide. It even encouraged ministers to preach sermons on its themes in competitions for cash prizes.

Liberals howled at the group's conflation of God and greed; in 1948, the radical journalist Carey McWilliams denounced it in a withering exposé. But Mr. Fiffeld exploited such criticism to raise more funds and redouble his efforts.

Meanwhile, the Rev. Abraham Vereide advanced the Christian libertarian cause with a national network of prayer groups. After ministering to industrialists facing huge labor strikes in Seattle and San Francisco in the mid-1930s, Mr. Vereide began building prayer breakfast groups in cities across America to bring business and political elites together in common cause. "The big men and the real leaders in New York and Chicago," he wrote his wife, "look up to me in an embarrassing way."

In Manhattan alone, James Cash Penney, IBM's Thomas Watson, Norman Vincent Peale and Mayor Fiorello La Guardia all sought audiences with him.

In 1942, Mr. Vereide's influence spread to Washington. He persuaded the House and Senate to start weekly prayer meetings "in order that we might be a God-directed and God-controlled nation." He opened headquarters in Washington — "God's Embassy," he called it — and became a powerful force in its previously secular institutions. Among other activities, he held "dedication ceremonies" for sev-

eral justices of the Supreme Court. "No country or civilization can last," Justice Tom C. Clark announced at his 1949 consecration, "unless it is founded on Christian values."

The Garden of Eden, Graham informed revival attendees, was a paradise with 'no union dues, no labor leaders, no snakes, no disease.'

Enter Billy Graham

The most important clergyman for Christian libertarianism, though, was the Rev. Billy Graham. In his initial ministry, in the early 1950s, Mr. Graham supported corporate interests so zealously that a London paper called him "the Big Business evangelist."

The Garden of Eden, he informed revival attendees, was a paradise with "no union dues, no labor leaders, no snakes, no disease." In the same spirit, he denounced all "government restrictions" in economic affairs, which he invariably attacked as "socialism."

In 1952, Mr. Graham went to Washington and made Congress his congregation. He recruited representatives to serve as ushers at packed revival meetings and staged the first formal religious service held on the Capitol steps. That year, at his urging, Congress established an annual National Day of Prayer.

"If I would run for president of the United States today on a platform of calling people back to God, back to Christ, back to the bible," he predicted, "I'd be elected."

Dwight D. Eisenhower fulfilled that prediction. With Mr. Graham offering scripture for Ike's speeches, the Republican nominee campaigned in what he called a "great crusade for freedom." His military record made the general a formidable candidate, but on the trail he emphasized spiritual issues over worldly concerns.

As the journalist John Temple Graves observed: "America isn't just a land of the free in Eisenhower's conception. It is a land of freedom under God." Elected in a landslide, he told Mr. Graham that he had a mandate for a "spiritual renewal."

Although Eisenhower relied on Christian libertarian groups in the campaign, he parted ways with their agenda once elected. The movement's corporate sponsors had seen religious rhetoric as a way to dismantle the New Deal state. But the newly elected president thought that a fool's errand. "Should any political party attempt to abolish Social Security, unemployment insurance, and eliminate labor laws and farm programs," he noted privately, "you would not hear of that party again in our political history." Unlike those who held public spirituality as a means to an end, Eisenhower embraced it as an end unto itself.

Continued on next page



A remake of "The Ten Commandments" in today's "U.S. is a Christian nation" era might have Charlton Heston delivering the tablets directly to American colonists. The movie came out in 1956 (or MCMLVI), at the time when God was being inserted on currency, a new national motto and the Pledge of Allegiance.

Members tell AARP: Prayer is not ‘primal’

FFRF sent an Action Alert to members April 17 asking them to set AARP magazine straight about its February/March article entitled “The Paradox of Prayer: A Pilgrimage.” Commenting on the article, Editor-in-Chief Robert Love wrote, “I learned that prayer is a primal human instinct that crosses faiths and cultures, and extends even to those who don’t believe in a personal God.” He also claimed, “We older Americans are a prayerful people.”

Members responded in droves to the alert. Below are some excerpted responses to AARP:

What *were* you thinking? I don’t know about primal, but your statements about prayer strike me as primitive and poppycock. While I have not prayed for about 65 years, I have talked to myself on occasions, such as when I read your ludicrous statement in support of supernatural thinking. I said, “Don, are you hallucinating. Did he really write that?”

Is it your goal to reposition AARP as a faith-based seniors organization? I ask that you give equal time in the next issue to reason, critical thinking, freethought and science, and apologize for insulting the good sense of so many AARP readers. — **Donald B. Ardell, Florida**

I am a senior citizen, age 81, and I have two longstanding beliefs in regard to prayer and religion: “Nothing fails like prayer” (Unknown), and “Religion is the worst disease of mankind” (Ayn Rand).

Faith is believing that an entity actually exists without any proof or evidence. Whenever a “prayed for” person “miraculously” recovers, a scientific explanation can always be found to explain the recovery. — **John Dunn, California**

I believe humankind should get off its knees and get to work instead of pretending it can suspend the natural laws of the universe or alter reality through wishful thinking. Please devote part of an upcoming AARP magazine to the joy and freedom of relying on human ingenuity and of being a nonreligious senior citizen. — **Kevin Larkin, South Carolina**

As a longtime member of AARP, I was appalled to read [Robert Love’s comments]. I do not believe in a personal god and I have never prayed in my life. — **Edward F. Rockman, Pennsylvania**

You are wrong! Prayer is taught, left over from from the cave-man days. I am 76 years old and haven’t prayed since I learned how to read and abandoned Mormonism. Actually, I did pray once. When I was in graduate school, my mother told me that praying would help me pass a very hard test. So, I got down on my knees, folded my hands in front of me, closed my eyes and said, “Dear Heavenly Father, please help me with tomorrow’s test so that I won’t [expletive] it up. Amen.” It didn’t help, I got a C+. — **Frank W. Knell, Arizona**

I turn 50 in May, and I’m part of a generation that is a lot less religious than perhaps the majority of your current membership. I teach science, my husband and I are married, with two teenagers, and while we loves stories, we’re also interested in an evidence-based understanding of the world, as opposed to unsupportable, “supernatural” belief systems that call

for prayer to nonexistent goddesses, demons, witches, shamans or gods.

So while I’ve recently received multiple invitations to join AARP, I really do not wish to be associated with the kind of religious nonsense printed in your February/March magazine. Feel free to pitch again for my membership when I turn 60. Maybe by then there will be fewer old Catholics, Mormons, Christians, etc., who currently reference their “faith” to deny basic civil rights to gays and lesbians, deprive women of access to health care options and dumb down evidence-based science education to pander to in your magazine. Cheers! — **Bill Griesar, Oregon**

Take it from me, there are lots of people (older and not) who do not pray. To insist that prayer extends to those who don’t believe in a personal God is incorrect. It is disrespectful. if not absurd, to claim nonbelievers find meaning in prayer. As an AARP member, I have become disenchanted with your magazine. It was once of value, but now it is mere fluff. — **Lois Martin, California**

I am an older person, a member of AARP, and so is my wife. We know many people our age. None of us is prayerful. I do not appreciate you using your position as editor-in-chief to engage in proselytizing. Prayer is not primal. No one is born with any manner of religious belief. It is taught to people as children, an indoctrination. — **Graydon Wilson, Vermont**

In the summer of 2008, I was mauled by a bear, which tore my face off before I was able to fight it off and drive myself down a mountain for help. As it was attacking me, I can assure you that “prayer” was the very *last* thing on my mind. (Nor did my life flash before me, nor did I see some Baby Jesus come to carry me home.) I find your contention “prayer is primal” hugely offensive to the very real calculus that ultimately saved my life.

The fact that the Independent Book Publishers Association deemed my memoir *Chomp, Chomp, Chomp: How I Survived a Bear Attack and Other Cautionary Tales* worthy of its Benjamin Franklin Award for autobiographical and inspirational book of 2015 should tell you that not all of us seniors fall prey (sorry,) to this nonsensical abdication of personal responsibility. — **Allena Hansen, California**

Prayer is what is often done by people who aren’t willing to contribute anything else to a situation. They believe they have done something meaningful, when in fact they haven’t accomplished jack. I don’t go out of my way to criticize people who have a religious conviction unless and until, as you do, they stomp on what I believe, as you did.

I just renewed my membership in AARP and now I’m sorry I did. You are incredibly disrespectful to lump all of seniors us into the same bag. — **Jerry Foreman, 73, Nevada**

I found the comments regarding prayer to be offensive and even silly. The majority of older Americans may believe and participate in prayer but there are plenty of us who *know* that nothing, absolutely nothing fails like prayer, and that is statistically quantifiable. — **Stephen P. Driscoll, Massachusetts**



Please give those of us who rely on ourselves the respect that we have been forced to give “believers.” How about an article on the many successful, fulfilled beings in the past and present who have no need of prayer to keep ourselves happy. You have a very good magazine, but this was uncalled for. — **Rose White, AARP member since 1998, Hawaii**

I found your article about prayer to be distasteful to my wife and I, both atheists, but thought it was just more of what we always experience — a mainstream publication trying to isolate people who don’t voice the official views. We are both 75 and have been AARP members for a long time. Please leave religion out of your magazine so we all feel included. — **Peter and Marilyn Werbe, Michigan**

I have never prayed, except as a child, and that was only under duress. Though I would fight for the right of others to pray, it is not something I would never chose to do myself. It’s deeply offensive for you to assume that all elders are exactly like you. Atheists are proud, thinking people, and we have maintained our beliefs in the face of great prejudice. We don’t deserve to be treated as nonexistent. — **Andrea Natalie, New York**

With age comes to some the wisdom to stop believing in imaginary friends and illusory *dei ex machina* as solutions to problems. Please devote a similar amount of space in an upcoming issue to those AARP members who are not “prayerful” but are instead rational in confronting the inevitable pains of life. — **Julia Whitsitt, South Carolina**

“Prayer: A Pilgrimage” was, I hope, a story of your own personal life searches. If it was meant to be any more than that, I take it as a personal insult, as well as lacking in factual or logical statements. Please, I wish to read no more faith-based proselytizing in *our* magazine, the magazine for *all* Americans over 50. — **Jere Miles, Florida**

I am an atheist, happy with my choice to be without belief in God or gods, and consider prayer a foolish waste of time. I say, “Have at it if it makes you feel better,” but please stop trying to include people like me in your illusions. If you are a Christian, Muslim or Jew, the main theological difference from me is that I believe in one less god than you. Kindly desist from theological preachments in AARP. — **Ron Weinert, 81, Arizona**

I usually enjoy reading my copy of AARP and find much good advice,

but I cringed at your article on prayer. However, I do want you to know that I am a believer. I believe in being a good person, and that being a good person takes the expenditure of time, energy and money.

Now, if you are a good person, a fair person and a good editor, you will solicit an article from a freethinker/agnostic/atheistic organization and provide balanced reporting. — **Charles Golden, California**

I’m a member of AARP and an atheist. Can anyone seriously believe there is a great being somewhere, holding puppet strings, making humankind do its bidding? Read about any of the atrocities being done to women and children in countries torn apart by religion. Do you think a loving God of any kind would let these things happen to a human being, especially an innocent child? I think not. — **Charles James, New York**

As an AARP-age atheist, I do not pray and please don’t make unwarranted assumptions about people like me. — **Tom Hays, California**

Christian nation? Since when?

Continued from previous page

‘One nation under God’

Uncoupling the language of “freedom under God” from its Christian libertarian roots, Eisenhower erected a bigger revival tent, welcoming Jews and Catholics alongside Protestants, and Democrats as well as Republicans. Rallying the country, he advanced a revolutionary array of new religious ceremonies and slogans.

The first week of February 1953 set the dizzying pace: On Sunday morning, he was baptized; that night, he broadcast an Oval Office address for the American Legion’s “Back to God” campaign; on Thursday, he appeared with Mr. Vereide at the inaugural National Prayer Breakfast; on Friday, he instituted the first opening prayers at a cabinet meeting.

The rest of Washington consecrated itself, too. The Pentagon, State Department and other executive agencies quickly instituted prayer services of their own. In 1954, Congress added “under God” to the previously secular Pledge of Allegiance. It placed a similar slogan, “In God We Trust,” on postage that year and voted the following year to add it to paper money; in 1956, it became the nation’s official motto.

During these years, Americans were told, time and time again, not just that the country should be a Christian nation, but that it always had been one. They soon came to think of the United States as “one nation under God.”

They’ve believed it ever since.

Kevin Kruse is a professor of history at Princeton University and the author, most recently, of One Nation Under God: How Corporate America Invented Christian America. Professor Kruse is a featured speaker at FFRF’s 38th national convention Oct. 9-11 in Madison, Wis. (See back page for more convention details.) He was also a recent guest on Freethought Radio. Go to ffrf.org/news/radio/shows and scroll down to May 2.

FFRF convention speech, Los Angeles, October 2014

Activist Ahlquist: Wag more, bark less



Ingrid Laas Photo

Jessica Ahlquist

Sam Erickson, FFRF student intern:
Jessica Ahlquist has already done more to protect state/church separation than many of us do in a lifetime. When she was 17, a judge ruled in her favor that a school banner depicting a prayer at her Rhode Island high school violated the Establishment Clause. The ruling in 2012 infamously prompted a local legislator to brand her an “evil little thing.” At one point, she was going to school under police escort. FFRF tried to send her flowers but not a single florist would deliver them.

Since then, Jessica has won many honors from the secular movement, including FFRF’s Thomas Jefferson Youth Activist Award [\$2,000] and a \$10,000 scholarship from FFRF’s Atheists in Foxholes Support Fund. She addressed the Reason Rally in Washington in 2012 shortly after she won her lawsuit. This is Jessica’s third appearance at a national FFRF convention. Her stories offer inspiration for me to continue the work that I’m doing and for other students to continue their work as well.

By Jessica Ahlquist

Thank you so much. I’m sure a lot of you have come to these events before and have seen me speak. Previously, I was just sharing my story. I spoke the first time about my case before it had actually been ruled on. The second time was after we’d been successful.

After some time I started to feel like I was missing the bigger picture and started to wonder what could actually be learned from my experiences. At the end of just about every talk that I gave for about two years, somebody would say, “OK, so what can we do?” I didn’t really have an answer to that until recently.

After analyzing some of the various aspects of what I’m going to call my “campaign,” I started to see a pattern. Ultimately, my lawsuit and activism had been successful. As I look back on it today, the main thing that made it successful wasn’t just the actual legal success; it was a lot of the social aspects as well.

When I first started advocating for removal of the prayer, it felt like everybody hated me and I didn’t have any allies. I’m glad to say that by the end, I don’t know if that was the case anymore. It felt like a lot of people had, not an epiphany, but they had come

to understand my perspective a little bit better. So I started to analyze why. What exactly made this something that people were receptive to?

Initially I was very concentrated on the actual legal aspects, for obvious reasons. It’s a prayer in a public school. When I attended the first school committee meeting about the prayer, I brought some index cards. On them I wrote “separation of church and state, the First Amendment” and a few other precedents. I thought that was like, proof. I was 15. Being so naive, I actually believed that would be enough, that they would be like, “Oh well, obviously it’s illegal. We’ll just take it right down, no problem.”

You all know that’s not what happened at all. But I was entirely genuine and I went into it with an open mind. I didn’t plan on speaking that night but after hearing so many people speak and get it so wrong so many times about how this is a Christian nation and we should want prayers in our schools, I did decide to speak and attempted to make my points several times. It felt like nobody was listening.

In fact, they all had their own index cards with “facts” that were completely contrary to mine. I was getting frustrated, and without even knowing it, I realized that being right isn’t actually enough. Just because you’re right doesn’t mean that people will believe it or care.

That night I “came out” as an atheist while not really knowing what it meant or how controversial it was. I put my cards away and spoke from my heart. I talked about how excluded I felt as a secular student by a prayer that was obviously Christian hanging in a public school. Now, instead of just patting me on the head and telling me I should check my facts and dismissing me, they had to prove they weren’t discriminating against me. That was a much harder thing to do, especially considering I had been called a witch and a satanist at the meeting.

Secular campaigning

There are three main categories in secular campaigning, “campaigning” meaning a lawsuit or cause being pursued. The categories that I came up with are in a way very similar to ethos, pathos and logos. Instead, I called them (1) legal and historical, (2) emotional and personal and (3) logical and scientific.

At first I thought that those categories described the best way to argue with people, that if you have a cause, or in this case the prayer banner lawsuit, you could take different approaches. For example, in my school committee meeting, I felt that I was getting absolutely nowhere trying to debate actual legal fact and history. So I tried to change it into more of an emotional and personal story. That made it very different for them. I don’t think they knew that I had that card, and when I played it, they didn’t really know how to respond.

You can pursue legal or historical or scientific activism or you can take the more emotional route, which is sort of what my story did for people. When I was in 11th grade, I was taking a U.S. history class. Every day after class, this one girl would always wait for me. She

was dead set on changing my mind. The most insight she ever gave me was when she said, “So it’s technically illegal, but why do you care so much?”

At first it really irritated me that she would have such little regard for the importance of the First Amendment — it protected her as well. But now I actually want to thank her for helping me to understand a perspective I hadn’t before. To many people out there, it’s sad to say, the law doesn’t actually matter at all. In a way I almost feel like that’s the majority of people today. It’s really hard for us to wrap our minds around it, because we’re all very aware of how important it is, but we can’t expect for everybody to be just like us.

To many people out there, it’s sad to say, the law doesn’t actually matter at all.

We actually don’t need to change them in order to have them be more receptive to us. You can’t change who a person is, but you can change the way they are going to see you. It’s our responsibility to come up with ways to appeal to that person who doesn’t even know what the First Amendment says. We should make our ideas, our perspective, relevant to them. I’m not going to try to say that now that I’ve told you this, it’s going to be super easy. It’s not, and I struggle with it all the time.

My classmate eventually told me that she doesn’t really get what “the whole big deal is with the whole prayer thing” and “who cares if it’s illegal?” But she had to admit that I didn’t deserve the hate and hostility I was getting and also admitted that I was in the legal right.

That seemed to be how most people felt. This shows us that many times, taking a more personal or emotional approach can be very hard to disagree with. In this case, it was the death threats and hate mail that I was being sent on a very regular basis. It was very hard for people to try to ignore that.

Generally speaking, these people aren’t bad; they just don’t care.

It’s important to make ourselves more likable and more receptive to those who would otherwise not know about us. It’s actually very interesting for me because the secular community found me. I had no idea that it existed, and I can’t be sure that I would have ever found it on my own. There was nothing that was appealing about it to a 16-year-old girl from Rhode Island. But now that I’m aware that this is something that needs to be done, I feel like I’m in a better place to appeal to younger people, and to different people.

Another example is actually on my phone, because it’s on Facebook. This gives me goose bumps when I read it. I’ve never before been able to have an example that so clearly demonstrated my point. I got a message. Actually, I was getting many messages on Facebook. They were threatening my life, threatening to beat me up. It got to a point where, as was mentioned before, police were escorting me to my classes because my classmates were using Twitter to threaten me. Shortly after I had won the case, a girl wrote:

“Hey, I know I was part of the whole Twitter rampage against you, but I’d like to apologize for the hurtful things that I did say. I was kind of just going along with it for the sake of being a goofball and because my friends were doing it and encouraging me to do it as well. Still, that doesn’t give me an excuse to treat someone like that and say such ignorant and downright stupid, hurtful and disgusting things. I’m sure you get countless amounts of mail on here every day, whether it be fan mail or hate mail, but looking back on the fool I made of myself, I wanted to give a sincere apology for the things myself and my friends said to you. I recently saw some news segments about your case, and I’ve come to believe that what you did was really the right thing, and I support it completely. As I looked on from afar, watching how adults, people’s parents, and even political figures ridiculed you, I realized how horrid it really was. I’m so very sorry. For a 16-year-old kid, only two years younger than me, I’m sure you’ve achieved more than I will achieve in a long time and I



Andrew Seidel Photo

Jessica Ahlquist at the 37th annual national convention in October 2014.

really respect that. Thank you for doing the right thing and not giving up, even when idiots like me tormented you. Keep up the awesome work.”

One thing led to another, and I ended up deciding for myself that I didn’t believe in God at all.

To me that’s what this is all about. When it comes down to it, are we really looking to just sue everybody into liking us? No, we’re here because we need to defend our rights, encourage science and have people become more receptive to us and our beliefs. Those are really the three things that I think we want in the world, and I think that the three categories really explain that in a much easier and simpler way.

I did a lot of interviews, for two years I was doing interviews several times a month. I had people telling me that I was just wasting my time with those, but obviously it was extremely effective. That girl’s message on Facebook was not the only one. There were others similar to it, and those are just the peo-

ple who were willing to admit it.

I’ve learned that when you give an interview, or when you put yourself out there publicly as an atheist, you’re not talking to the interviewer, who, by the way, is probably going to be out to get you and have a very single-track conversation, ask you irrelevant questions and trick you into saying things that you don’t really want to say.

Then you’re done with the interview and realize you haven’t actually said anything that you wanted to say. You’re actually talking to the people watching the interview, not the interviewer. It’s very hard to keep that in mind while you’re in the middle of it. I was just a kid. It was something that I had to learn the hard way.

The best way to communicate with people who do not want to be receptive to our ideas, who don’t even know what an atheist is, is to put it in the most basic terms possible. I gave a live interview on CNN one day, and the interviewer asked me why I didn’t believe in God. I could have said many, many things, but instead of taking the scientific route, instead of explaining that there isn’t any science that supports it and the bible has lots of fallacies, etc., etc., I just explained that when I was about 10 years old my mother had become ill with a mental illness.

I explained that for the first time in my life, I had started praying and then started to feel guilty because if I had a sick mother, you know, there are peo-

ple in the world who don’t even have parents. Who am I to be asking for help when there are so many people out there who need help more? One thing led to another, and I ended up deciding for myself that I didn’t believe in God at all. That was a much more receptive thing to say than to try to explain all the problems logically with faith and even just singling out Christianity.

I just explained my perspective. I didn’t try to tell anybody that they shouldn’t believe what they believed. It was very much, “This is me, this is my personal view of things.” In a lot of ways, I feel the emotional or personal approach is one of the most effective, at least because we probably already have won over all the people who are going to be won over by scientific debates. The people who are science-minded probably already got to those conclusions on their own.

Of course though, the science and logic category is important, but it is very well-covered here [at the convention]. I didn’t really have that many opportunities to speak about that.

This brings us back to the movement itself. I’m going to be totally honest with you. I think that the secular community spends far too much time fighting over and debating silly details that don’t actually matter to anybody but us. A lot of the issues that I see and hear us discussing don’t ever end up reaching the ears of anybody

outside our community. I don’t see what good it does to try so hard to be a very single-minded community. Part of what makes this beautiful is that we can all have our own perspectives and approaches.

If we’ve learned anything from previous movements, diversity is never a bad thing. Different ideas, people and approaches are only going to help us communicate with an even larger group of people. I have been given so many wonderful opportunities to travel and speak, and it has given me such a unique perspective that I’m very thankful for.

Now for that question, “What can we do?” Well, we can focus on improving public relations with people outside of this community. We can start by recognizing our weaknesses and working really hard to fix them. We can smile more. We can go into it as 15-year-old girls who have no idea what to expect and just pretend that we are blissfully unaware that atheists are hated.

Just go into it saying, “Yeah, I’m an atheist, is that OK?” It’s much harder to hate that. It’s much harder to be aggressive toward somebody who is very, very likable.

We can really just focus on showing the world how lovable atheists are and how good we are without God. I sincerely believe that is the best direction our community and movement can be going in. Thank you.

Unique art finds home in new FFRF library

The evolution of ‘Mr. Darwin’



Sam Grover Photo

Pictured with “Mr. Darwin” at Freethought Hall is a family of his admirers (from left): Kai, Hannu and Ingrid Andersson and Karolina Johnson.

“Mr. Darwin,” the lifelike creation of talented artist Csam Wheatley, Louisville, Ky., now graces the Joel B. Landon and Wanda Y. Beers Freethought Library on the third floor of Freethought Hall, FFRF’s national office in downtown Madison, Wis.

The acquisition of Mr. Darwin was officially celebrated at a May 2 event, “Tea with Mr. Darwin,” in the new Charlie Brooks Auditorium. Area members enjoyed dainty hors d’oeuvres and entertainment by the clever satirist and songwriter, Roy Zimmerman. He accompanied himself on guitar and sang “Creation Science 101,” “The Wedding of Church and State” and other apropos tunes.

FFRF Co-President Dan Barker was the warm-up act on the Diane Uhl Steinway concert piano, performing “It’s Only Natural,” with its reference “Thanks to Mr. Darwin for showing us

the origins of the human race.”

Csam (pronounced “Sam”) Wheatley thoroughly researched details about Charles Darwin before constructing the figure. He stands a little over 6 feet, as the naturalist did in real life. Csam caught Darwin’s slight stoop, and his piercing blue eyes, dimmed a little by age.

He originally designed Mr. Darwin “for my personal collection,” adding, “I wanted to find a subject who had a very rich skin texture (such as wrinkles, pores, age spots and moles) and whose face had a lot of character. Darwin fit the bill. My great admiration for him and the availability of high quality (for its time) photos of him sealed the deal.

“I researched him to find out what the real man was like. I learned that he was a very loving husband and a doting father and that he was known to laugh so hard that he’d even slap his knee. I

knew that he was demonized in some circles so I decided to portray him in the way that I imagined he’d look if he were greeting a friend. I hoped that after seeing my portrait, people would be more likely to see him as a real man with warmth and humanity.”

Csam estimates that Mr. Darwin has already been viewed by tens of thousands, since he lent out him out to be a centerpiece at secular booths at the Kentucky State Fair for several years. He was “born” five years ago, originally as a bust.

Mr. Darwin’s head and hands are foam rubber with a silicone skin. The rest of his body is sculpted from foam rubber over a wood and metal armature. Csam realized the bust he had created would have much greater impact atop a complete figure. The head and hands are sculpted in clay, from which Csam made molds, pouring in a thin layer of silicone to form the skin.

“Once the skin had cured, I filled them with foam rubber. Then I removed them from the molds and cleaned them up. Then I painted them. Then the fingernails and eyes were painted and installed. Then different hair colors were blended, and the hair was curled as appropriate, punched into the skin, and cut.”

Csam cut pieces of foam rubber and glued them onto the armature, then sculpted them to give the body its final shape. Then he installed the hands, which he said were the most intricate and time-consuming part. He took great care to reproduce every facial mole and wrinkle. Wanting “some of my DNA to be part of this project,” Csam placed one of his eyelashes into one of those moles.

“We’re so delighted and honored

that Csam has allowed FFRF to give Mr. Darwin a home,” said Annie Laurie Gaylor, FFRF co-president. A standing plaque positioned near Mr. Darwin notes that the acquisition was made possible by Michael Cermak, who originally gave the largest donation in FFRF’s first attempt to add a library to its original building.

The property owner next door opposed the construction, so FFRF eventually was able to negotiate purchase of the decrepit apartment building, which it has replaced with a four-story (plus lower-level mailing area) addition finished earlier this year.

Generous donors Wanda Beering and Joel Landon gave \$100,000 for library construction, which is joined to the addition but still sits atop FFRF’s original building, as first planned. “We wanted Mike’s original support to be immortalized, too, because that support was so gratifying and because we kept Mike waiting a lot longer to see the library go up then we’d anticipated!” Annie Laurie said.

Please come and get your photo taken with Mr. Darwin at the open house Friday morning, Oct. 9, preceding FFRF’s 38th national convention at Monona Terrace Convention Center.



Sam Grover Photo

Guess which of Csam’s body parts is forever part of “Mr. Darwin.”

Legal victories shore up wall of separation

FFRF gets sexist posters removed

Lincoln High School in Manitowoc, Wis., took down sexist prom posters sponsored by a Catholic health care provider and a “crisis” pregnancy center after FFRF Staff Attorney Sam Grover sent an April 29 complaint letter.

The poster featured a silhouette of a girl in a dress made out of words suggesting supposedly desirable qualities for women, including “quiet, gentle and classy.” The Crossing of Manitowoc County, a Christian anti-abortion group, and Holy Family Memorial, which offers faith-based health services and is operated by the Franciscan Sisters of Christian Charity, sponsored the poster message.

The complaint was picked up by national media, with many stories pointing out the poster implied that girls who had sex had no character and would no longer embody qualities named in the poster. Senior Kelsey Schindl met with Principal Luke Valitchka to ask if she could put up posters countering the “shaming” message but was refused.

“The insinuation that if you do have sex, then you don’t have any character any more is a horrible message to send,” Schindl said. “I’m not endorsing teen sex, but you’re not a bad person if you do and you’re not a bad person if you don’t.”

Grover wrote, “When a school district allows a private religious organization to advertise on the walls of its school, it entangles itself with the religious message being advertised. As it stands, Principal Valitchka appears to have denied students the right to advertise a message on the same topic as the religious advertisements currently on display solely because their message is an opposing viewpoint.”

Manitowoc Public School District Superintendent Marcia Flaherty responded April 30, denying that the posters were religious but confirming they were taken down.

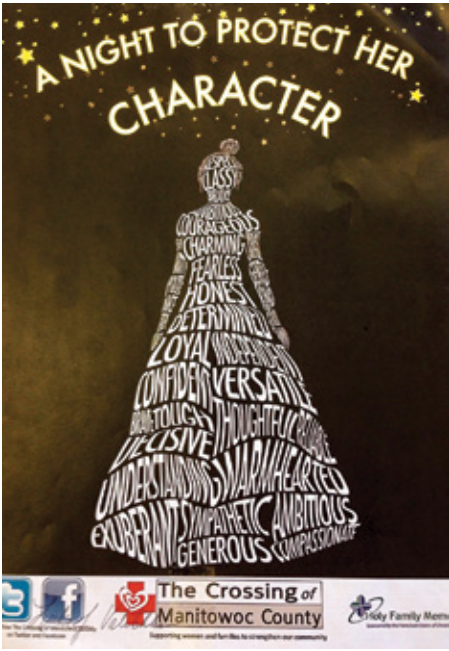
Missouri school drops ‘character assembly’

After FFRF objected to inappropriate religious references at a public school assembly in Branson, Mo., the district has taken steps to ensure future assemblies will be religion-free.

Last October, Branson Junior High School hosted a “character assembly” sponsored by the Fellowship of Christian Athletes. A former football player offered to pray with students, told them to give all their problems to Jesus and handed out football cards with a testimonial about how God and Jesus had helped him through difficult times.

Staff Attorney Patrick Elliott wrote the district March 27: “Providing a school assembly with religious content by a Christian speaker gives the appearance that Branson Public Schools endorses that speaker’s religious message.”

Superintendent Doug Hayter responded April 3 that the administration discussed policies regarding neutrality toward religion with the school principal and would “review these guidelines with our entire administrative team to ensure knowledge and full compliance.”



There was no corresponding poster theme for male students at Lincoln High School in Manitowoc, Wis.

California official won’t endorse prayer

A Solano, Calif., County supervisor will no longer officially participate in a prayer breakfast. Staff Attorney Andrew Seidel wrote Supervisor Linda Seifert on April 1, objecting to her participation in the Vallejo Prayer Breakfast: “It is unlawful under the First Amendment for a government employee to attend the event in an official capacity or to place official government seals on publications of the event.”

Seifert responded April 6, saying she would not authorize the use of her title and the county seal as a sponsor or participant in future prayer events.

Georgia teachers can sit out pledge

The principal at Greenbrier Elementary School, Evans, Ga., will no longer make teachers participate in the Pledge of Allegiance to “set an example” for students.

“The Supreme Court ruled over 70 years ago that compelling participation in the Pledge of Allegiance was constitutionally impermissible,” wrote Staff Attorney Andrew Seidel in a letter to the district. “Employees should not be singled out, rebuked or otherwise penalized for following their freedom of conscience.”

Columbia County Schools Superintendent Sandra Carraway responded soon after, informing FFRF that the district “recognize[s] and support[s] our inability to compel anyone to participate in the Pledge of Allegiance,” and would educate the principal on the law.

FFRF shuts down Oklahoma proselytizing

Students in the Cleveland, Okla., School District will no longer be subjected to bible distributions and harassment from teachers about religion.

FFRF received a complaint that a teacher at Cleveland Intermediate School read aloud to the class from a bible. When the complainant’s child asked her to stop because “not everyone believes the same thing,” the teacher allegedly refused because it was “her personal reading material.” The teacher later reportedly singled out the student, saying she bet the stu-

dent didn’t know a certain bible verse. The school principal and another man also handed out bibles to students as they left school.

In a March 30 letter, Staff Attorney Andrew Seidel detailed the problems with the school employees’ conduct: “Public schools have a duty to ensure that ‘subsidized teachers do not inculcate religion’ or use their positions of authority to promote a particular religious viewpoint.”

In an April 7 response, Superintendent Aaron Espolt said the bible distribution was done without his knowledge, adding that future distributions would not be permitted. In addition, the administration addressed bible reading with the teacher, which Espolt said would “prevent any future incidents.”

Student screening moved from church

The Tea Area School District, Tea, S.D., will end its practice of holding a mandatory kindergarten screening at a local church. In an April 9 letter of complaint, Staff Attorney Patrick Elliott wrote, “This practice forces parents and children, who may be of varying faiths or none at all, to enter a Christian house of worship in order to be screened to attend public school.”

Superintendent Jennifer Lowery replied April 29 that the screening would be moved to a district facility.

Praying Iowa coach told to stop

Staff Attorney Patrick Elliott wrote the Ankeny, Iowa, Community School District on Feb. 11 about a football coach illegally praying with his students. “We ask that you ensure coaches are not leading, organizing, inviting, encouraging or participating in prayers with their teams in the future.”

Superintendent Bruce Kimpston responded April 16 that the district provided guidelines to all high school activity directors to give to coaches: “Ankeny CSD respects the separation between government activity and religion. While we are grateful for any assistance our sports teams may receive, we understand that sponsoring religious practices is not an appropriate school function.”

Church trailer, awards venue remedied

Volusia County Schools, DeLand, Fla., remedied state/church violations after getting a Feb. 5 letter from Staff Attorney Andrew Seidel. FFRF received a report that Spruce Creek High School in Port Orange let a church leave a trailer with a church ad on it in a school parking lot all week. The school also scheduled its senior honors awards program at a Baptist church.

Chief counsel for the district responded that the trailer would be removed entirely or have its message covered during the week. The district will use a secular location for the awards program in future years.

FFRF cures school’s religion addiction

Students at Central Freedom School in Mankato, Minn., will no longer be required to attend religious Alcoholics Anonymous programming.

Central Freedom, a public alternative school for students with chemical dependency issues, required AA meetings during the school day. Students who refused to attend might be found “resistant” or otherwise noncompliant.

“Public school programs may not encourage or require student recognition of a ‘greater power’ and that students turn their lives over to God,” wrote Staff Attorney Patrick Elliott, referencing some of AA’s famous 12 steps.

FFRF’s complainant reported that several changes were being made, including no further 12-step meetings held at the school. The district superintendent confirmed the changes April 16.

Virginia ‘release time’ punishment barred

Nottoway, Va., Public Schools students who do not attend religious “release time” will no longer be forced to clean rooms or do extra homework. At least one student at Blackstone Primary School who didn’t participate in a religious class off-campus was required to sweep and dust classrooms until the other students returned. In addition, class instructors reportedly pressured nonparticipating students to attend.

Continued on next page



Ankeny players huddle for a prayer before the Class 4-A game between Ames and Ankeny on Friday.

What I learned fighting public school bible distributions

FFRF Staff Attorney Andrew Seidel's column below was first published May 5 by Hemant Mehta's Friendly Atheist as a guest post.

By Andrew Seidel

When bibles were distributed in Orange County, Fla., Public Schools in January 2013, I wrote a letter to the school district on behalf of FFRF asking them to “halt all distributions.” Earlier this year, the district finally banned all such distributions, but only after we sued.

On May 4, the 11th Circuit U.S. Court of Appeals handed down the final word on the case, which has essentially been over since the school board voted in February to give FFRF what it asked for 28 months ago. Basically, the court said the case was moot because the school district changed its mind.

Endings are a time for reflection, and I learned several lessons litigating this case. But to understand the lessons, you need to understand exactly what happened. FFRF tries to resolve state/church complaints through education. We only resort to lawsuits when the government ignores us or defends First Amendment violations as legitimate. Hence, our January 2013 educational letter to the district asking them to halt all bible distributions.

The district refused. It claimed that it had an “open forum” where any outside group, including FFRF, could distribute any literature, including bibles, on school property. FFRF’s position has always been that these forums should be closed. But if bibles are going to be distributed, FFRF thinks students should also get literature that criticizes the bible.



Dan Barker Photo

Andrew Seidel

With the help of our local chapter, the Central Florida Freethought Community, and its founder David Williamson, FFRF asked to distribute secular literature. The district insisted on vetting the literature and censored much of it. For instance, one book was prohibited because its message that Jesus was not crucified or resurrected “is age-inappropriate for the maturity levels of many of the students in high school,” even though the district-approved bible claims that Jesus was crucified and resurrected. So FFRF sued in federal court.

On Jan. 3, 2014, the district told FFRF its literature could be distributed and that the deadline for submitting new material for vetting was Dec. 31, 2013. Yes, you read that correctly. They told us three days after the deadline. Moreover, the district kept the same broken vetting process in place — the same person, same procedures and the same unbridled authority to prohibit

literature with a message the district disliked — and that vetting was only applied to us. (The district actually admitted it did not vet the bible.)

‘Lucien’s Law’

Even though we were not given time to participate in the 2014 distribution, the court declared the case moot. But more importantly, the distribution forum was still open. Sure, we could finally distribute our message, but that was not our primary goal.

From the first letter we sent, we made it clear we were trying to “halt all distributions,” from the bible to atheist literature. So we wanted a way to test the forum, to ensure that it was truly fair and open to all.

That’s why I called my friend Lucien Greaves at the Satanic Temple in July 2014. Lucien agreed that, if the bible is being distributed, kids should hear about the messages of other religions as well, including the Satanic Temple. Like FFRF, Greaves thinks that schools should stick to educating students and not give space to adults to prey on other people’s children. But he’s not willing to let bible thumpers monopolize those forums.

When the temple asked to distribute its wonderful coloring books in public schools, the backlash was harsh, immediate and predictable. It was so predictable that David Williamson, also a plaintiff in the case, coined a new phrase: “Lucien’s Law.”

Lucien’s Law states that governments will either (1) close open forums when the Satanic Temple asks to speak, or (2) censor the Satanic Temple, thereby opening itself to legal liability. It is, as Hemant Mehta has noted, “like the nuclear option of church/state separation cases.”

By November 2014, it became clear that the school board was going to

choose option #1 and close the forum, which they eventually did in February 2015.

What have we learned?

Lesson #1: Despite the court opinion declaring the case moot, it was an unqualified success for FFRF and our chapter, CFFC. We sought to close the bible distribution forum, and it is closed.

Lesson #2: Apparently, the temple’s coloring book is scarier than atheist literature. Perhaps we atheists are not the most-hated group in America after all. Or perhaps we’re only less feared — because Satan *does* run hell.

Lesson #3: This strategy is portable. Other school districts around the country allow bible distributions. Just this year, two Oklahoma districts, Okemah and Checotah, told FFRF that bible distributions occurred as part of open forums. In that case, I informed them, FFRF would like to use the forum and would be telling some friends. They closed their forums within a month.

Lesson #4: Groups trying to distribute bibles in public schools are not thinking clearly. (Shocking, I know.) Bibles are the most widely available book in this country, if not the world. It is incredibly easy for students to get a bible, but it’s much harder for students to get literature critical of the bible.

When these groups infiltrate public schools, they are forced to declare an open forum, which also brings in the atheists. Which message will have a bigger impact on students: the one they hear for the hundredth time or the one they hear for the first time?

If religious literature is being distributed in your schools, report the violation to ffrf.org/legal/report/. If you think handling 3,500 state/church complaints every year is impressive, join FFRF.

Legal victories

Continued from previous page

“Allowing release-time instructors to cajole primary students despite their parents’ objection is impermissible. Forcing nonparticipating students to partake in punitive exercises like dusting and sweeping, rather than enrichment activities, is downright coercive,” wrote Staff Attorney Patrick Elliott in an April 14 letter.

The district responded the next day, saying that what FFRF described as happening was not consistent with school policy and that teachers had been advised of those concerns.

Teacher told no more class prayer

Dawson County School District in Georgia took corrective measures about a teacher planning prayer at a class Christmas party. Staff Attorney Andrew Seidel wrote an April 8 letter after a complainant reported that a first-grade teacher at Robinson Elementary in Dawsonville told students and parents at the party, “Now let’s all

bow our heads for the blessing.” A student then led a prayer.

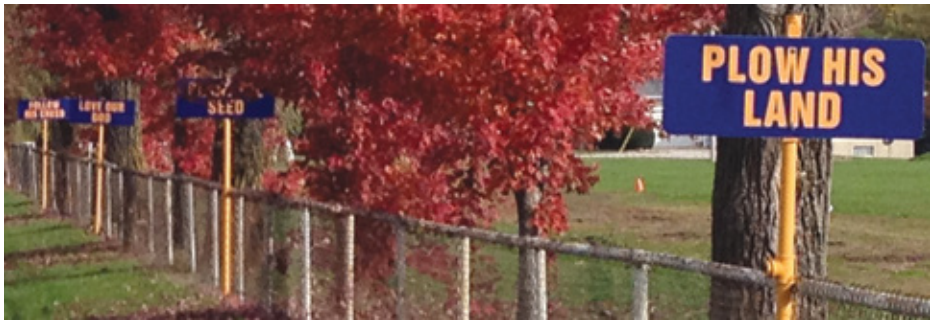
Attorney Philip Hartley responded April 20, confirming that the incident had occurred as described. He reported that after talking to the teacher, the school was confident it would not happen again.

Vet center religious sign removed

Louis A. Johnson Veterans Administration Medical Center, Clarksburg, W.Va., has taken down a religious sign. A veteran contacted FFRF to report that while at the center to have his photo taken for an ID card, he encountered a sign saying each day was “a gift from God” positioned near the camera.

FFRF Co-President Annie Laurie Gaylor sent a letter of objection Feb. 10 noting that 23% of military personnel currently choose “no religious preference” when asked.

The center’s director responded April 22 that the sign had been removed.



St. Elmo, Ill., Junior and Senior High School has removed a series of four religious signs from school property after getting a complaint last November from Staff Attorney Sam Grover. The signs on a fence next to the road said, “Plow His Land / Plant The Seed / Love Our God / Follow His Creed.” After two follow-up letters, Superintendent Deborah Philpot responded April 17 that the signs were removed in February.

FFRF reins in Georgia baccalaureate

Mount Zion High School in Carrollton, Ga., will have no further involvement in a baccalaureate ceremony. FFRF Attorney Madeline Ziegler lodged a complaint with the district April 28 about a teacher in charge of planning the baccalaureate, a religious ceremony for graduates to be held at a church. A pastor was slated to speak and seniors were being pulled out of class to learn Christian worship songs to sing at the ceremony.

FFRF’s student complainant was told written permission from a parent and “a valid excuse” would be required to skip the ceremony.

Assistant Superintendent Terry Jones replied April 30, noting that the district made changes to ensure it was meeting legal requirements. FFRF’s complainant confirmed that the teacher was no longer in charge of the baccalaureate, practice was no longer held during the school day, and the school made it clear that the ceremony was completely voluntary.

FFRF convention speech, Los Angeles, October 2014

New life for me and I'm feelin' good

Anthony Pinn, the first African-American to hold an endowed chair at Rice University, spoke at FFRF's Los Angeles convention last fall. He has advanced degrees from Columbia and Harvard universities and is a professor of humanities and religious studies at Rice and research director at the Institute for Humanist Studies. His books include *Why, Lord? Suffering and Evil in Black Theology* (1995), *The End of God-Talk: An African American Humanist Theology* (2011) and *Writing God's Obituary: How a Good Methodist Became a Better Atheist* (2014), available from FFRF.org/shop.

By Anthony Pinn

I am delighted to be here with you and I want to thank my new friends from FFRF for this invitation. I turned 50 this year, in May. I've been a bit too lazy for a midlife crisis, but it has given me opportunity to think.

My life divides fairly evenly between two diametrically opposed positions on life. I'm one who believes that there are certain elements of human existence, our movement through the world, that are best expressed through the poetic. So I'll help you get a sense of what these two poles, these two contradictory stances entail, and tell it through song. I won't sing the songs, but I'll tell you what they are.

The first phase of my life is roughly summed up by the hymn "Amazing Grace." Some of you may know this: "Amazing grace/how sweet the sound/that saved a wretch like me." Written in 1779, the same year that enslaved Africans in Connecticut petitioned for their freedom.

The second phase, the second 25 years, is better summed up by this hauntingly beautiful song first published in 1964, the year of my birth, but was really given "oomph" and classic significance in 1965 when Nina Simone decided to sing it. One of the lines [from "Feeling Good"] is this: "Freedom is mine/and I know how I feel/it's a new dawn/it's a new day/it's a new life for me and I'm feelin' good."

The second phase is marked by a certain type of lucidity or awareness, a way of recognizing and honoring what my grandmother told me as she sent me off to college. She said, "Tony, walk through the world knowing your footsteps matter." Life is embodied in how you interact with others, and the sorts of relationships you form or don't form have impact. You're not in this alone; you're not doing this simply for yourself. Move through the world knowing your footsteps matter."

I've spent 50 years moving between these two poles, which is nothing anyone would have anticipated for me. My family was part of the Great Migration, the movement of African-Americans into southern and northern cities after the Civil War through the mid-20th century, looking for opportunity and a way of integrating themselves into U.S. life.

My mother's family moved from Halifax, N.C., to Buffalo, N.Y. My grandparents were college educated, but that didn't mean much. My father's family moved from Dinwiddie, Va., to



Ingrid Laas Photo

Anthony Pinn

Buffalo. They moved to Buffalo because Bethlehem Steel was in [nearby] Lackawanna, which meant opportunity, a good paycheck, a good life.

I remember as a child going to church with my grandfather in Lackawanna, to a small Baptist church. He was one of the deacons. We'd go to Sunday school, and we'd listen to Sunday school lessons that really had nothing to do with our inner-city lives. But we listened to these stories and somehow they were connected to scripture that we didn't quite understand.

Then came the big service, the service for the adults. We had our own way of entertaining ourselves. Each child on the row got a hymnal and you'd close your eyes and open up the hymnal quickly and you'd look. The goal was to eventually land on the same hymn, and if you landed on the same hymn, it was great joy and then you moved on to the next challenge.

The final challenge was going to the restroom and staying away for an extended period and being able to explain the absence. Now sometimes this worked, sometimes it didn't. Sometimes my grandfather would catch us. All he had to do was look. It was just that look, behind those rather thick, cloudy glasses, and you knew that was it.

We stayed at that church until my mother decided it wasn't a proper environment. She didn't want us growing up in a church in which women were second-class citizens, where women could clean but couldn't preach. We started attending a small church much closer to home. This church would eventually affiliate with the African Methodist Episcopal Church, but when we arrived it was independent. My mother loved it, and it made sense

to the rest of us.

My mother and my sister went to service one Sunday when I didn't go. They got home and announced they had joined the church. I'm thinking, Linda's older, but there's nothing she gets to do that I don't do. Next Sunday, I'm in church; I play my games and take a little nap and then ask my mother what those people are doing walking up to the front of the church. She said, "They're joining the church."

I think, "Well OK, I want to do that, too." So I walk to the front and announce my name, "I'm Anthony Bernard Pinn and I came to join this church." And that was the beginning. We had a new family, it provided a cultural network; it provided social networks; and, it was a space in which we could breathe, a space in which we could have a bit of comfort in what seemed to be a death-dealing society.

It was a space apart, away from all of the madness. It was a space away from my grammar school teachers who really didn't give a damn about me. As long as I stayed out of trouble, didn't create waves, everything was good. It doesn't matter if he's learning anything or not. But this was a different space in which my talents were assumed, and pushed.

The minister also taught Sunday school. One Sunday after the lesson he asked a typical question, "What do you want to be when you grow up?" There were the typical responses: "I'm going to be president; I'm going to be a doctor; I'm going to be a lawyer." He got to me and I said, "I'm going to be a preacher." I'm not quite certain why I said it. I'm not sure I anticipated what his reaction was going to be, but I said it. He looked at me and said, "OK, we start next Sunday." So the games were over for me.

In the pulpit

So, with my mother's permission and a big smile on her face, I mounted the pulpit. I led hymns, collected the offering, said prayers, opened the church doors. I was a little minister with a very different role. I couldn't go to the store alone. I had to be in the house when the streetlights came on, but in the context of that church I had a certain type of authority simply because I said, "I'm going to be a preacher."

Eventually that minister left and another came, and he left, and then this young guy arrived from Philadelphia who was known for "growing" churches. This church needed to grow, because now it was affiliated with the African Methodist Episcopal denomination, the oldest black denomination in the country. Folks told him, "Tony has a call on his life. He's going to be a minister." He said, "Hmm, I'll check this out."

At age 12, I preached my first sermon, my trial sermon. The real test of a sermon is not how many people get happy with you. The real test of a sermon is how many people come to Christ as a result of what you've said. For that first sermon, all about fire and brimstone, three people came, so I was on my way.

I went through the process, meeting with church leaders, proving this calling. I can't go to the store alone, but I'm leading people to Christ. I'm counseling people on issues I don't really understand, on topics I couldn't necessarily pronounce.

My grandmother told me, "Look, I'm so proud of you, but understand this. I would not make use of an attorney that didn't have a J.D. Nor would I make use of the services of a physician without an M.D. And my grandson will not be a preacher without proper training."

I knew education within my family had always been important and at this stage, I knew that beyond the B.A. I would have to get professionally trained for ministry. I decided, along with my mother, that it would be most beneficial for me to be in an educational environment with folks who were like-minded. The public school system was not going to cut it. I had to

At age 12, I preached my first sermon, my trial sermon.

be in the world but not of it, and this school was not helping.

So, I transferred from City Honors, a program for gifted students, to a small Southern Baptist high school outside Buffalo. It was a feeder program for institutions like Bob Jones University and [Jerry Falwell's] Liberty Baptist. Need I say more?

I spent three years there, unlearning critical thinking skills and embracing scripture. Now it was time for college. I knew I couldn't stay in Buffalo

because I was surrounded by folks who had limited ambition, and I needed more than that. It just so happened that my minister had been transferred to a rather large church in Brooklyn, N.Y., Bedford-Stuyvesant. I took this as a sign from the Lord to go to school in New York, so Columbia University was my place.

I arrived thinking I'm going to set this world on fire for Christ and lead people to Jesus, but I was in for a surprise. I'm taking classes in biblical studies and these folks are treating the bible as if it's simply a piece of literature. They did not appreciate a deeper understanding of scripture.

I'm also meeting people who practice other faiths with devotion and without apology. It doesn't matter to them that from my perspective they are going to hell. This was the thing that really got me: Some of these folks who are on their way to hell treated me consistently better than so many of the Christians I encountered. They didn't talk about me behind my back. They weren't looking for me to slip up and prove that I was human.

Youth pastor

Bedford-Stuyvesant wasn't gentrified in 1982. It was an area deeply troubled by economic want and need, and people found ways to pacify that want and need. In the early '80s, crack cocaine became a way of doing this. It's cheap, readily available and numbs the pain.

I'm at a church in the middle of this, and we're saying nothing that eased life for these folks. I'm working with young people who are finding it easier to plan out their deaths than to think about a bright future. They're struggling with this in the basement of a church that believes it has "the way." I had nothing to say that really made much of a difference, even in terms of basic life circumstances and needs like sex education.

I was the youth minister, 18 or 19 years old, so one of my responsibilities was to provide these young people with a way to think about their sexual wants and desires. I had this one statement that was going to transform life for them and make it easy to avoid sexual sin. This is what I would say, with a rather stern but caring and compassionate look on my face: "You can do whatever you want, whenever you want, [pause] knowing that Jesus is in the room with you."

And I'm thinking, damn, this is brilliant! In reality, I had nothing to say that made a difference for their life circumstances. They were confronted with the same sort of dilemma that the writer Richard Wright describes in terms of his own life. In *Black Boy* he says, "Look, if I'd encountered the church before I encountered the harshness of the world, the songs and the sermons would have meant something to me."

Wright says he encountered the world first, and the church could not fix the suffering he felt. I gave them nothing that really made a difference, Monday through Saturday, and this was becoming difficult for me because I wanted to be a person with integrity. It reached a point where I just couldn't do it. There was a kind of dissonance that I just couldn't deal with.

This was my solution: I was supposed to be at the 6 a.m. service every Sunday. That was not a challenge because I thrived on very little sleep. But not having anything to say that made a difference, a theology that was anemic at best and perverse at worst, just

wasn't getting the job done. On some Sundays when it was just too much, I'd get dressed in my suit, make my way to the train station at 116th Street and Broadway and let the train pass. I'd sit down and the next train would come, and I'd let it go. The third train would come and I'd let it go.

I'd get on the next train and make my way to 59th street to get on that famous A train into Brooklyn and I'd let one pass. I'd look at the clock and I'd let another one pass, and I'd look again and perhaps I'd need to let a third pass. I wouldn't get on the train until I was fairly confident that I could get to Brooklyn late enough not to have to participate in the service. I'd make that slow walk down to the church, walk in and sit in the back. Afterward I'd tell the minister, "Doc, I'm sorry, the train."

I was still committed to ministry, but my idea of God was changing radically. It went from the idea of a god who breaks into human history and makes things happen to a god who works by persuasion, what my mother described as that small, still voice, attempting to get us to do the right thing. I was moving from this kind of evangelical fundamentalist position to something more along the lines of the social gospel, but it still wasn't getting it done.

I was still going to be in ministry, but I had to figure out a way to do this. My model eventually became Adam Clayton Powell Jr., for whom the church and theology were about sociopolitical and economic change.

Divinity school

My church family thought I had the answers, but I had questions, questions I couldn't share because the minister is supposed to know the answers, or know to get them. So I had to leave, and I wanted to go to a place where my sense of ministry would not matter at all, where it was about learning and critical thinking skills, so I decided Harvard Divinity School was the place to go because they didn't really care about Jesus.

When I told church family that I was thinking about going to Harvard Divinity School, they'd ask, "Why do you want to go to the cemetery?" They

didn't say "seminary;" it was "cemetery," where good religious ideas go to die.

I was a youth minister at a small church in Roxbury, in Boston. They were just integrating some of the public housing there, like the Mary Ellen McCormack development. A clear marker of economic need was the park across the street from the church. It had metal nets on the basketball hoops, which cut fingers and required tetanus shots. The park was home to kids having fun but also home to drug deals and prostitution.

I'd left the church, but I'd entered a much larger community.

I asked the minister what we could do in the context of our preaching to make a difference. He told me, "Pinn, let the people get happy with you." But I'm not happy, because I'm not making a difference. Young people from the church are literally dying. They can't get out of gang activity because of where they live. James Baldwin said, growing up in Harlem, that it became clear to him that you had to belong to something. You couldn't survive in that environment without belonging to something. He said, "You could belong to the drug dealers, you could belong to the pimps, or you could belong to the church. I'll pick the church."

I had nothing to say that made a difference, and I beat myself up for a long time and then realized that it wasn't me; it was this faith that had nothing to contribute to the life circumstances of these folks, nothing that would make a damn difference in how they lived Monday through Saturday. It wasn't me; it was the faith.

I'm wrestling with this, trying desperately to hold onto something of theism, but it reached a point where I had to make a decision. Do the people matter, or is it the tradition that matters? I decided the people matter

most. There were lots of things I was willing to be, but I was not going to be a hypocrite. I could no longer stand in the pulpit preaching what I did not believe.

I contacted the minister and said, "I'm done. I won't be on the staff anymore, I just can't do it." I've got to think; I've got to process; I've got to figure out what religion is and if it can matter in any shape or form. I contacted my bishop and surrendered my ordination. I said, "I'm no longer involved in AME ministry."

It didn't matter to me what people thought because I had to live with integrity. It didn't matter to me if I lost family or friends. I had to live in the world in a way that I could respect. I had to be true to what my grandmother told me, "Move through the world knowing your footsteps matter."

I remained interested in religion. It was a force that needed to be wrestled with and understood as a cultural development that shaped world events in some profound ways. From my perspective, if we could get people to think critically about the world, we were set. If we could give them effective communication strategies, they could make some things happen. That was my next phase.

I'd finished the Ph.D. and spent time trying to understand this all and give greater attention to the ways in which humanism and atheism have influenced life in the United States beyond white folks. It was a bit of a novel thought, that you folks don't own this. But it surprised people, so I needed to spend time understanding the nature and meaning of religion, how this functions — religion particularly, in the form of theism. I also wanted to give attention to how atheism and humanism function within the context of racial minorities.

I'd left the church, but I'd entered a much larger community, kind of nebulous in nature, but a larger community. I was convinced from that moment forward that humanists and atheists, even within my African-American communities, are legion.

Thank you. So I think we have time to chat, yes?

Audience questions

Q. I've often wondered why blacks seem to be interested in religion out of proportion to their numbers. Is it history, and slavery, or a feeling of hopelessness or hopefulness or what?

A. I knew this question was coming. It's not always first, because folks typically have to kind of warm up to it, but I always get this question. There are two things I want to say on this. First, we have to think in more complex ways concerning religion. I want to make a distinction between religion, which is a kind of binding together, and theism.

From my perspective, the real problem is theism, not religion. They overlap but are not identical. There are a variety of reasons why African-Americans over time would embrace theism. One, folks with power had it, and if these folks with power had this thing, maybe this thing could get African-Americans something.

There are pragmatic reasons for embracing it, but we cannot forget that although Christianity within the context of African-American communities, and the U.S. in much larger terms, has done a lot of damage, there are ways in which, in a rather flat way, it spurred a demand for personhood.

You cannot take away from the Christian faith in African-American

Continued on page 14



Ingrid Laas Photo

Anthony Pinn speaks at the October national convention in Los Angeles.

Tony Pinn: New life, feelin’ good

Continued from previous page
communities the slave revolts. Nat Turner, Denmark Vesey, Gabriel Prosser — all ministers. So it’s an incomplete process that forces them to surrender something of themselves, but there are ways in which it involved a push for personhood.

Let’s also think about it this way: There would be little reason for African-Americans to assume that humanism and atheism provide a softer landing place. I hear so many humanists and atheists celebrating Thomas Jefferson. *Continued from page 13*

“This is one of our dudes; he’s one of us.” But as soon as you say that, you have linked humanism to slavery. This is the man who says “This far, but no further,” because freeing slaves will mess up Virginia and mess up the nation. Again, as soon as you embrace him, you’ve linked humanism to slavery.

Too many humanists and atheists believe disbelief, nontheism, is a prophylactic against nonsense. Because I don’t believe in religion, I cannot be guilty of racism, classism, sexism or homophobia. This is a problem because it doesn’t allow us to take these issues seriously.

And African-American nonbelievers are in the shadows looking at you wrestling with these issues in an inadequate fashion. So give them an alternative,

give racial minorities in the United States a soft landing place, which involves doing more than just critiquing the traditions they’re leaving. Give them something positive.

Q. Where can I get your reading list for any of the classes you teach? I’m really interested in what you’ve studied.

A. Email me at pinn@rice.edu and identify the conversation in the subject line. I’m much better at email and text messages than phone calls, I’m a text messaging pro.

Q. I wanted to bring up the subject that the gentlemen did earlier, about African-Americans being disproportionately religious. I was wondering about a way to get more minorities in general to come out of the closet. It seems particularly rough for minorities to come out of the closet. I’d like to to come up with a better way of recruiting.

A. It seems to me, and I think there’s evidence to support this, that the churches in the context of the United States declined numerically after the civil rights movement, and that’s not just black churches. In terms of black churches, there was an upswing in the 1980s, in part because the black middle class hit the ceiling. They played by the rules after the civil rights movement, went to the schools that they were told they needed to go to, moved into the neighborhoods they were told

they needed to move to, played by the rules. Still, they couldn’t capture the American dream.

It reaches a point mid-1980s, and they say, forget this. They’ve lost cultural connections; they’ve lost social networks. So they decide they’re going to reconnect and the way to reconnect easily is to join a church. You get cultural connection and opportunities for kids to learn something about African-American culture. You get social networking. You get business networks.

Now, lots of these folks join and understand that the sermon is the price they pay for these connections, but they’re not buying what the minister is saying. We don’t really know how many African-Americans are “sure enough” theists. We know how they respond to surveys, but we don’t really know because they’re in these churches for a variety of reasons.

If we want them to come out, give them a soft place to land. That soft place has to allow more than just a critique of the traditions they’re leaving. Meet their needs, give them networks and give them a sense of community. It also means folks who dominate these organizations have to be able to give something up.

You have to recognize that you have to break free of illusions. Privilege comes in two forms — soft, and what I would reference as hard. The soft

forms of privilege are the ones we typically forget, but think about it this way. When you go to buy a car, and you’re deciding on how much to spend and what model to get, do you ever take into consideration how often you’d be followed by police if you get a certain vehicle? I do. Because a luxury vehicle is going to expose me to “driving while black,” and white friends don’t always notice this.

I’m driving down Highway 45 in Houston and police officers are running the plates behind me. They don’t leave until, darn, the plates are clean. There are things that not every U.S. citizen has to take into consideration. If you go into a restaurant, and they seat you near the restrooms, what reasons go through your mind? I’ll tell you what goes through my mind!

Soft forms of privilege, things you don’t have to worry about, but things that racial minorities in the U.S., of necessity, out of survival, have to be concerned about. So recognize these forms of privilege, work through these forms of privilege and their ramifications. Understand something about the communities you want in your organizations. Humanists and atheists are people who read, so read something about Africa-Americans, and learn something about us.

And then African-Americans might be interested.

‘Nones’ increasing, Pew poll shows

The Associated Press reported May 12 on a 2014 Pew Research Center poll that says 56 million Americans are religiously unaffiliated. Between 2007 and 2014, the number of Americans who described themselves as atheist, agnostic or of no particular faith grew from 16% to almost 23% percent. The number of self-described Christians dropped from 78% to 71%.

According to the poll, conducted in English and Spanish, 31% of “nones” said they were atheist or agnostic, compared to 25% percent in 2007. The poll found that while mainline Protestant and Catholic numbers dropped, the number of evangelicals rose slightly to 62 million.

Muslims and Hindus each make up less than 1% of the U.S. population.

The number of Jews rose from 1.7% to 1.9% percent of Americans from 2007-14.

The study put the number of Catholic adults at 51 million, about 20% of the population, compared to about 25% in 2007 — or just over one-fifth of the U.S. population, a drop of about 3 percent over seven years. In 2007, Catholics made up about one-quarter of Americans.

Greg Smith, Pew associate research director, said the findings show “substantive changes” among the religiously unaffiliated. He said secular groups have become increasingly organized to counter bias against them.

“Nones” now are the second largest “affiliation”

It paid to complain

The Michigan Association of Civil Rights Activists (MACRA), founded by Mitch Kahle and Holly Huber, FFRF Life Members, had another success in April when a substitute teacher at Hart High School in Hart was ousted as a sub for distributing religious materials. MACRA alerted the district April 6 about the violations.

The teacher was supplied as a substitute by Professional Education Services Group (PSEG), a staffing company. “The substitute had, in fact, done some things and passed out materials with religious information and some specific references to entries in the bible,” Superintendent Mark Platt told the Ludington Daily News on April 14.

“As a result of the investigation, the

substitute will no longer be allowed sub for Hart Public Schools. We followed the formal complaint process that PESG provides and we communicated clearly with PESG that Mr. Meersma is not allowed to substitute at Hart Public Schools,” Platt said in a press release.

A demonstration planned in support of the teacher never took place, Platt said.

“[W]e will be reminding staff of the importance of honoring the issue of the separation of church and state,” Platt said. The district will also add the topic to “start of the school term” staff discussions in the fall and consider putting together a “do’s and don’ts” handout for subs.

They said what?

No matter how much good you bestow upon a woman, she will deny it. Her selfishness drives her to deny it. This holds true for all women, whether Western, Arab, Muslim, Jewish or Christian. This is the nature of women. **Imam Mohamed Khattabi, sermon at Aicha Mosque in Montpellier, France** *France 24, 3-29-15*

In our church, the last four cycles we’ve probably had almost 100% of our people vote. In our local county, we control the Republican Party pretty much — our church and another church. **Bill Tvedt, pastor at Oskaloosa Jubilee Family Church, commenting on Iowa pastors’ influential role in presidential politics** *Minnesota Public Radio, 4-5-15*

So, Hillary, are you going to answer any questions about why dismembering children in the womb should continue to be the policy of the nation of which you want to be president? And if you cannot respect the life of a little baby, how are we to expect you to respect ours? In 2016 and beyond, the people of God have to elect public servants who know the difference between serving the public and killing the public. Amen!

Texas Catholic priest Frank Pavone, column headlined “Hillary Clinton tops the blindness list” *renewamerica.com, 4-14-15*

In the elementary schools, participation rate averages 97% per school. Our students love the high-energy bible stories that are enhanced with tons of visuals. We have great bible teachers. The bible program is in 16 elementary schools and three middle schools. Student participation is voluntary. A

signed permission slip from the parent is required.

Wayne Pelts, board member of Bible in the Schools, a program in which the bible is taught as literature and history in Mercer County Public Schools, West Virginia *Bluefield Daily Telegraph, 4-27-15*

We want them to know we’re behind them 100% and saying “God bless Blue Bell” says it all.

Jim “Mattress Mack” McIngvale, Houston, organizer of a prayer vigil supporting the ice cream company whose listeria-tainted product killed three people and sickened seven others in Kansas *click2houston.com, 4-25-15*

Prayer is something we should be doing all the time, especially public schools. I recall when I was in elementary school, we had prayer and [the] Pledge of Allegiance every day. What happened to those days and why has it gone?

City council member Leonard Gomez, supporting a National Day of Prayer proclamation for an event at City Hall in Grantville, Ga. *Newman Times-Herald, 4-29-15*

Father, I want to lift up this road bond to you and just ask you to help the people realize this county has got to have ways to get around.

Mary Hammer Menzel, Montgomery County, Texas, prayer opening a county commission meeting at which she called bond opponents “tools of Satan” *Montgomery County Courier, 4-6-15*

Freethought isn't free, *wow* did FFRF supporters come through!



Photographed in the Charlie Brooks Auditorium, fourth floor of FFRF's new addition, are current staff and interns. Seated from left: Director of Operations Lisa Strand; Co-Presidents Annie Laurie Gaylor and Dan Barker, Attorney Rebecca Markert. Row 2: Legal Publicist Maddy Ziegler, Editorial Assistant Dayna Long, Legal Fellow Kat Paige, Director of First Impressions Lisa Treu, Legal Assistant Calli Miller, Communications Coordinator/Executive Assistant Laura Seering. Back row: Freethought Today Editor Bill Dunn, Legal Extern Jarvis Idowu, Membership/Office Manager Jackie Douglas; Attorney Patrick Elliott; Legal Extern Ryan Jayne, Graphic Designer Jake Swenson, Attorneys Sam Grover and Andrew Seidel. Thanks to Andrew for arranging the photo. Calli Miller (right) holds photo, yet to be framed, of the late Harry Lonsdale.



In the News

Court deals blow to Canada prayer

The Supreme Court of Canada ruled unanimously April 15 in Ottawa that elected officials don't have the right to pray at public meetings. The case stems from a 2007 complaint by Alain Simoneau about city councilors praying before meetings in Saguenay, Quebec. Mayor Jean Tremblay, who argued that Catholicism was part of Quebec's heritage, was ordered to stop reciting prayers.

"The recitation of the prayer at the council's meetings was above all else a use by the council of public powers to manifest and profess one religion to the exclusion of all others," the Supreme Court ruled. "A neutral public space free from coercion, pressure and judgment on the part of public authorities in matters of spirituality is intended to protect every person's freedom and dignity, and it helps preserve and promote the multicultural nature of Canadian society."

Simoneau was awarded about \$24,000 in damages.

Greece doesn't apply in North Carolina

U.S. District Judge James Beaty ruled May 4 that the Rowan County Commission in Salisbury, N.C., violated the U.S. Constitution by opening meeting with sectarian prayer. Beaty ruled that the board's "practice fails to be nondiscriminatory, entangles government with religion, and over time, establishes a pattern of prayers that tends to advance the Christian faith of the elected Commissioners at the expense of any religious affiliation unrepresented by the majority."

The American Civil Liberties Union of North Carolina in its suit alleged that 97% of the prayers delivered by commissioners between 2007 and 2013 were specifically Christian.

Beaty held that Rowan County's prayer "falls outside of the prayer practices approved" by the U.S. Supreme Court ruling in *Town of Greece v. Galloway*. In Greece, N.Y., the town invited clergy and laypersons to deliver prayers in a nondiscriminatory fashion, he said, while in Rowan County, only commissioners delivered prayers.

Norway repeals law banning blasphemy

As reported by Religion Clause and Sputnik News, the Norwegian Parliament repealed the country's blasphemy law in early May. The law had stated: "Any person who by word or deed publicly insults or in an offensive or injurious manner shows contempt for any creed whose practice is permitted in the realm or for the doctrines or worship of any religious community lawfully existing here, or who aids and abets thereto, shall be liable to fines or to detention or imprisonment for a term not exceeding six months."

Support for repeal came in the wake of the Charlie Hebdo massacre in Paris in February. Repeal was opposed by several Christian groups.

The last time anyone was charged under the law was in 1933, when writer Arnulf Overland was acquitted of charges stemming from his lecture titled "Christianity, the tenth plague."

Sentences for Farkhunda's death

Afghanistan's Primary Court in Kabul sentenced four men to death by hanging on May 6 for the March 19 mob killing of Farkhunda Malikzada, 27, after she was falsely accused of burning the Quran even though she was a devout Muslim. Eight others were sentenced to 16 years in prison.

The Associated Press reported: "Chilling mobile phone videos recorded the horror of the last moments of Farkhunda's life, as she was punched, kicked, beaten with wooden planks, thrown off a roof, run over by a car and ultimately set afire on the banks of Kabul River."

The mens' trials were broadcast live across the country. Police are also being prosecuted for neglecting their duties.

Decalog law passed in Arkansas

Arkansas Gov. Asa Hutchinson signed a bill April 8 requiring the secretary of state to arrange for a privately funded Ten Commandments monument to be placed on the Capitol grounds in Little Rock, the Arkansas Democrat-Gazette reported. The bill easily passed in the Republican-dominated Legislature, 27-3 in the Senate and 72-7 in the House.

While the law says the monument "shall not be construed to mean that the state of Arkansas favors any particular religion or denomination over others," Rita Sklar, ACLU of Arkansas executive director, said the ACLU is considering a lawsuit because "we think it's a religious document and to say otherwise is disingenuous. It's divisive and excludes people of non-Abrahamic faiths and no faith from feeling" welcome at the Capitol.

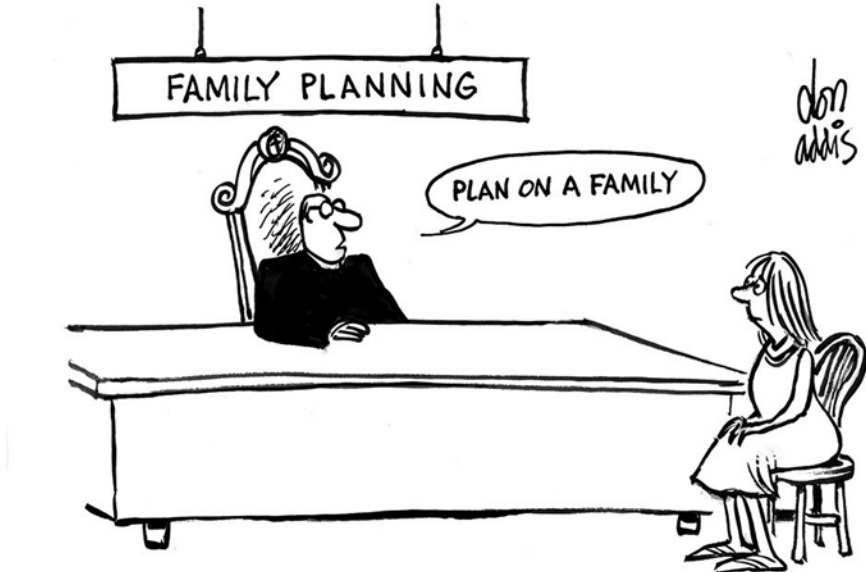
An ACLU lawsuit challenging a similar monument at the Oklahoma Capitol is pending before the state Supreme Court.

Tennessee GOP kills state bible bill

The Tennessee Senate voted 22-9 on April 16 to send a bill making the bible the official state book back to committee, effectively killing it a day after the House passed the bill sponsored by freshman Rep. Jerry Sexton, R-Bean Station.

Senate Majority Leader Mark Norris, R-Collierville, opposed the bill, reported The Tennessean. "All I know is that I hear Satan snickering. He loves this kind of mischief. You just dumb the good book down far enough to make it whatever it takes to make it a state symbol, and you're on your way to where he wants you."

"I am a Christian, but I am also a constitutionalist and a conservative," Lt. Gov. Ron Ramsey, R-Blountville, said in a statement. "It would be fiscally irresponsible to put the state in a position to have to spend tax dollars defending a largely symbolic piece of



legislation. We don't need to put the bible beside salamanders, tulip poplars and 'Rocky Top' in the Tennessee Blue Book to appreciate its importance to our state."

Transit system ad bans spur debate

The American Civil Liberties Union of Pennsylvania filed a federal lawsuit April 28 against the County of Lackawanna Transit System (COLTS) for refusing to let the Northeastern Pennsylvania Freethought Society advertise on its buses. The rejected ads said "atheists" along with the group's name and website.

At first, COLTS claimed it barred ads "promoting" or "attacking" religion or intended to spark public debate. But the suit alleges it has allowed ads from religious groups, a political candidate and a blog with links to anti-Jewish websites. In 2014, COLTS did accept a Freethought Society ad after it removed the word "atheists."

"It's hard to advertise effectively if we're not allowed to use the word 'atheists' to say who the NEPA Freethought Society's members are or who we're trying to reach," said spokesperson Justin Vacula.

Reggie Shuford, executive director of the ACLU of Pennsylvania, said: "Once you open up a space for speech, you have to let everyone in equally."

...

New York City's Metropolitan Transportation Authority on April 29 banned all political ads on its subways and buses after a judge ruled the American Freedom Defense Initiative and Pamela Geller could place an ad with the phrase " Hamas Killing Jews" on buses.

The new policy means any ad that demeans or disparages a person or group will be barred, reported CBS New York. "Advertisements expressing viewpoint messages" will no longer be accepted, said Jerome Page, MTA general counsel.

10-year-old denied Paraguay abortion

The government in majority-Catholic Paraguay is refusing to let a pregnant 10-year-old who was allegedly raped by her stepfather have an abortion. CNN reported the girl's mother brought her to the hospital April 21 because of abdominal pains. It was determined she was 22 weeks pregnant.

The mother told authorities she believes her husband, 42-year-old Gilberto Benitez, is the father. Paraguay, which is about 90% Catholic and 6% Protestant, allows abortion only save

the pregnant woman's (or girl's) life. The girl weighs about 75 pounds.

Benitez denied he's the father. "I've been with tons of women, and I never got anybody pregnant." During the investigation, the girl's mother was arrested for allegedly enabling her abuse.

About two births a day occur among girls aged 10 to 14 in Paraguay (pop. 6.8 million). Many are the result of sexual abuse by relatives and stepfathers, according to the government.

Ga. teacher out over comments

Nancy Price Perry, a Dublin, Ga., middle school teacher who told her students in March that President Barack Obama isn't a Christian, has been removed from the classroom and will retire at the end of the school year.

Dublin Schools Superintendent Chuck Ledbetter on April 28 announced Perry's retirement and apologized to students and parents, reported the Atlanta Journal-Constitution.

"It is not the place of teachers to attempt to persuade students about religious or political beliefs," Ledbetter said. "In doing so, the teacher was wrong and that has been communicated to her."

WMAZ reported that Stephanie and Jimmie Scott, parents of a student, alleged in a complaint that Perry said, "If your parents voted for Obama, they're evil and I don't see how your parents could vote for someone that's Muslim," then challenged students to prove their Christianity.

Third atheist dies in attack

Ananta Bijoy Das, 33, a secular blogger, was hacked to death on the way to work at a bank May 12 in Sylhet, Bangladesh's fifth-largest city. It was the third such attack this year.

Police Commissioner Kamrul Hasan told Agence France-Presse that four masked attackers pounced on Das. "They chased him down the street and first attacked his head with their machetes and then attacked him all over his body," Hasan told Agence France-Presse.

Colleagues said Das was an atheist who wrote for Mukto-Mona, a website formerly moderated by Avijit Roy, a Bangladeshi-born U.S. citizen murdered in Dhaka in February. Das also was an editor for the quarterly magazine Jukti (Logic) and headed the Sylhet science and rationalist council.

Freethought ‘church’ protests bank’s bias



“Hail Bacon, Full of grease, The Lard is with thee,” starts the church’s prayer “Hail Piggy.”

Nevada Bacon Prophet John Whiteside led an April protest by secular groups, including Whiteside’s United Church of Bacon, taking Wells

Fargo Bank to task for refusing to notarize a church document. Whiteside, an FFRF Life Member, said the refusal by the Las Vegas branch bank amounted to discrimination against atheists and was backed by Wells Fargo’s corporate office, where the protest by seven secular groups was held. More than 100 people picketed over two days.

Whiteside has legally founded the church, which stemmed from a 2010 gathering at atheist comedian Penn Jillette’s house, with “a funny name and a serious mission” to protest how religious organizations get special privileges under the law, including tax exemption.

The “congregation” now has about 4,000 members. The church claims no tax-exempt status and through donations has raised about \$160,000 in 2014-15 to benefit autism, cancer and

AIDS research and other secular charities. Members may apply to become wedding officiants, which are performed for free.

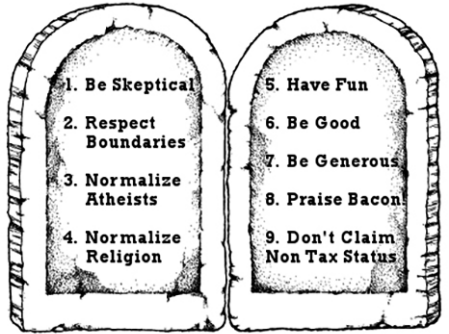
In rejecting the document, the notary questioned whether Whiteside was really the “owner” of the church. “Notaries may not reject a customer with a valid ID,” said Whiteside. “It’s the law, and the National Notary Association makes it clear in their code of conduct. The only explanation for what Wells Fargo did is discrimination.”

The protest and events leading up to it received extensive media coverage, all of which was positive, said church spokesman Johnny Monsarrat. KLAS-TV Evening News gave the protest two minutes, he said. “Note that the Wells Fargo rebuttal fails to give any reason for the refusal and is basically a personal attack. That’s what you resort to when you have nothing else to say.”

Montserrat noted that in the rebuttal, the company touted its “history of supporting and serving the needs of a widely diverse customer base.” That flies in the face of facts, he asserted.

“Actually, Wells Fargo paid \$175

million in 2012 to settle a federal case of discrimination for giving bad loans to African-Americans, Hispanics and women. Since then, they have also been sued by Los Angeles, Cook County, Ill., and a group of pregnant women for discrimination.”



The United Church of Bacon’s Fourth Commandment. “Normalize religion: We oppose special privileges in the law for religious organizations. There is nothing about people of faith and their groups that makes them better than secular nonprofits.”

Overheard

So, as far as I’m concerned, the free throws, victories, losses, thrills and disappointments will be shared equally by the just and unjust, believers and unbelievers. Even atheists make baskets and win games.
Minnesota columnist Lynn Hummel, “March Madness and the power of prayer”
Detroit Lakes Tribune, 4-8-15

You walk into coffee shops like Starbucks in the morning and you’re going to see a group of people with the bible open.
Mark Pettus, associate pastor, Church of the Highlands, Birmingham, Ala., “Inside the Most ‘Bible-Minded’ City in America”
Time, 4-6-15

After controlling for the geographic location of the school, the type of school and the demographics of the students being tested, the Lubienski study clearly shows that students who attend traditional, K-12 public schools outperform students who attend both charter schools and private religious schools, irrespective of denomination (although student achievement was lowest in private, conservative Christian schools).
Report by the Center for Tax and Budget Accountability which found “no compelling reason to subsidize Indiana school vouchers with public taxpayer dollars”
Indianapolis Star, 4-16-15

The priest allegedly favored sexual role-play scenarios in which his lover played the disciple Judas Iscariot and had to atone for his betrayal of Jesus by becoming his slave.
News story on the removal from ministry of a Catholic priest by the Archdiocese of Taranto, Italy
The Daily Mail, 4-8-15

In the beginning Kanye created the heaven and the earth.
News story on The Book of Yeezus, a bible that replaces every mention of God with singer-songwriter Kanye West’s first name
buzzfeed.com, 4-3-15

I know God sometimes says “No” when we ask for something in our prayers. But if He really loved us, wouldn’t He always answer our prayers with a “Yes?”
Question from Mrs. G.H. to “Ask Rev. Graham”
Bowling Green Daily News, 4-20-15

The Indiana Office of Tourism Development is partnering with the Indiana Economic Development Corp. on this initiative to restore Indiana’s image after the recent political controversy surrounding RFRA.
Jake Oakman, tourism official, on a \$1 million appropriation to a public relations firm to create ads to show the state welcomes gays
Chicago Tribune, 4-13-14

We’re not out to make more atheists. We’ve had to deal with people trying to convert us. But discourse is good. Nothing is better for your beliefs than to have them challenged.
Chance Parker, president of Campus Atheists and Agnostics, on “Ask an Atheist Day” at Indiana University–Purdue University Fort Wayne
Journal Gazette, 4-16-15

I am a 12-year-old atheist attending a Christian all-girls’ school. Before I joined, I posted an atheist picture on a social media site. I thought it was fine, until a teacher asked to speak with me. Apparently, a few of my peers had dug up the picture and were concerned enough to show it to her. She asked me to delete it. What should I do?
Question to actor Molly Ringwald, who writes an advice column on “love, family or life in general”
The Guardian, 4-17-15

We, the family of Rabbi Yitzchok Dovid Groner OBM [Of Blessed Memory], are very sorry for what has occurred to those who were the victims of sexual abuse while they attended the Yeshivah Centre Melbourne when our father was the senior Rabbi.
Open letter to abuse victims from Miriam Telsner, Yossi Groner, Chaim Tzvi Groner, Rivkah Yurkowicz and Mendy Groner, whose father died in 2008
failedmessiah.typepad.com, 4-20-15

We were driving around town and I was showing them how the banks scroll bible verses across their marquees, and they were just like “This is amazing.”
Neil Carter, a teacher and former evangelical in Mississippi who blogs on “Godless in Dixie,” describing his interview for a “CBS Sunday Morning” segment titled “Atheists: In godlessness we trust”
Jackson Clarion-Ledger, 4-21-15

Compassion, the ability to recognize pain in others, should move you to want to do what you can to help others to better their lives and to help them feel better. If you don’t feel that, I think you might want to talk to a doctor.
FFRF member Kelly McCauley, panelist at Ask an Atheist in Huntsville, Ala., answering the question, “If there’s no higher power, how do you know right from wrong?”
The Huntsville Times, 4-22-15

Now, do people in offices have preachers coming into their place of business, interrupting their work? No. They have to do it before or after work. As a team and an organization, you’ve got to try to minimize those distractions, period.
Former New York Knicks coach Jeff Van Gundy, quoted in a story on how all 30 National Basketball Association teams have volunteer chaplains
The New York Times, 4-24-15

Pinhead-sized Bible goes on show in Jerusalem
Headline on a story about a Hebrew version of the bible which has 1.2 million letters imprinted on a gold-plated silicon chip
BBC News, 4-26-15


Somebody call for a sheriff.
M. Teresa Sarmina, Philadelphia Common Pleas Court judge, refusing bail for Msgr. William Lynn during his appeal of a prison sentence for endangering the welfare of children by covering up clergy sex abuse
The Inquirer, 4-30-15

I suspect that anyone that looks at this will realize this ain’t kosher.
Dallas attorney David Finn, on Prestonwood Baptist Executive Pastor Mike Buster’s email to 2,500 church families in which he endorsed five political candidates by name
WFAA-TV, 5-1-15

My child, Timmy Yu, I say unto you thus: I have heard your prayers, and now I shall answer them. No, you cannot get out of your wheelchair. Not ever.
“God Answers Prayers Of Paralyzed Little Boy”
The Onion, 12-9-98

But of course many Christians are highly fact resistant when it comes to their certainty that the Founders simply cribbed our Constitution from the bible, rather than following Enlightenment ideals and carefully attempting to blend and perfect Roman and British models. It really seems as if they either haven’t ever read either the Constitution or the bible, or both.
Michael Christian, Haverhill, Mass., letter to the editor, “Nation was born in Enlightenment, not the bible”
Eagle-Tribune, 5-3-15

The most important finding in Barna’s report is that women are joining the atheist community by the millions. In 1993, just 16% of nonbelievers were women, but in 2013 that number was 43%, representing a nearly threefold leap.
Adam Lee commentary on the Barna Group’s “2015 State of Atheism in America” study
The Guardian, 5-3-15

 Like a Pringles vendor sounding an alarm about obesity, Pope Francis fashioned himself a feminist last week.”
Columnist Frank Bruni, “Catholicism undervalues women”
The New York Times, 5-6-15

I don’t need no Arab or Muslim or whoever telling me what to do or us here in the county what to do about praying. If they don’t like it, stay the hell away.
Carrol Mitchem, Lincoln County Board of Commissioners chairman, saying that because all of the North Carolina county’s 102 churches are Christian, only Christian prayers will be allowed to open commission meetings.
WBTV Charlotte, 5-9-15

Black Collar Crime Blotter

Compiled by Bill Dunn

Arrested / Charged

James Osborne, 55, Granville, NY: 3rd-degree grand larceny. Osborne is charged with taking over \$3,000 from Bible Baptist Church coffers in Ghent between June 2010 and June 2014 while he was pastor there.

Prosecutor Paul Czajka alleged Osborne stole the money to pay personal expenses. *Source: Times Union, 5-1-15*

James E. Crawn, 45, Idaville, IN: 2 counts of child molesting, sexual misconduct with a minor and child solicitation. Crawn, pastor at Faith Baptist Church, is accused of molesting 2 males, both under age 16 when the alleged offenses occurred. *Source: Rensselaer Republican, 4-30-15*

Corey D. Butler, 34, DeKalb, IL: Possession and dissemination of child pornography. Butler, pastor at Jesus Is the Way Christian Center, allegedly had hundred of images on a computer in his bedroom, where they were shared online from Feb. 28-March 2.

The church meets at the Holiday Inn Express and at the Holmes Student Center at Northern Illinois University. *Source: Daily Chronicle, 4-29-15*

An unidentified former Catholic priest, 70, Granville, New South Wales: 2 counts of sexual assault and 17 counts of indecent assault. He was arrested after an investigation of a 2014 complaint from a girl allegedly assaulted while he was a priest in 1986.

It's alleged that 7 more children have been identified as his victims from 1975-92. *Source: NSW Police, 4-29-15*

Massimo Luculano, Vercelli, Italy: Soliciting sex from minors and sexual assault. Luculano, a Catholic priest in the Archdiocese of Vercelli, is accused of molesting a 14-year old Italian boy and 2 foreign boys, both age 17.

Archbishop Marco Arnolfo said in a statement that Luculano had been suspended. He offered "affection and prayers to the families that may be implicated."

Luculano also allegedly claimed to be a physical therapist, then met minors online and offered them gift phone cards, soccer shoes and money. *Source: Press TV, 4-25-15*

Gratien Alabi, 45, Cà Raffaello, Italy: Murder. Alabi, a Catholic priest, is charged with the death of Guerrina Piscaglia, 50, a parishioner who vanished in May 2014.

Detectives said Alabi and Piscaglia exchanged numerous text messages and phone calls, including on the day she disappeared during a walk. Media reported he allegedly had computer images of nuns in lewd poses, which he told police were sent to him by religious women with whom he corresponded online. *Source: ibtimes.com, 4-24-15*

Bruce Fehr, 54, Savannah, GA: Sexual exploitation of children. Fehr, rector of St. Francis of the Islands Episcopal Church, is accused of downloading child pornography.

Fehr was ordained in 2013 and, according to the church's website, works there with his wife, a former attorney with the Florida Department of Children and Families. *Source: WJCL, 4-23-15*

Domingo O. Isidro, 43, Edcouch, TX: Indecency with a child. The incident with a girl from the congregation allegedly took place in December when Isidro was pastor at Iglesias Victoria en Cristo.

Police Chief Eloy Cardenas said, "The first one is usually the hardest. Once people start to see, and I'm talking about the alleged victims, that somebody else spoke out, that usually triggers a domino effect in cases like these." *Source: KRGV, 4-22-15*

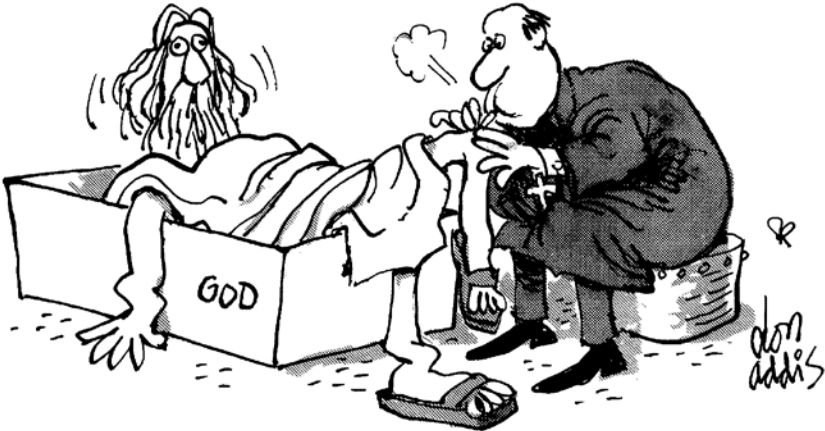
Wagdi Y. Iskander, 52, Calgary, Alberta: Sexual assault and sexual interference with a child under 14. At the time of the alleged abuse in 1994-95 during counseling sessions, Iskander was pastor of Arabic Baptist Church. The alleged victim was then 11 and first came forward to police in 1996, when he and his family decided not to press charges but have it resolved through the church due to the boy's age.

Iskander was an active pastor until 2012, according to authorities, who reopened the case that year after the man contacted them with the same allegations and witnesses were reinterviewed. *Source: Calgary Herald, 4-20-15*

Hien Minh Nguyen, 55, San Jose, CA: 14 counts of bank fraud and 4 counts of tax evasion. A federal grand jury indicted Nguyen, a Catholic priest and director of the Vietnamese Catholic Center, for failing to report \$1.1 million of income between 2008-11.

He's also accused of depositing at least 14 checks totaling \$19,000 meant for the center's account into his personal account. *Source: San Francisco Chronicle, 4-20-15*

Benjamin R. Hollifield, 25, Salisbury, NC:



Indecent liberties with a child, 3rd-degree sexual exploitation of a minor and statutory rape/sex offense with a person aged 13, 14 or 15 by a person at least 6 years older. Hollifield was fired as youth and outreach pastor at Piedmont Baptist Church after being charged, according to a post on the church website, "for abusing a child and violating the church's trust and policies."

Arrest warrants allege he encouraged teen girls to engage in sexual activity. *Source: Charlotte Observer, 4-18-15*

Gerardo Lopez, 60, Orange Walk Town, Belize: 4 counts of producing child pornography. Lopez, pastor of Boca de Poder Evangelical Church, was arrested after a woman gave police nude photos of her daughters, ages 3 and 10, that were allegedly on Lopez's cell phone.

The woman alleged she was in a relationship with Lopez and that he coerced the girls to pose after they had all been swimming. *Source: Belize News, 4-17-15*

James E. Simmons Jr., 64, Malaga, NJ: 2nd-degree sex assault, criminal sexual contact and endangering the welfare of a child. Simmons, pastor at New Life in Christ Ministries in Malaga, is accused of molesting a girl starting when she was 17 and continuing the abuse for several years.

Church members are standing behind Simmons, according to a video posted online. "We want to let Satan know and the world know that we love our pastor," Elder Freddie Alexander said to applause from parishioners. *Source: nj.com, 4-16-15*

Aracely Meza, 49, Balch Spring, TX: Serious bodily injury to a child by omission. Meza and her husband, **Daniel Meza, 42**, co-pastors at Iglesia Internacional Jesus es el Rey, allegedly starved a 2-year-old boy to death because Aracely Meza said he was possessed by demons. Daniel Meza and the boy's parents, **Liliana and Zenon Aparicio**, may also be charged. The Aparicios are believed to be in Mexico.

Documents said the boy was deprived of food for 25 days and that after he died, Aracely Meza led a resurrection ceremony which followers recorded on video.

The affidavit said she told police God ordered her to make the child fast because he "had demons." A church member allegedly told police she tried to feed him but the Mezas stopped her. *Source: Dallas Morning News, 4-15-15*

Robert Whittaker, Snellville, GA: Exploitation of a disabled adult and violating probation. Whittaker, founder/pastor of Be Encouraged Ministries, is accused of using a parishioner's credit cards for his personal use, with charges totaling over \$14,000. Police Chief Roy Whitehead said Whittaker "offered to care for" a church member with short-term memory loss while his wife worked the night shift. *Source: Journal-Constitution, 4-14-15*

Frederick Daack, 54, West Paducah, KY: Unlawful use of an electronic device to procure a minor in a sexual performance. Daack is charged with inappropriate phone calls and texts with a minor who attended Milburn Chapel Cumberland Presbyterian Church, where Daack was an elder until last year.

Daack's alleged offenses came to light during an investigation of **Michael Parsons**, the church's youth pastor, who faces 2 counts of 3rd-degree rape and 22 counts of electronic solicitation of a minor allegedly involving a 16-year-old girl in his youth group. *Source: WPSD, 4-14-15*

Kurt G. Ludwigsen, 43, Nyack, NY: 100 counts of illegal sexual contact, including forcible touching and sexual abuse involving 14 alleged victims who were members of the girls softball team at Nyack College, where Ludwigsen was coach until being fired in March.

From the evangelical school's website: "If you are interested in receiving a Christian education in an environment that will prepare you to do all that God has called you to do with ex-

cellence, Nyack College is the place for you!" Its sports teams, formerly the Fighting Parsons, are now called the Warriors. *Source: WABC, 4-13-15*

Constance G. Fortune, 61, Los Angeles: Financial elder abuse and 3 counts of grand theft. Fortune, an employee, trustee and former spokesperson for First AME Church, is accused of bilking seniors, including many church members, out of more than \$100,000.

Fortune, a licensed insurance agent, allegedly collected premiums and fabricated bogus documents to fool clients into thinking they had policies. *Source: Insurance Journal, 4-13-15*

Seven members of an Idaho family, some of whom are in a band called Matthew 24 Now (aka Busking in the Son), a bible verse referring to the End Times, were charged in **Yavapai County, AZ**, with aggravated assault on a police officer, hindering prosecution, riot and resisting arrest. A family member, Enoch Gaver, 21, died after being shot by police. A police officer and another family member sustained gunshot wounds.

Police had responded to a complaint from an employee about an incident inside the store. The family had recently left Boise and was living in a Chevrolet Suburban in the parking lot. Video showed a violent confrontation in which officers were tackled, struck and put in chokeholds when they tried to separate family members. *Source: Daily Mail, 4-11-15*

John-Mark Wilson, 45, Brookland, AR: Possession of child pornography. Wilson, pastor of Brookland Church of Christ, was terminated after his arrest for allegedly having sexually explicit images on his computer, a church official said. *Source: AP, 4-9-15*

Eric Isaiah Adusah, 28, London: Murder. Adusah, pastor of Global Light Revival Church, is accused in the death of his wife, Charmain Speiers, 41, a native of Scotland, who was found dead of a heroin overdose in a hotel bathtub in Koforidua, Ghana, 3 days after her husband had returned to London. She was reported to be 3 months pregnant. Adusah is in custody in Ghana. *Source: Ghana Web, 4-6-15*

Francisco Moran, 57, Clinton, CT: Risk of injury to a minor and 2 counts of each of 4th-degree sexual assault and coercion. Moran, pastor at Good Samaritan Church, is charged with assaults on an underage teenager and an adult last summer on separate occasions at a private residence.

Both alleged to police that Moran threatened to have them deported if they reported the assaults. *Source: Hartford Courant, 4-3-15*

Patrick Carrick, 56, Swissvale, PA: Possession of child pornography. Carrick, an elder at First Presbyterian Church and chairman of the Christian Education Ministry, ordered about 30 explicit videos from 2007-11, said a statement from Attorney General Kathleen Kane. *Source: WPXI, 4-3-15*

Ransom E. Howard Sr., 47, Port Arthur, TX: 3rd-offense driving while intoxicated. Howard, pastor of Rock Island Missionary Baptist Church (who also teaches 6th-grade social studies at a public school) slid off the road in a 2008 Cadillac Escalade and refused to take a field sobriety test or submit to a blood sample. A grand jury indicted him in November, but the school wasn't aware of the charge, a spokesperson said. *Source: KBMT, 3-31-15*

Jon C. "Chris" McKinney, Terre Haute, IN: Misdemeanor battery. McKinney, pastor at North Terre Haute Christian Church, is accused of pepper-spraying another driver in an argument about the other man's allegedly unsafe driving. *Source: WTHI, 3-30-15*

Zachary Zahl, 23, Middleton, WI: 3 counts of child enticement and 2 counts of false imprisonment. Zahl, most recently a youth volunteer at High Point Church in Madison, is charged with alleged incidents in 2012 in Wausau, where

he was a youth volunteer at Immanuel Baptist Church.

Zahl is accused of using duct tape to tie a 14-year-old boy's hands behind his back before pulling down his pants and underwear. On a second occasion, Zahl is accused of asking the boy to undress and climb in the trunk of a vehicle.

He's also accused of having a different alleged victim get out of a hot tub, undress and sit naked in the snow. *Source: WSAW/WMTV, 3-27-15*

Rix Thorsell, 27, Wheaton, IL: Theft from a place of worship. Thorsell, youth pastor at 1st Congregational Church in Des Plaines, allegedly stole about \$400 worth of voucher cards for the needy from Hope's Front Door, a charity working out of the church.

Thorsell was seen using some of the cards and others were found in his possession, a statement from prosecutors said. *Source: Sun-Times, 3-27-15*

Ahmad H. Osman, 52, Tustin, CA: 2 counts of performing lewd acts on a child under 14. Osman, pastor of the Indo-Chinese Islamic Center in Santa Ana, is accused of molesting 2 girls, ages 9 and 6, at a private home.

Authorities allege Osman lured the girls into a room where he was supposedly praying and that the 9-year-old girl later told a family member what happened. *Source: Orange County Register, 3-27-15*

Vladimir Sosa, 38, Bronx, NY: Rape, sexual misconduct, sex abuse and endangering the welfare of a child. Sosa, a pastor at Iglesia Metodista Libre el Remanente and a police officer, met the 16-year-old alleged victim through the church's youth program.

"He abused his two positions of authority, both public and vestal," Assistant D.A. Joelle Morabito said. The girl's mother had found "disturbing" texts on her phone and went to police. *Source: NY Daily News, 3-25-15*

‘Many of us are praying
God will bring Michael
to complete repentance
while he’s in prison.’
— Carole Green, Pastor Michael
Sperou’s ex-wife

Pleaded / Convicted

James Staley, 40, Wentzville, MO: Pleaded guilty to 4 counts of wire fraud. Staley, pastor of Passion for Truth Ministries in St. Charles, admitted bilking 16 investors out of \$3.3 million while keeping \$570,000 for himself.

Assistant U.S. Attorney Dianna Collins said elderly victims invested because he was a "nice religious man." She added, "Seniors tend to be more trusting and give people the benefit of the doubt, particularly people who hold themselves out as religious leaders."

Staley was a licensed insurance agent from 1999 to 2008, when he formed an investment firm. He claimed to adhere to the "Christian roots movement" that emphasizes returning to the first Christians' walk of faith and obedience to the Torah. *Source: Post-Dispatch, 4-30-15*

Mendel Epstein, 69, Lakewood, NJ, Bin-yamin Stimler, 39, and Jay Goldstein, 60, both of Brooklyn, NY: Guilty of conspiracy to commit kidnapping. All 3 men are rabbis caught in an FBI sting in which husbands were threatened and beaten to convince them to give their wives religious divorces called "gets."

Testimony was heard about the beatings of 5 men in 4 separate incidents between 2009-12. *Source: nj.com, 4-21-15*

Yoshiyahu Pinto, 41, Ashdod, Israel/New York City: Pleaded guilty to bribery, offering bribes and obstruction of justice. Pinto, an Orthodox rabbi who heads Mosdot Shuva Israel, admitted to bribing high-ranking police officials to head off allegations against Pinto of money laundering and other suspect financial practices.

Forbes Israel named Pinto as one of the 10 wealthiest rabbis in Israel in 2012. *Source: Haaretz, 4-14-15*

Sentenced

Michael G. Sperou, 64, Happy Valley, OR: 20 years in prison after being found guilty by jury on 3 counts of unlawful sexual penetration. Sperou, founder/pastor of North Clackamas Bible Community, was convicted of molesting the daughter of a church member in the 1990s. Six other girls also alleged he molested them but

the statute of limitations had expired. They testified at his trial.

The girls and their parents lived communally with Sperou. Judy Sperou, his current wife and mother of alleged victim Amy Robinson, told the jury she doesn't believe her daughter. Four other parents have discounted their daughters' allegations and remain in church leadership roles.

"I'm very happy the girls got justice," said Carole Green, Sperou's former wife and former church member. "Many of us are praying God will bring Michael to complete repentance while he's in prison." *Source: AP, 4-30-15*

Godwin Moffat, Esit-Eket, Nigeria: 3 years in prison on 37 theft convictions for stealing 56 electrical transformers meant for distribution to communities. Moffat, pastor of an unidentified Christian church, was also a member of the Niger Delta Development Commission, through which he received 90 transformers. *Source: Pulse Nigeria, 4-27-15*

Adam Metropoulos, 53, Bangor, ME: 12 years in prison with 5½ years suspended and 3 years' probation after being found guilty of 4 counts of sexual exploitation of a minor and pleading guilty to possession of sexually explicit materials and violation of privacy. Metropoulos, pastor at St. George Eastern Orthodox Church, denied molesting a 15-year-old altar boy in 2006-07. Superior Court Justice Ann Murray said at sentencing she didn't believe Metropoulos' testimony.

His guilty pleas involved possession of about 400 sexual images, including many showing children, and secretly recording a woman in the shower who was visiting him. *Source: Daily News, 4-27-15*

Damien K. Bonner Sr., 33, Tulsa, OK: 23 years in prison and a \$20,000 fine for conviction by a jury of 2 counts of lewd molestation. Bonner, pastor at Galilee Baptist Church, was acquitted of 7 counts. He was charged with molesting 3 teen parishioners on 9 occasions.

He was found guilty of having intercourse with a 14- to 15-year-old girl from Galilee and groping another girl at Mt. Zion Church, where he was youth pastor.

The girl, now 16, testified they had sex about 17 times and said Bonner once gave her a pill when she expressed worry about being pregnant. *Source: Fox23/Tulsa World, 4-27-15*

John Calnan, 76, West Cork, Ireland: 3 years in prison with 1 year suspended after pleading guilty to sexually assaulting a girl during her first confession in 1989 when he was a Catholic priest and she was 7.

Sgt. Maurice Downey told the court Calnan digitally penetrated the girl while hearing her confession, according to her 2013 complaint. She alleged he also appeared to be doing something to himself at the time.

Calnan's release date for earlier sentences of sexual assault of a minor male and a minor female is July 2017. He was removed from the ministry in 1992. *Source: Irish Times, 4-24-15*

John K. Councilman, 45, Pascagoula, MS: 20 years in prison, 15 years' probation and \$32,000 in fines after pleading guilty to 2 counts of sexual battery and 4 counts of touching of a child for lustful purposes.

Police Det. Kim Stevens testified Councilman told the girl's parents they were studying the bible. "It was a long grooming process," Stevens said. "He'd known her 12 years of her 14-year life."

Stevens testified he assaulted the girl in a storage shed while they read bible verses. He used scripture to justify having oral sex and intercourse, Stevens said. *Source: Sun Herald, 4-20-15*

Annamalai Annamalai, 49, aka Dr. Com-mander Selvam and Swamiji Sri Selvam Siddhar, Norcross, GA: 27 years and 3 months in prison for 34 convictions of tax fraud, bank fraud and bankruptcy fraud. Annamalai, leader of the (now bankrupt) Hindu Temple of Georgia, was also ordered "to not engage in any spiritual service for compensation."

Annamalai offered spiritual guidance in exchange for money but added unapproved charges to clients' credit cards. *Source: Journal-Constitution, 4-13-15*

Jerry D. Francis, 42, Dayton, OH: 120 days in jail, 5 years' probation and restitution for the \$67,000 stolen from Great Hope Community Church in New Carlisle, where he was pastor. His wife, Tamra Francis, faces counts of theft and complicity to commit theft. She has filed for divorce.

The couple also operated Mayhem & Mystery dinner theater at the Spaghetti Warehouse in downtown Dayton. *Source: Daily News, 4-9-15*

Darin Evans, 43, Elmhurst, IL: 10 years in prison after pleading guilty to criminal sexual assault. He was accused of sexual contact with a girl over a 4- to 5-year period, starting when she was 16. At the time, he was her youth pastor at West Suburban Community Church. *Source: NBC Chicago, 4-10-15*

Calvin D. Gideon, 54, Plymouth, WI: 3 years in prison and 3 years' probation for convictions on 10 counts of possession of child pornography. He also was ordered to pay \$3,442.

Gideon at first denied having the charges, called porn "disgusting" said said he'd been fired

‘After each time I was sexually abused, I had to go to confession to him and confess my sin of impurity.’ — ‘AYB,’ testifying that Fr. Reginald Durham raped her over 100 times

as youth pastor at St. John the Baptist Church for drinking. Though he'd gone on church-related trips overseas and in the U.S., he denied having sexual contact with juveniles.

Authorities found computers and storage devices with photos and videos of children as young as 4 engaged in graphic sexual activity. *Source: Sheboygan Press, 4-8-15*

Matthew Boos, 25, St. Louis Park, MN: 90 days in jail and 3 years' probation for soliciting a child with an electronic device. Boos, youth pastor at River Valley Church in Savage, admitted to using his job to start online conversations with about 15 underage girls by setting up female personas on profiles.

The mother of a girl under age 15 found a message traced to Boos in which he asked the child if she was bi-curious and would send naked photos.

The complaint said Boos, who is married, asked for photos from girls as young as 12. *Source: KSTP, 4-6-15*

Roy Harriger, 72, Albion, NY: 15 years in prison after a jury found him guilty of sexual abuse of 2 of his grandchildren while he was pastor at Community Fellowship Church.

"It started with me when I was a kid and I'm his sister," Nona Blackchief said. "And I'm his son," George Harriger said. "And he messed with me and then my son."

State Police Sgt. Michael Notto said 15 alleged victims have been identified. *Source: TWC News, 4-6-15*

Johnny Botello, 78, Wichita Falls, TX: 10 years' deferred adjudication [charge dismissed with completed probation] after pleading guilty to indecency with a child by sexual contact. The plea stemmed from a 2013 incident when Botello took an 11-year-old girl into his Assembly of God church office and put his hand under her blouse.

Another alleged female victim, now 38, testified Botello inappropriately touched her and kissed her on the mouth when she was between the ages of 11 and 13 and later had intercourse with her 3 times. She said she kept silent out of fear her family would be destroyed and because she thought it was "her fault" for dressing a certain way. *Source: Times Record News, 4-3-15*

Josh Swain, 34, Carbondale, IL: 6 years in prison for theft, aggravated identity theft and loan fraud. Swain, pastor of The View Church, was also ordered to repay \$18,500 to the church, a \$40,000 loan obtained without authority by the church and \$17,775 to a credit card company for an account he opened up in the name of a church member. *Source: The Southern, 3-30-15*

Mike Overd, 50, Taunton, UK: Fined \$300 and \$1,800 in costs and compensation for using threatening or abusive words or behavior. Overd, a Christian street preacher who uses a loudspeaker, was charged with calling homosexuality an "abomination."

Overd was unrepentant after sentencing. "I'm going to go straight back now and preach." *Source: The Independent, 3-28-15*

Michael J. Havrilla, 46, St. Mary's County, MD: 18 months in jail suspended and 3 years' probation after pleading guilty to 2nd-degree assault for molesting a preteen girl in 2008 as a youth leader with Faith Bible Church. He was charged with touching the girl under her clothes at a residence. *Source: SoMdNews, 3-27-15*

Anthony McSweeney, 68, London: 3 years in prison for sexual abuse of a 15-year-old boy at Grafton Close Children's Home in 1979-81. McSweeney, a Catholic priest, was charged

with his friend **John Stingemore** of molesting the boy. Stingemore, manager of the home, died before trial.

Judge Alistair McCreath said McSweeney "has a voyeuristic interest in children, either in seeing them unclothed, or in seeing them sexually abused by others." *Source: BBC, 3-27-15*

Civil Lawsuits Filed

James Goings is suing **William Davies, Abundant Life Pentecostal pastor, and his son Matthew Davies** for \$950,000 in McMinnville, OR. Goings claims he was excommunicated and defamed in front of the congregation. Previously, he'd complained to the Oregon Bureau of Labor and Industries that Davies didn't pay overtime or failed to pay at all for landscaping work done by his Christian Academy students.

Eight teens filed wage and hour complaints. The state ordered the Davieses to \$4,464 to the students. *Source: News-Register, 5-3-15*

Two men are suing the **Catholic Archdiocese of Louisville, KY, Fr. James Schook and Sr. Eleanor F. Tierney**, claiming they were sexually abused by Schook in the 1970s and the church failed to protect them. Schook was convicted last year of molesting one of the plaintiffs and is serving a 15-year sentence. His attorney successfully argued that the other man was of legal age when the "relationship" began. *Source: WLKY, 5-1-15*

Israel and Chaya Gutman of Florida are suing **Marsha Stern Talmudical Academy in Manhattan, NY**, for falsely claiming the high school is a safe place for students to send youths. "This is the first case in which a parent has sued a school for deceptive practices based upon the school's retention of known sexual predators," said their lawyer Kevin Mulhearn.

The Gutmans allege their son was sexually abused in the 1980s by **Rabbi George Finkelstein**, a former principal, and Finkelstein's friend **Richard Andron**.

Other former students have alleged being raped by **Rabbi Macy Gordon**, a teacher accused of sodomizing one alleged victim with a toothbrush and toothpaste in a dorm room. *Source: NY Post, 4-20-15*

"John T. Doe 24" and "John M. Doe" filed suits seeking \$300,000 each in damages from the **Catholic Archdiocese of Chicago**. They allege sexual abuse by convicted pedophile and defrocked priest **Daniel McCormack** when he was pastor of St. Agatha Parish.

One man alleges he was abused between 2001-06, starting when he was 7. The other alleges he was molested twice in 2001 when he was 14. *Source: Sun-Times, 4-10-15*

Civil Lawsuits Settled

"John Doe 187" settled for undisclosed terms his suit against the **Catholic Archdiocese of Philadelphia** in which he alleged being sexually assaulted as an altar boy at Incarnation of Our Lord Parish by **William Ayres**, who was a seminarian from 1996-99 before being ordained.

The archdiocese also settled a suit filed by "John Doe 10," who alleged he was molested by **Fr. Martin Satchell** in the 1990s at St. Aloysius Academy in Bryn Mawr. Satchell was defrocked in 2005. Ayres was suspended in 2010. Neither was ever charged criminally due to the statute of limitations. *Source: The Inquirer, 4-30-15*

Troy Bramlage, Sauk Rapids, MN, settled a suit against **Fr. Allen Tarlton, the Order of St.**

Benedict, St. John's Abbey and St. John's Preparatory School in Collegeville, MN, on the eve of trial. He alleged church and school officials knew of Tarlton's attraction to boys as far back as the 1950s but let him teach until 1990. Bramlage alleged abuse by Tarlton in 1977 when he was 14.

At least 4 others have sued Tarlton, who has admitted in depositions to heavy drinking. "In Louisville, the drinking got worse; at one point I was drinking a quart of scotch a day. I did very little work in the school, and was in an alcoholic haze must [sic] of the day."

As part of the settlement, Bramlage's attorneys released the names of 18 other clergy deemed "likely to have offended minors." Detailed files will be released in coming months. *Source: St. Cloud Times/WHAS, 4-28-15*

Two municipalities with ties to the Fundamentalist Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints were ordered by a federal judge to pay the state of Arizona \$2.18 million in attorney fees in connection with a 2014 civil rights case in which a couple settled their suit for \$3 million. Ronald and Jinjer Cooke sued the twin cities of **Hildale, UT, and Colorado City, AZ**, for refusing to provide utilities because they weren't church members. *Source: Salt Lake Tribune, 4-25-15*

Three former students at **Bishop McCort High School, Johnstown, PA**, settled their suits against the **Catholic Diocese of Johnstown-Altoona** for \$50,000 each in which they alleged molestation by **Brother Stephen Baker**, a Franciscan friar who fatally stabbed himself in the heart in 2013.

More than 80 students at Bishop McCort settled earlier for a total of \$8 million. Baker, who worked as an athletic trainer at the school from 1992 to 2001, killed himself 9 days after the **Diocese of Youngstown** settled with 11 abuse victims of Baker in Warren, OH. *Source: Tribune-Democrat, 4-15-15*

The Diocese of Joliet, IL, agreed to pay \$4.14 million to settle 14 suits filed by male plaintiffs alleging 5 priests molested them as children from the 1960s to 1980s.

Steven Janik, now 61, alleged he was 13 or 14 when a priest interviewed him about a recommendation for the seminary. "[O]ne of the first questions he asked was, did I know what testicles were? . . . He asked me if I knew what masturbation was. I did not. He took out a book and showed me."

One boy was told to take off his clothes and wear a loincloth so the priest could practice giving funeral rites, court records said.

The priests named in the settlement are **James Nowak, Michael Gibbney, Lawrence Gibbs, Myles White and Fred Lenczycki**. *Source: Chicago Tribune, 4-14-15*

Legal Developments

The Catholic Diocese of Helena, MT, posted on its website the names of 80 individuals (priests, sisters and laypersons) identified by 362 victims as sexual abusers between the 1930s and 1970s. In March, a U.S. bankruptcy judge approved a \$20 million plan to settle the claims, most alleged to have occurred at the hands of Jesuit priests and Ursuline nuns.

The settlement also calls for Bishop George Leo Thomas to send a written apology to victims. A clergy abuse suit against the **Diocese of Great Falls** has about 60 plaintiffs and is in the discovery phase. *Source: Ravalli Republic, 5-1-15*

The Catholic Archdiocese of Los Angeles released the last batch of clergy sex abuse files, consisting of 2,400 pages, 8 years after a \$660 million settlement with victims. The documents on 11 priests bring to 205 the number of files that have been unsealed to settle over 500 civil claims.

The last files were kept on priests who belonged to the Carmelite, Servite and Redemptorist orders and worked in Los Angeles. *Source: AP, 5-1-15*

The Pennsylvania Supreme Court upheld the 2012 conviction of **Msgr. William J. Lynn, 64, Philadelphia**, the first U.S. church official ever prosecuted over his handling of sex abuse complaints. Lynn approved the transfer of **Fr. Edward Avery** despite knowing about abuse complaints. The vote was 4-1.

Lynn had served 18 months before being allowed to live under house arrest in January during his appeal. Sentencing Judge M. Teresa Sarmina denied his request not to return to prison until all appeals were exhausted.

"Somebody call for a sheriff," Sarmina said before leaving the bench. *Source: The Inquirer/Tribune-Review, 4-30-15*

Ronald D. Joling, 71, and Dorothea J. Joling, 72, Coquille, OR: Federal judges issued arrest warrants for the couple, who failed to appear in court to face charges of knowingly filing false liens. The Jolings, who are married and lead Hope Covenant Reformed Church, call themselves "sovereign citizens." They're accused of filing retaliatory liens against officials involved in their 2014 convictions for hiding more than \$2 million from the IRS over 19 years. *Source: oregonlive.com, 4-25-15*

Letterbox

Pledge-free student ‘made my heart soar’

I wait in anticipation for your paper to arrive. (I found FFRF less than a year ago.) Your paper has wrapped its warm, thought-provoking arms around me. I’m a 62-year-old grandmother who didn’t come out till my late 50s.

I most appreciate the youths who have the intelligence and guts to speak up. Their comments and essays make me wish I also had that inner resilience and bravery to have done as they have done at a much earlier age. The April article by Ewan McCartney [“Seattle student sits for pledge”] made my heart soar! Keep it coming.

Terri Hassig
West Virginia

‘After-Lifer’ decries need for carrot, stick

I am one who feels ultimate morality lies in the maintenance and preservation of this planet’s life-support system. Twenty years ago I was awakened to the destructive role in dismissing life in the here and now for some ethereal, future world. Religion supplies the justification for the violence to the inhabitants of Earth, and guns provide the means.

The conundrum I see in religious morality is that it presupposes humans as evil. We cannot exhibit correct behavior unless it is backed up with a supreme being wielding a carrot and a stick. If we are inherently bad, than how can we inherently be deserving of a reward? I also ask how is it that one life form can supersede the life of the universe? Isn’t that pride of which goeth before a fall?

We live on a progressive island in the San Juan Archipelago in the Salish Sea near the northwest U.S. border. Many of our friends are God-free and about half a dozen are FFRF members on our island of 2,300. We have had no conflicts with our identity and are open with it.

We also belong to SERVAS International, a travel/peace group. There are some religious members but the group’s theory that cultural exchange opens one’s mind and its mission of promoting peace makes it easy and necessary to proclaim God-free status.

I am honored to, again, raise my appreciation to the FFRF movement and give at the “After-Life” level.

Jack Pedigo
Washington

FFRF gives thanks for new Lifetime Members

I am enclosing my check for \$1,000 for Lifetime Membership. I want to extend my gratitude for your excellent work in spreading the “good news” and fighting to maintain separation between church and state.

Janice E. Myers
Colorado

• • •

My wife and I, both age 72, have often said we would like to be Life Members but put it off, saying our meager savings should eventually go to our daughter. But we finally realized, “Hey, we put her through college and her job pays her more than we make. So what the heck. (I almost said ‘what the hell’ but then realized there is no hell.)”

What a deal for FFRF! The organization gets the money near the end of our expected life span. When we croak

they will have funds left over. Use this lucre wisely. As my dear old dad would say, “Don’t spend it all in one place!”

Keep up the great work!
Oak DeBerg and Joellen DeBerg
Colonels, U.S. Air Force (ret.)
Texas

• • •

Because I have a terminal disease and I’m 81 years old, this Life Membership may not have a very long duration. I wanted my obituary to include a statement that I was a Life Member of FFRF.
John D. Dunn
California

Editor’s note: Much love and thoughts of comfort to you, John. Life is not fair.

• • •

I have never been overly religious. It just didn’t seem real or logical to me. I thought of religious people as harmless “do gooders.” That view changed after I started to receive Freethought Today. I now realize how insidious the Christian religion is in the U.S.

I also see how politically conservative Christians are trying to push their moral agenda. This makes your work so vital that I feel compelled to become a Lifetime Member. My hope is that someday FFRF can become an international organization.

Ken Rowe
Tennessee

I’ve no regrets about abandoning religion

I was so pleased to see the April article by Wendy Russell about coming out as an atheist. I have had reasonably similar experiences. Although I have not been met with any outright hostility, I have been met with extremely cold shoulders and a reticence to have a discussion.

I agree that some people are quite relieved to learn that someone shares their opinions and beliefs. They appear to immediately “relax” by knowing they are not alone. I have no regrets that I have abandoned religion.

Thanks for your inspiration. You are the greatest!

Jack Red
North Carolina

Kudos for Madison’s atheist protections

I am so pleased with the work FFRF does. I love your balance of activism, legal tactics, publicity, public outreach and resource sharing. I am particularly pleased at the creation of a new protected group in Madison!

Dr. John A. Wagner
New York

‘Nonbelief Relief’ rescues irresponsible God

“Nonbelief Relief,” with its poetic rhyme, is a nice name for FFRF’s new charitable fund. But more importantly, from our standpoint philosophically, we are indeed making progress. There have been hardly any references at all to God in connection with the horrific Nepal earthquake.

I have to go along with Rabbi Harold Kushner, who told us in his famous book, *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*, that there are some things where God has no role at all, and they



Shawnee Bakker Photo

Countering problem reasoning

Nick Bakker, Hawley, Pa., hopes the billboard he’s sponsoring brings some inspiration to area freethinkers (and perspiration to church members!). Nick is generously funding a billboard and local newspaper ads for six months.

just happen at random. Now you may contend that Kushner was just trying to exonerate God from responsibility, but I do consider it a true common-sense approach to natural disasters.

’Nuff said, and thank you for your declaration that Ted is certainly a man of great common sense!

Ted Utchen
Illinois

God is, where else, only in your head

In *The God Delusion*, Richard Dawkins makes a compelling case for not indoctrinating children with their parents’ religious beliefs. He advocates teaching kids *how* to think, not what to think. I count myself lucky that my parents were free from religion. This freedom helped me to express my thoughts on the deity I grew up hearing about at school.

Between Two Temples

*As a child I would wonder
Where is it that God dwells?
Is it up above the thunder
or in nature’s hills and dells?*

*At last I came to understand
He does not live out there.
His abode is closer than
most people are aware.*

*Between two temples His house is wrought
where He was born and reared,
where often wish engenders thought —
in the space between our ears.*

Tom Schlicht
Wisconsin

P.S. For the past 21 years, Freethought Today is the only newspaper I read from cover to cover. I often read from it in my PLATO classes.

Make decisions based on law, not religion

I’m a 70-year-old grandmother of five concerned about inserting religion into politics, government and schools. I respect others’ religious beliefs but don’t want them forced on me.

The government does not belong in our bedrooms, nor should politicians make decisions based on their religious beliefs instead of on the law.

More important than religion is the way we treat others and live our lives. I believe it is up to the government to help those in need and that a true believer would believe greed is a sin.

Edna Birch
New Jersey

Schools should ditch all religious holidays

I recently read “When Every Day Is a Religious Holiday” and enjoyed the concept [in a Wall Street Journal column by Boston University religion professor Stephen Prothero] that schools should recognize no religious holidays. After all, school taxes go to support these holidays. I certainly don’t want my tax dollars going to support this kind of madness.

I enjoy your efforts in publishing Freethought Today. Keep up the good work.

Stephen Kozerowitz
Illinois

Platinum Rule outshines the golden one

I’d like to encourage expansion of Ms. Hansmann’s advocacy of the “the Golden Rule” [April15]. It’s a good moral guideline in a culture that is homogeneous. It’s reasonable to expect others to want to be treated as we want to be treated. But even in a homogeneous culture, to practice the intent of the rule you would need to think how you would like to be treated if you were in the other’s position.

An adolescent, in interacting with an adult, would be expected to treat that adult differently than a fellow adolescent. In America we can’t expect to only interact with people who have our spiritual beliefs or moral values. I believe our society would be better off if we practiced the Platinum Rule: “Treat others as they would like to be treated (within our own moral guidelines).”

Jim Vokac
Missouri

3-D printer replicating FFRF legal staff?

In every issue of Freethought Today, I read about scores of FFRF legal team initiatives, ongoing efforts and victories. The same handful of staff names pops up in case after case, and each seems to be working on dozens at a time, everywhere at once.

Could FFRF possibly have a 3-D printer churning out copies of its lawyers? I don’t want to say it seems like an army, because that would imply some kind of war. And I don’t want to say “miraculous” or “supernatural.”

So I’ll just have to say “thank you” to the legal staff. However you do it, you sure are doing a superhuman job, and you are appreciated!

Joan Reisman-Brill
New York

Indiana freethinkers place essay contest ad

Our little freethinkers club in Madison, Ind., took your high school essay contest information to the local newspaper, the Madison Courier, to have it published. I was nervous about how they would react to it, but they treated us about like anyone else would be treated and it appeared in the paper.

We would sure like to know if anyone from this area sends in an essay.

Roy Heron
Indiana

Editor’s note: Roy’s group generously spent \$220 of its \$400 treasury for an ad to get the contest information in the paper.

Readers weigh in on cultural Judaism

In April’s Letterbox, “total atheist” Jerry Oster sought input from nonpracticing Jews on how they deal with their heritage and anti-Semitism. Several readers responded to Mr. Oster. Responses were edited for space:

We are exactly the same. I am a 79-year-old militant atheist who was born Jewish. I laugh at and criticize Orthodox Jews for their stupidity and desire to live as their ancestors lived over 3,500 years ago.

While I believe that organized religion is the stupidest, most disgusting, destructive and hateful institution ever created by humanity — and it was created by humanity — I react violently to anti-Semitism, as it leads to the execution of human beings based on their beliefs and not on their actions.

Jason G. Brent
Nevada

...

Whereas most religions have grown and endured by coerced and/or invited conversions, Judaism has survived largely because it created a distinctive ethnic culture that was only shared with those born into that culture. And while some Orthodox sects tend to cast a jaundiced eye on Jews who do not make the same commitment or observe the same cultural mores, in the “us vs. them” realities of anti-Semitism, Jews tend to stick together.

It should be clear to Mr. Oster and others that, just as Jews themselves may be completely irreligious, anti-Semites do not denigrate Jews simply because of religious differences. They hate Jews because of the very cultural/ethnic “otherness” and familial descent that have always defined Judaism. So it is completely not surprising that Mr. Oster would feel compelled to respond to anti-Semitism even as he himself is Jewish only in ethnicity. Or, as my sister once famously retorted to a person who accosted her with a “Jews for Jesus” sign, “Just remember that when they come to put us in the ovens, your ass is going to be there right next to mine!”

Jews need have no compunction about feeling and expressing loyalty to Judaism any more than a Puerto Rican Protestant, Puerto Rican Jew or Puerto Rican atheist can take pride in being Puerto Rican.

Jim Fingeroth
New York

...

I was raised as a Conservative Jew but gradually changed to agnosticism and then to atheism. I still feel culturally and ethnically part of Judaism.

I know a number of Jews, who while still identifying as Jewish, are atheists. My late mother, for example, while a member of a Reform synagogue, admitted to me that she had been an atheist for years, as was her husband. Many Jews participate in activities for social and cultural reasons and have given up on the idea of a god.

Dr. Charles Falkowitz
New York

...

I am a year younger than Jerry and became an avowed atheist six or seven years ago after being a doubter for a long time. I have had the same problems dealing with anti-Semites. I would love to correspond with him.

Dan Jacobson
California

...

If asked my religion, I might say I am a Jewish secular humanist or culturally Jewish. As for objecting to anti-Semitism, surely you don’t have to be Jewish

to do that. Any compassionate person will speak up against hate, whether it is racism or homophobia or other prejudice.

Incidentally, for any secular Jewish parents who might want to teach their children their heritage without indoctrinating them in theism, my friend Judy Seid wrote a book, *God-Optional Judaism*. It offers a historical, rather than religious, approach to celebrating the Jewish holidays.

Thank you, FFRF, for your ongoing efforts to protect the Establishment Clause. Our entire Bill of Rights is in danger of becoming a quaint, obsolete historical document. I am afraid, without the constant effort of groups like ours.

Linda Palter
Michigan

...

I’m a 73-year-old Jew who likes my heritage. I love the food, the humor and assorted “schtick” that is part of Jewish culture but at an early age, even before my bar mitzvah, I knew that I was an atheist at heart. Of the “big three” religions, I find that Judaism is the one that allows for some critical thinking, which is likely why there are what seems to me to be a rather high percentage of Jews who are atheists.

I am also offended by anti-Jewish behavior and rhetoric. I have never seen bigotry and hatefulness expressed by atheists and agnostics. It always comes from those who usually are proud to declare their belief in some unseen deity.

Clearly, atheism isn’t a religion, so we shouldn’t say our religion is atheism. When I was in the Army when I was 17, they put NO PREFERENCE on my dog tags. I couldn’t argue with the Army. But when I was hospitalized a couple of years ago, the designation NONE perplexed the admitting clerk, who tried to insist that some word connoting religious belief had to be placed in the box. I explained that I didn’t give a tiny %\$*@ what she put down because the answer was still NONE.

I hope to meet you, Jerry, in Madison for this year’s Main Event. Maybe we can share a nosh together.

Gerald L. “Jerry” Foreman
Nevada

...

Although I’m not a Jew, I sympathize with your people’s long history of suffering. Rabbi Joseph Telushkin, in his book *Jewish Wisdom*, convinced me that Jewish ethics are far above those of Christianity. And in that respect, I consider it a pity that Christianity didn’t remain a sect of Judaism.

Nevertheless, I don’t consider anti-Semitism and anti-Zionism synonymous. Rather, I agree with those Jews, both in Israel and here in America, who think of Israel as a police state designed to repress Palestinians. Israel is now much like South Africa when apartheid was the law of the land.

I praise you, Mr. Oster, for having abandoned your tribal god and replaced him with your trust in reason. Long ago, I also abandoned my family’s god, Jesus, along with all of Christianity’s superstitions.

In my opinion, only reason (together with a love of peace and a diligent effort to unite humankind as brothers) can bring forth a better world. We non-believers have much work to do.

David Quintero
Californi



Hwy. 31, Athens, Texas

“Boy, was I disappointed when I looked up the website and found that it was just an ad for a Christian church,” says Al Wagner, Texas. (Senior Pastor Mark Allen, with a biblical studies degree from Liberty University, lists among his favorites: TV show, “Duck Dynasty,” Actor: Clint Eastwood, Place in the World: Israel.)



Barling, Arkansas

“Judge not? I just had to turn my truck around and get a picture,” writes Amy Hall, Arkansas.



Got guilt?

“I smile each time I drive by on my way to work,” writes Thomas Kindle about this marquee in Grover Beach, Calif.



FFRF on the road



Jakub Mosur Photo ©2015

San Francisco

The Secular Student Alliance at San Francisco State University on April 16 hosted Dan Barker, who spoke on the topic “Can we be good without God?” (Hell, yes!) From left are Keith Eveslage, Steve Sun (treasurer), Connor Kessler (public relations coordinator), Dan Barker, Billy Oertel, Tyler Woodward (vice president) and Virginia Jaynes (president).



Washington, D.C.

Simon Davis, Center for Inquiry–DC treasurer, and Melody Hensley, CFI–DC executive director, welcomed Co-President Dan Barker to CFI’s “Voices of Reason” event April 12 to talk about his new book *Life Driven Purpose* at Busboys and Poets (named for free-thinking poet Langston Hughes) at 5th and K streets.



Sacramento City College

“The importance of state-church separation” was FFRF-Co-President Dan Barker’s topic April 13 in Sacramento, Calif. From left are Aisha Shah, Chris Lee, Amber, Taylor Ramsey, Dan Pemberton (SSA regional campus organizer), Don Button (faculty adviser and FFRF member), Dan Barker and Jim Naylor.



Nate Hilman photo

Portland, Oregon

Portland State University Freethinkers and FFRF’s Portland Area Chapter sponsored a talk April 25 by FFRF Co-President Annie Laurie Gaylor on “The Battle of Church and State and Its Impact on Women.” From left are student activists Marko Balogh, Rachael Black, Colt Taylor, Annie Laurie, chapter director and founder Cheryl Kolbe and secular club director Addie Lass. Addie, with FFRF, was responsible for the removal this year of Gideon bibles from public university lodgings.



David Diskin Photo

Sacramento Freethinkers, Atheists and Nonbelievers

FFRF’s chapter sponsored a fun, free (but not fun-free) event April 17 at the Reason Center featuring Co-President Dan Barker on keyboard with the Unofficial Greater Sacramento FFRF Chapter Band (aka Sgt. Barker’s Lovely Hearts Club Band). At Dan’s right are drummer Joe O’Loughlin and guitarists Murray Powers, Judy Saint (chapter president) and John Lucas.



Ashland, Oregon

FFRF Co-President Dan Barker spoke April 20 at Southern Oregon University about . . . well, you can read. (Although Dan’s fame preceded him to the extent that there was no need to put his name on the poster!) At left is Giovani Castaneda Velasco of the university’s Secular Student Alliance, which sponsored the event. At right is FFRF Life Member Len Eisenberg, who makes the evolution shirts and caps available at ffrf.org/shop and at evogeneao.com. Len, a geologist, gave Dan a tour of Crater Lake, at 1,943 feet the deepest U.S. lake. He and his wife Karen also endow FFRF’s Thomas Jefferson Youth Activist Award.



Ed Kolbe photo

Chapter board members pictured with Annie Laurie Gaylor are Wes Mahan, Kim Peterson, Chris Nicholson, Cheryl Kolbe and Sean McCoy.



Nate Hilman photo

Lifetime Member Amy Cox, an FFRF staff member in the 1990s, surprised Annie Laurie by showing up at the Portland event. Amy recently moved to Portland to start a business with Josh Middleton (snapping a photo of the reunion) and Dawn Griffin, pictured at right.

38th annual national convention, Oct. 9-11, Madison, Wis.

Atheist Reagan also not afraid to revel in Madison

Ron Reagan, the “unabashed atheist, not afraid of burning in hell” who recorded FFRF’s much-censored TV ad, will keynote its 38th national convention at **Monona Terrace Community and Convention Center** in Madison, Wis., on the week-end of **Oct. 9–11, 2015**.

The convention center, designed by Frank Lloyd Wright, is next to Lake Monona and is two blocks from Wisconsin’s impressive State Capitol and next door to the convention hotel, the Hilton. (There’s a memorial along the lake near the convention center noting that singer Otis Redding and six members of his band died there on Dec. 10, 1967, when their plane plunged into the lake’s icy waters.)

Reserve your hotel room now to avoid disappointment at the **Hilton Madison Monona Terrace Hotel**, 9 E. Wilson St., room rate \$169 single or double, by phoning toll-free 1-866-403-8838 or 1-608-255-5100. The group name is Freedom From Religion Foundation and the group code is FFRF. Book online at ffrf.org/convention2015 — go to the hotel site section, which links directly to reservations. **The cut-off is Sept. 7**, or as long as rooms last.

For those who are driving in or don’t mind staying away from downtown,



there are additional rooms at the **Sheraton Madison Hotel**, 706 John Nolen Drive, which provides a free shuttle to and from the convention center every half hour from 7 a.m. to 11 p.m. Sheraton rates are \$139 single/double/triple/quad. Make your reservations at 1-800-325-3535 and let them know you’re with “Freedom From Religion.”

You may wish to arrive Thursday in order to tour the “reborn” Freethought Hall Friday morning, which is six blocks from the convention center. An informal open house will be held from 9–11:30 AM. Please indicate if you plan to attend on the registration form, to help ensure FFRF orders enough refreshments.

Enjoy rolls, juice, coffee and tea and socializing in the Charlie Brooks Auditorium, top floor, where a short video presentation on the building and FFRF will play. Staff members will be posted throughout the building to greet, answer questions and make sure you don’t get lost!

If you ordered a paving stone, look for it in the Rose Zerwick Memorial Garden & Courtyard, or your vestibule tile in the entry. Major donors’ names will be found in the Wall of Honor and Donor Wall in the Anne Nicol Gaylor Lobby. Every donor will be listed in a book on the reception desk.

Due to time and staff constraints, this will be the only time to tour during the convention.

Speaker lineup
Joining Reagan as confirmed speak-

ers are:

Kevin M. Kruse, the Princeton University professor of history whose new book, *One Nation Under God: How Corporate America Invented Christian America*, is creating a lot of excitement. He recently appeared on NPR’s “Fresh Air” with Terry Gross, and has authored or co-edited four other books. His *White Flight: Atlanta and the Making of Modern Conservatism* (2005), won several prizes.

Dan Barker, FFRF co-president, will also speak about his newest book, *Life-Driven Purpose: How an Atheist Finds Meaning*, an answer to Rick Warren’s *Purpose-Driven Life*, and will autograph books. Dan, a talented pianist and songwriter who has recorded three music CDs for FFRF, will also entertain throughout the conference.

Douglas Marshall will receive a Free-thinker of the Year Award as the local plaintiff in FFRF’s most recent federal court victory, forcing the town of Warren, Mich., to permit him to put up a Reason Station to counter an ongoing prayer booth that dominates the atrium of his city hall.

Anita Weier will be honored as Freethought Heroine for introducing a historic ordinance to make “nonreligion” a protected class in Madison, Wis. Weier, former city editor for The Capital Times, served as an alderperson for two terms. Her “first of its kind” ordinance passed with no dissent on March 31.

Steven Hewett will be honored with FFRF’s Atheist in Foxhole Award. The

former police officer and Afghanistan war veteran returned home with a Combat Action Badge and Bronze Star, only to find a Christian flag flying at the Veterans Memorial in King, N.C. In December, following a long court battle taken on his behalf by Americans United, the city agreed to stop flying the Christian flag and to remove a cross from a kneeling soldier statue. Steven is a Lifetime FFRF Member.

FFRF staff attorneys will give a detailed presentation on their major accomplishments in ending state/church entanglements in 2015. Other speakers and honorees will be announced in future issues.

You have a chance to receive an expenses-paid trip to the convention. If you persuade your prayerful local governmental body to let you to give a secular invocation, you can enter FFRF’s Nothing Fails Like Prayer contest (see details on page 15 or at ffrf.org/outreach/nothing-fails-like-prayer). The award includes opening a session of the conference with your secular words and a \$500 award, plaque, transportation and accommodations at the convention.

FFRF will honor major donors who made possible the expansion of Freethought Hall at Saturday’s dinner, which will also include the annual drawing for “clean money” (pre-“In God We Trust”).

See the registration form, below left for costs.

Freedom From Religion Foundation’s

38th Annual National Convention

October 9–11, 2015

Madison, Wisconsin

Return with payment to: FFRF, Attn: Convention, P.O. Box 750, Madison, WI 53701

CONVENTION REGISTRATION		NUMBER REGISTERING	COST
FFRF member(s)		_____ x \$60	\$_____
Non-member spouse or companion accompanying a member		_____ x \$65	\$_____
Non-member(s) (Save \$5 by becoming an FFRF Member. \$40 Individual Membership)		_____ x \$100	\$_____
Student(s)		_____ x \$10	\$_____

FOOD REGISTRATION		
All meals but vegetarian are gluten-free. Indicate number of orders per entrée and check if you have gluten-free requirements.		
Saturday Non-Prayer Breakfast Buffet _____ x \$20* \$_____		
Saturday Night Dinner _____ x \$40* \$_____		
____ Champagne Tilapia	____ Cranberry Chicken	____ Vegetable / Vegan Strudel
<input type="checkbox"/> Gluten Free	<input type="checkbox"/> Gluten Free	<input type="checkbox"/> Gluten Free
*Includes 20% Gratuity & Sales Tax		
Total \$_____		

Number planning to attend Freethought Hall Open House, Oct. 9, 9–11:30 am. _____

General schedule

After the Friday morning tour of Freethought Hall will be a 2–4 p.m. reception with complimentary appetizers in the Grand Terrace at Monona Terrace, with legal and other workshops. Friday dinner is on your own.

The formal program opens at 7 p.m. Friday, ending with complimentary dessert and hot beverages. The convention resumes Saturday with an optional Non-Prayer Breakfast buffet at 8 a.m. The morning program starts at 9:30. After a two-hour lunch on your own/sightseeing break, the program resumes at 2 p.m. An optional banquet dinner will be followed by evening speaker/entertainment.

Annual meetings of the membership and the state representatives are Sunday morning.

Menu

Saturday’s Non-Prayer Breakfast is the Lakeshore Breakfast Buffet: orange juice, fresh-cut fruit, Wisconsin cheese and chive scrambled eggs, rosemary wedge potatoes, home-baked petite pastries and muffins, coffee, tea or milk and option of bacon. \$20, including 20% service charge and tax.

Saturday’s banquet dinner includes a choice of **Champagne Tilapia**, with champagne mushroom sauce, Yukon Gold potato wedges, lemon garnish; **Vegetable Strudel** (zucchini, yellow squash, carrots & peppers in a delicate filo pastry atop red pepper coulis, served with mushroom polenta); or **Wisconsin Cranberry Chicken**, boneless chicken breasts with dried Wisconsin cranberries, baked with vermouth sauce and served with garden rice pilaf. \$40, including service charge and tax.

A **Chef’s Vegan Option** will also be available. All offerings are gluten-free except the vegetarian strudel & dessert.

Dessert is **Chocolate Lush Cake**, a flourless chocolate cake laced with real punch and finished with Irish Crème Anglaise. Specify if need gluten-free dessert.