

# FREETHOUGHT TODAY



**Julia Sweeney's  
guide to religious  
movies**

PAGES 10-12



**Do you know an  
American Indian  
atheist?**

PAGES 13-14



**FFRF's  
Winter Solstice  
celebration!**

PAGE 24

Vol. 35 No. 1

Published by the Freedom From Religion Foundation, Inc.

January / February 2018

## 'A' is for awesome (and atheist and agnostic)!



Photo by Kimberley Haas/Union Leader Correspondent

After getting approval from the city of Somersworth, N.H., FFRF Member Richard Gagnon raises the 'A' flag next to a Ten Commandments monument on city property on Jan. 2. See story on page 7.

## FFRF blocks giveaway for church repairs

An Alaska city wisely chose not to dole out money to a local church after the FFRF raised objections to the proposed move.

The Sitka City Assembly was prepared to allocate \$5,000 from the city's Visitor's Enhancement Fund to help repair St. Michael's Cathedral. City Attorney Brian Hanson had reviewed concerns that funding this church would violate the First Amendment and initially (and erroneously) concluded that the grant would be permissible.

FFRF challenged this assessment. Hanson failed to properly apply the Supreme Court's 1971 *Lemon v. Kurtzman* (1971) test. Other cases have shown that *Lemon's* second prong (that a governmental action's principal or primary effect must neither advance nor inhibit religion) does not allow grants that support religious activities, FFRF Staff Attorney Ryan Jayne asserted. Two subsequent cases, *Tilton v. Richardson* (1971) and *Community House, Inc. v. City of Boise* (2007), in particular affirm this.

The city's potential funding of St. Michael's Cathedral advanced religion even more obviously than the unconstitutional actions in *Tilton v. Richardson* and *Community House*, FFRF contended. Repairing a building that is used for religious worship, and that



Shutterstock photo

**St. Michael's Cathedral in Sitka, Alaska, will not be receiving public funds to help repair the church after FFRF got involved.**

## Most productive year ever for FFRF!

**Legal Department  
earns more than  
300 victories**

By Rebecca Markert

FFRF's legal department in 2017 had its most productive year to date. Not only were FFRF's nine in-house attorneys busy protecting the wall of separation, but they also demonstrated the prominence and stature of the staff, as they were routinely called on by attorneys and constitutional

scholars across the country for legal advice.

### State/church complaints

Over the past year, FFRF earned more than 300 victories to keep religion out of government after sending out more than 1,500 letters of complaint. The number of victories will continue to grow, as many complaints lodged last year will still have responses roll in this year. FFRF attorneys wrote to government officials in 47 states (all but Vermont, Rhode Island and Hawaii) and the District of Columbia.

A significant portion of that to-

tal consisted of letters warning 350 school districts across the United States against allowing the Todd Becker Foundation into public schools to convert students. The letter included a special report, "Closing the Doors: Why the Todd Becker Foundation Must Not be Allowed in Public Schools," drafted by Senior Counsel Patrick Elliott and Patrick O'Reiley Legal Fellow Christopher Line. The Todd Becker Foundation targets high school students, seeking to convert them to fundamentalist Christianity. The foundation

See FFRF on page 17

See Alaska on page 9

## Strategic Response Team hits the ground running

The Freedom From Religion Foundation's newly created Strategic Response Team has wasted no time fighting for your rights — with two successful outcomes already in the books.

While the behind-the-scenes legal work has been happening for years at FFRF, the Strategic Response Team is a formalization of the framework of FFRF's ongoing "rapid response team," combined with a revved-up legislative agenda as part of FFRF's ongoing Educate Congress Campaign.

As the new director of strategic response, FFRF attorney Andrew Seidel oversaw two big issues: helping defeat some Trump judicial nominees and



Photo by Brent Nicastro  
**Andrew Seidel**

notoriety when his comments about trans kids being part of "Satan's plan" surfaced. He's a long-time nemesis of FFRF and state/church separation.

helping protect the Johnson Amendment as debate over the tax package began.

Seidel identified one judicial nominee who stood out as particularly unqualified: Jeff Mateer. Mateer garnered

FFRF had even faced off against Mateer in court, besting him in our lawsuit removing a Jesus portrait from public schools in Jackson, Ohio. At that time, Mateer represented First Liberty Institute, a theocratic law firm seeking to tear down the wall of separation that FFRF guards. First Liberty, Seidel quips, "is basically the anti-FFRF."

Of the many groups opposing Mateer's nomination, FFRF was the only one to compile a definitive record of his unfitness for office. Seidel and FFRF Staff Attorney Ryan Jayne authored and submitted a full report to Senate Judiciary Committee members cataloging Mateer's many "sins." Se-

idel and FFRF Legal Director Rebecca Markert traveled to Capitol Hill in early November, speaking with Senate Judiciary Committee staffers about Mateer and the report.

"We've tangled with Mateer before and knew he would be a disaster for the federal bench," explains Seidel, who put in countless hours watching Mateer's talks and reviewing his written record. "We pulled out all the stops to end his hopes of a lifetime appointment." Mateer's nomination was ended late last year.

The Strategic Response Team also

See Team on page 12



# Guertin proves that deafness is no obstacle

## MEET A MEMBER

**Name:** Ralph Francis Guertin.  
**Where I live:** Green Valley, Ariz.  
**Where and when I was born:** Stafford, Conn., in 1938. My parents were living in Indian Orchard, Mass. (a suburb of Springfield), and that is where I grew up.  
**Family:** My wife, Nu Nu Mae, died last year. She was a native of Myanmar (Burma) and was teaching the Burmese language at Yale when I met her. We were married for 50 years. My daughter and granddaughter live in Massachusetts.  
**Education:** Clarke School for the Deaf (now Clarke Schools for Hearing and Speech) in Northampton, Mass.; Classical High School in Springfield, Mass.; B.S. in physics from Worcester Polytechnic Institute; Ph.D. in physics from Yale University.  
**Occupation:** Retired as a physicist/engineer. Last worked for Raytheon in Arizona. Company was awarded a patent that includes an advanced



Ralph Guertin, who lost his hearing at age 7, became a renowned physicist and engineer who developed a mathematical formula that improves the ability of a missile to hit its target. He is shown in this photo from 2012 with his granddaughter.

mathematical formula I developed which can improve the ability of a missile to hit its target.

**Person in history I admire and why:** Albert Einstein, due to his theory of relativity.

**A quotation I like:** “The one who says it cannot be done should not interrupt the one who is doing it.” — Chinese proverb. I included it in a speech I gave at a Clarke School graduation that included a criticism of those who claim that deaf children cannot communicate well via speech and that they should be educated with sign language.  
**These are a few of my favorite things:** Physics and advanced mathematics, baseball (I’m a Boston Red Sox fan), basketball, which was founded in my home city of Springfield, Mass., and chess.  
**These are not:** People who say I’m headed for hell and try to get me to adopt their religion. By the way, my parents raised me as a Catholic and were shocked when I told them that God was a fiction and I was not going to church any more.  
**My doubts about religion started:** While I was at Worcester Polytechnic and became firm after a few months at Yale University.

## Clarke alumnus, engineer and physicist gives back

*Ralph Guertin was profiled in the 2012 issue of Clarke Speaks magazine, the publication of the Clarke Schools for Hearing and Speech. It is reprinted with permission:*  
Ralph Guertin, ’53, has led a life of extraordinary accomplishment. After losing his hearing at the age of 7 due to meningitis and measles, Ralph graduated from Clarke and went on to the Worcester Polytechnic Institute, where he graduated with a 4.0 GPA, and Yale University, where he earned a Ph.D. in physics. His distinguished career has encompassed work in academia, government, and

the corporate world, including positions at the University of Nijmegen, the Middle East Technical University, Rice University, the University of California at Berkeley, Raytheon and Lockheed Martin.  
Among his numerous professional achievements is a mathematical algorithm that is a key component of a patent associated with a sophisticated defense system. An inveterate traveler, Ralph has visited England, Portugal, France, Turkey and the Straits of Gibraltar on his many trips around the globe — but Clarke Northampton holds a special place in his heart.  
“I loved the high-quality academic programs, particularly science, math, and history, which prepared me well for a challenging academic career learning alongside hearing students. I remember enjoying the many active discussions we used to have about national and world events, both inside and outside of the classroom. I was also inspired by the achievements of Clarke School’s alumni.”  
Ralph served on Clarke’s Board of Trustees from 1984 to 2004 and was the speaker at Clarke’s 1984 graduation ceremony.  
Now settled in Arizona with his

wife, Nu Nu Mae, Ralph’s generous annual contributions are a way of giving back to the school.  
“I believe strongly in providing deaf children with the opportunity to attend Clarke and benefit from its exceptional teaching staff,” said Ralph. “Clarke makes it possible for individuals who are deaf to realize their potential in a society where most people can hear. I want other children to benefit from Clarke by learning to communicate via spoken language, as well as to benefit from the knowledgeable Clarke teaching staff who encourage each child to succeed.”

## RECRUIT A NEW MEMBER

### Sample copies for just \$2

Send \$2 with the name and address of each person you wish to receive a sample copy of **Freethought Today** to:  
FFRF • P.O. Box 750 • Madison, WI 53701

### Freedom depends upon freethinkers

— Please send only names of likely supporters. —

ffrf

## FREETHOUGHT TODAY

Published by Freedom From Religion Foundation, Inc.

P.O. Box 750 | Madison WI 53701  
info@ffrf.org | FFRF.org  
P 608.256.8900 | F 608.204.0422

**EDITOR** PJ Slinger [fttoday@ffrf.org](mailto:fttoday@ffrf.org)  
**EDITOR EMERITUS** Bill Dunn  
**EXECUTIVE PUBLISHER** Annie Laurie Gaylor  
**GRAPHIC DESIGNER** Roger Daleiden  
**COMMUNICATIONS DIRECTOR** Amit Pal  
**CONTRIBUTORS**

Mohammad Alkhadra, Bethany Allen-Ebrahimian, Philip Appleman, Brent Michael Davids, Molly Hanson, Ingrid Laas, Chris Line, Rebecca Markert, Andrew Seidel, Julia Sweeney, Jake Swenson  
*The only freethought newspaper in the United States*

## Portland chapter aids food bank



Photo by Barry LaMont

Volunteers and Columbia Market owner Albert Choi, right, load up food for transport to food bank freezers in Hood River County, Ore., on Dec. 1, 2017. FFRF’s Portland chapter, headed by Cheryl Kolbe, granted the local food bank \$1,000 worth of meat. Chapter members went on a shopping trip to Columbia Market to stock up on the requested donation of meat that will go to clients of the FISH (Friendly Instant Sympathetic Help) food bank.  
“It should last the food bank several months,” said Kolbe, who worked with FISH’s Martha LaMont and Choi to complete the donation, which had been approved by the FFRF Board via FFRF’s Nonbelief Relief fund.  
Kolbe told the Hood River News that the donation wasn’t timed for the holiday season, but rather to help people after a three-month fire that consumed 50,000 acres in Oregon and Washington. “We particularly wanted to help out as a result of the Eagle Creek fire,” Kolbe said. “We knew there are still many needs.”



# DOJ admits Johnson Amendment still in force

## Despite false assertion by Trump, FFRF prevails and dismisses lawsuit

President Trump has failed to fulfill his misguided promise to “get rid of and totally destroy the Johnson Amendment,” according to documents filed in court by his own lawyers.

The Department of Justice filed two motions in response to FFRF’s lawsuit challenging Trump’s executive order on religious freedom that torpedo the president’s claims.

As The Washington Post, Politico and others reported, Trump’s attorneys admitted that, despite Trump’s assertion that churches could ignore the Johnson Amendment, “The order does not exempt religious organization from the restrictions on political campaign activity applicable to all tax-exempt organizations.”

In response, FFRF voluntarily dismissed its federal lawsuit on Dec. 11.

FFRF sued Trump and the IRS on May 4, the day he signed the high-profile order announced from the Rose Garden with nuns and other religious figures looking on. FFRF pointed out the disconnect between the impotent language in the order regarding the Johnson Amendment and Trump’s inflated claims about the order’s effect. Trump repeatedly boasted that he was getting rid of the Johnson Amendment and that doing so would be his “greatest contribution to Christianity.”

Trump claimed continually that his executive order invalidated the Johnson Amendment as it applies to church politicking. As FFRF’s amended complaint filed on Sept. 19 documented, one such instance occurred on June 8, when Trump told the evangelicals in the crowd at the Faith and Freedom Coalition:

“That executive order also followed on one of my campaign promises to so many of you, to stop the Johnson Amendment from interfering with your First Amendment Rights. . . . So, I just want to congratulate everybody in this



Photo by Associated Press

**President Trump presents the “religious freedom” executive order he signed on May 4. However, the Department of Justice says the order does not exempt religious organizations from political campaign activity.**

room, because that was a big deal and it was a very important thing for me to do for you.”

But according to his own lawyers, the order was a whole lot of nothing. FFRF

Co-President Dan Barker points out that “essentially, the Department of Justice called the president a liar and explained to the court that everything the president has said about

the Johnson Amendment is nonsense. His religious freedom order as it related to that safeguard against politicking by 501(c)(3) nonprofits was all pomp and no substance — an admission we now have in multiple court filings.”

The filings by Trump’s DOJ attorneys prove that Trump’s executive order did not deliver on his destructive campaign promise designed to reward white evangelicals, 81 percent of whom voted for Trump. This voting bloc disproportionately approves of ending the Johnson Amendment.

“By filing an amended complaint we were able to get into the record Trump’s continuing and misleading braggadocio over the effect of the order,” says FFRF

Co-President Annie Laurie Gaylor. “We did not accept that the government was saying one thing, while Trump was saying another. We’re pleased we got the DOJ to reiterate its position twice in a court of law.” The DOJ argued in its filings that FFRF “misunderstood the executive order,” but, notes Gaylor, “clearly it is Trump who misunderstands both the order and the extent of his power.”

## Johnson Amendment remains intact

FFRF is celebrating a huge victory for state/church separation. The new tax bill leaves intact the wise ban on church electioneering: the Johnson Amendment.

The Johnson Amendment keeps nonprofits nonpartisan. Under it, churches and tax-exempt 501(c)(3) nonprofits may not endorse or oppose political candidates. They may discuss and advocate on issues; they may not come out for or against specific candidates. The second-highest court in the United States decided nearly 20 years ago that the rule does not infringe free speech rights or religious freedom.

The House version of the tax

The admission is significant since it means that if churches politick from the pulpit they cannot claim that Trump’s order allows them to do so. FFRF filed a complaint with the IRS in early December against the Alabama church that endorsed senatorial candidate Roy Moore, who is accused of sexual assault.

The Becket Fund, which has brought a host of bad suits in an attempt to redefine religious liberty to allow discrimination, was miffed at the government’s response to FFRF’s lawsuit. David Lane, a Christian nationalist who runs the American Renewal Project, “said the court filing shows the limitations of Trump’s executive order. ‘In the long run, it doesn’t do anything for us,’” according to The Hill.

From the beginning, FFRF predicted that the lawsuit might end once the government admitted the president cannot overturn an act of Congress by fiat: “If Trump’s lawyers want to march into that courtroom and tell the world and President Trump that this order doesn’t do anything, we would consider that a win,” FFRF’s Director of Strategic Response Andrew Seidel, an attorney who worked on the complaint, explained to the Daily Beast shortly after the suit was filed.

There is substantial value in being able to point to DOJ court filings to expose Trump’s lies, Gaylor said.

## OVERHEARD

It has historical significance to me as a Jew, but not so much that I wouldn’t be willing to share it with other people to whom it also has a historical significance. But to point to a holy book and use that as proof — it’s not proof of any kind that a city belongs to one people or another. Religion should be kept out of it. I would prefer to separate religion from the state.

**Debby, 66, a dual citizen of the U.S. and Israel who lives in Jerusalem, commenting on President Trump’s announcement that the U.S. would formally recognize Jerusalem as the capital of Israel.**

*New York Times, 12-18-17*

You don’t actually have to swear on a Christian bible. You can swear on anything, really. I don’t know if you knew that. . . . The law is not that you have to swear on a Christian bible. That is not the law. You didn’t know that?

**CNN anchor Jake Tapper, responding**

**to Roy Moore campaign spokesman Ted Crockett, who said without a hint or irony, “You have to swear on a bible to be an elected official in the United States of America.”**

*CNN, 12-12-17*

Most deniers know full well that global warming is real, that it is caused by humans, and that it will continue. Why take a personal risk with actual money when it is easier and less expensive just to continue denying, blogging and harassing scientists? . . . The blogging and posturing are just for show. I look forward to this year’s excuses, insults and hand-wringing.

**Mark Boslough, physicist, skeptic and science communicator, after offering for the fourth straight year \$25,000 to anyone who thinks a record high temperature will not be set in the coming year (2018 for this specific bet).**

*Huffington Post, 12-28-17*



Photo by Ingrid Laas  
**Steven Pinker**

The usual fallacies: 1. “Rationalists must have faith in reason” (no, we don’t \*believe in\* reason; we \*use\* reason). Fallacy 2: “Reason can’t get me to love my wife.” That’s a preference (desire), not a proposition (belief), so neither faith nor reason is relevant.

Fallacy 3: “We must act short of certainty.” Best action under uncertainty is not faith.

Worst of all: “Faith is OK, so believe the dogmas of \*my\* tribe!”

**Cognitive scientist Steven Pinker (and FFRF honorary president who spoke at FFRF’s convention) tweeting about a New York Times op-ed “How can I possibly believe that faith is better than doubt?” by Peter Wehner.**

*Twitter, 12-25-17*

How did you spend Sundays growing up? “Going to church . . . with dad.” How do you spend Sundays now? “Breakfasting, and trips to farmers’ markets.”

**Molly Shannon, actress, being interviewed by Parade Magazine.**

*Parade Magazine, 12-31-17*

Those seeking to breach the wall between church and state fail to understand that the separation protects them. If the church is allowed to formally seek to influence matters of the state, the state will eventually seek greater influence over them. It’s axiomatic. Indeed, that pressure is bound to increase once taxpayers are called upon to support religious organizations via their tax-exempt status, even as those organizations seek to influence public policy through overt political activity.

**Newspaper editorial.**

*The Buffalo (N.Y.) News, 11-27-17*



# HEADS UP

A Poetry Column By Philip Appleman

## INTELLIGENT? DESIGN?

(To the tune of “Battle Hymn of the Republic”)

Your eyes have seen a blurry scene  
That’s only known to man:  
Your optic nerves are backward and  
Have been since time began.  
That’s what the preachers tell you is  
God’s very special plan:  
*Intelligent Design!*

Glory, Glory, Hallelujah!  
Making-do will have to do ya.  
Beware the swindlers who voodoo ya  
With *Intelligent Design!*

You wish a guy’s urethra did  
The jobs that were proposed:  
Both lover’s clout and waterspout  
Is what you had supposed.  
Alas, the Great Designer squeezed  
A prostate ’round your hose:  
*Intelligent Design!*

Glory, Glory, Hallelujah!  
Nowhere does the Bible clue ya  
That your glands would soon subdue ya:  
*Intelligent Design!*

Your breasts get lumps, your heart goes thump,  
Your hips are giving in.  
Childbirth is a horror ’cause  
Your pelvis is too thin.  
And osteoporosis is  
Your Maker’s little whim:  
*Intelligent Design!*

Glory, Glory, Hallelujah!  
The Great Designer knows what’s due ya.  
Nothing else can stick it to ya.  
Like *Intelligent Design!*



From *Karma, Dharma, Pudding & Pie*  
© Philip Appleman.  
Philip Appleman is a Distinguished Professor Emeritus at Indiana University. He is editor of the Norton Critical Edition of *Darwin*. He and his playwright wife, Marjorie Appleman, are both “After-Life” Members of FFRF. Phil’s books: [ffrf.org/shop](http://ffrf.org/shop).

## Freethought Today caption contest!



This month’s caption contest picture is the painting of Leonardo da Vinci’s “Salvator Mundi” (Savior of the World), which sold at auction for a record \$450.3 million in November. To enter, please write a humorous or witty caption to go along with this picture. Email your response to [caption@ffrf.org](mailto:caption@ffrf.org) by Feb. 9. The winner, chosen by FFRF staff, will receive an “Unabashed Atheist” T-shirt! We will announce the winner and top runners-up in the March issue.

## Teaching (legal) doctrine at Monroe



FFRF Staff Attorney Ryan Jayne taught constitutional law, “know your rights,” and Bill of Rights law (with emphasis on state/church separation) to five high school classes (about 150 total students) at Monroe High School in Monroe, Wis., on Jan. 4.

# FFRF welcomes its new Life, After-Life Members

FFRF is proud to announce and welcome our 77 newest Life Members, three After-Life Members, one Beyond After-Life Member and four Immortals. The After-Life Members are John Calvin, Julia Roberts and Wayne A. Hensler (posthumous gift from Nicholas Schwartz), who put up FFRF billboards saying “Enjoy life now. There is no afterlife.” After-Life Membership is a tongue-in-cheek-named donation category of \$5,000 for those who want their donation to “live on” after them. The Beyond After-Life Member is Adam R. Rose. This newly created donation category is “for those seeking atheist nirvana” and requires a donation of \$10,000 (or more), designated as a membership.

The 77 newest Life Members are Edward J. Allan, W. Allen, Richard W. Andersen (a gift from Larry W. Allen), Rick Barnard, Shivarama Bhat, Douglas Burg, Becky Carter, Richard Christensen, Cal Davidson, Michael Delman, Sally Dorst, Robert Dufek, Gregg Feiertag, Robert Feingold, Steven Gilbert, Wilson Greateon Jr., Ralph Guertin, Beckham Haile, Alison Hamilton (a gift from Jo Ann Kremers), Rick Harper, Richard Lee Hefner, Lynne Hills, Dennis Hunt, Charles James, Greg Jarrell, Katherine Johansen, Andy Johnson (a gift from Ben Johnson), Ayden Oxley-Johnson (a gift from Ben Johnson), Kathy Johnson, Russell Keating (an anonymous gift), Donald Kielich,

Michele Koch, Ryan Langford, Robert Larson, Ann Larson (a gift from Robert Larson), James Ledwell, Morgan Leibrandt, Wynne LeGrow, Michelle Lewis, David Lindes, Ramsay MacMullen, Mike Markot, Marilyn E. Morgan (a gift from Larry W. Allen), Janet Murphy, Andrea Natalie, Mark Nicholson, Lee Oeth, Richard Otter, Christopher Pawlak, Beth Perry, Michael Personette, Samuel Pollard, Bob Ralston, Mary Ray, Jonathan Reel, Douglas Reynolds, Ross Rubenstein, Andrew Schwam, Richard Simon, Duane Slicker, Sarina Sogel, Jill J. Sorden, Steven D. Sorden, R.T. Sorensen, Merle Strong, Trevor Stroup, Stan Ulrich, James Unger, Betty Waterhouse, Rick Weiss, David D. Weldon, Ted Williams, John Wilson, Paul Winkeller, Jonathan Zadra (a gift from Robert Zadra), Joe Zemel and one who wishes to remain anonymous.

Individual Life Memberships are \$1,000, designated as membership or membership renewal, and are deductible for income-tax purposes, as are all donations. The newest Life Members hail from 28 states and Washington D.C.: Arkansas, Arizona, California, Connecticut, Florida, Georgia, Illinois, Indiana, Kansas, Louisiana, Massachusetts, Maryland, Michigan, Minnesota, North Carolina, Nebraska, New Jersey, New Mexico, New York, Ohio, Oregon, Pennsylvania, Tennessee, Texas, Utah, Virginia, Washington and Wisconsin.

John O’Hara, Ron Taggart, Janet Thew and Mark Welty are our latest Immortals, a donation designation for those members who have contacted FFRF to report they have made provisions for FFRF in their estate planning.

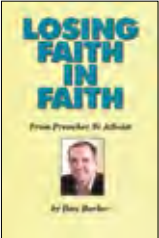
**MOVING?**  
Don’t miss your copy of  
**Freethought Today**

**Notify Us of  
Your Address Change  
Promptly!**

EMAIL [info@ffrf.org](mailto:info@ffrf.org)

**The Post Office does not  
forward third-class mail.**  
*FFRF cannot be responsible for replacing  
back issues if we have not been  
notified prior to your move.*

## Losing Faith in Faith: From Preacher to Atheist



By Dan Barker  
How Dan “threw out the bathwater and discovered there is no baby there.”

Buy it from FFRF online  
[shop.ffrf.org](http://shop.ffrf.org)



# IN THE NEWS

## FEMA broadens churches’ access to disaster funds

Less than four months after President Trump suggested churches should be able to receive federal disaster relief funds, officials have changed federal policies to make it easier for religious institutions to qualify for such aid.

With lawsuits pending in Texas and Florida from churches and synagogues challenging the limits, the Federal Emergency Management Agency announced Jan. 2 that it is removing language in its rules that often disqualified religious groups from aid available to other nonprofits.

“Private nonprofit houses of worship will not be singled out for disfavored treatment within the community centers subcategory of nonprofit applicants,” FEMA Recovery Directorate Assistant Administrator Alex Amparo wrote in a new manual.

FEMA said religious institutions could now qualify as “community centers” eligible for disaster grants, although facilities primarily used for “political, athletic . . . recreational, vocational, or academic training” will still be barred from receiving support.

## New Commandments monument moves forward

An Arkansas commission cleared the way for the installation of another Ten Commandments monument outside the state Capitol, after a prior marker was shattered when a man crashed his car into the stone less than 24 hours after it was put in place.

The Arkansas Capitol Arts and Grounds Commission signed off on the final design, which will include four concrete posts for the monument’s protection.

Chief Deputy Secretary of State Kelly Boyd said the commission will review the security of all monuments on Capitol grounds, which also include displays honoring firefighters, veterans and the nine students who desegregated Little Rock’s Central High School. The Little Rock Nine monument already includes concrete posts similar to the ones that will be placed with the Ten Commandments monument.

The American Civil Liberties Union of Arkansas said it plans to sue over the monument.

## Religious aspects of Christmas declining

A Pew Research Center survey has found that most U.S. adults believe the religious aspects of Christmas are emphasized less now than in the past, and that relatively few Americans are bothered by this trend.

Also, a declining majority says religious displays such as nativity scenes

## Appeals court rules bakers did discriminate



The Oregon Court of Appeals on Dec. 28 upheld a ruling of illegal discrimination and a \$135,000 fine levied by Labor Commissioner Brad Avakian against the owners of a bakery who refused to make a wedding cake for a gay couple in 2013.

The appeals court rejected the contention from Aaron and Melissa Klein, the bakers, that being required to make that wedding cake violated their constitutional freedom of speech or religion.

“The Kleins seek an exemption based on their sincere religious

opposition to same-sex marriage,” Judge Chris Garrett wrote in the opinion. “But those with sincere religious objections to marriage between people of different races, ethnicities or faiths could just as readily demand the same exemption.”

The ruling came as the U.S. Supreme Court is considering a similar case out of Colorado. During arguments in early December, the justices appeared closely divided on the issue, with observers predicting that Justice Anthony Kennedy could cast the deciding vote in a 5-4 split.

should be allowed on government property.

There has been a noticeable decline in the percentage of U.S. adults who say they believe that biblical elements of the Christmas story reflect historical events that actually occurred.

Currently, 55 percent of U.S. adults say they celebrate Christmas as a religious holiday. In 2013, 59 percent of Americans stated the same.

About 90 percent of adults say they celebrate the holiday, which is nearly identical to the share who said this in 2013.

## South Africa outlaws single-religion schools

Single-religion schools have been outlawed in South Africa after a ruling at the Johannesburg High Court.

Government-run schools may no longer promote themselves as subscribing to a single particular religion at the exclusion of others, the court ruled.

The Organisasie vir Godsdiens- en Onderrig en Demokrasie (Organization for Religious Education and Democracy), or OGOD, which fights against religious indoctrination through public schools in South Africa, welcomed the judgment.

OGOD made the application against six predominantly Christian public schools to prevent them from taking part in 71 instances of religious conduct.

While the court did not grant the restraining order, it ruled the schools had breached a section of the Schools Act making it an offence to promote one religion and exclude others.

## British want religion kept out of politics

Politics and religion should not mix, according to the British public, who want politicians to keep their personal faith to themselves.

A majority of British people believe that religion should also play a less prominent role in parliament, with bishops losing their automatic seats in the House of Lords, a YouGov survey found.

The prime minister, a vicar’s daughter, said that “faith guides me in everything I do,” while Tim Farron, a committed Christian, faced a barrage of questions over whether he believed gay sex to be sinful, as a result of which he felt he had to resign as Liberal Democratic leader.

## Superintendent sued for preaching to students

A superintendent in Louisiana’s Webster Parish has refused to stop promoting Christianity at Lakeside Junior/Senior High School, so he is being sued by the American Civil Liberties Union.

On Dec. 18, the ACLU said it was suing Webster Parish Schools and Superintendent Johnny Rowland. As the ACLU reports, the school day at Lakeside starts with a morning prayer over the PA, read either by teachers or by student “volunteers.”

“Nearly every Lakeside school event features an official prayer,” the report continues. “Graduation services are held in churches and often resemble religious services.”

Christy Cole, the mother of K.C., an agnostic Lakeside student, said that when her husband confronted Rowland, he was immediately rebuffed.

“I’ll stop when someone makes me stop,” Rowland reportedly said.

The Coles’ complaint claims that “when K.C. started to stay seated during morning prayer, other students ridiculed her.” Later, “when K.C.’s parents stayed seated during graduation prayers, other parents hissed in disapproval. One of K.C.’s teachers also implied to the class that the bible must be taken literally and mocked her when she questioned him.”

## Kentucky state rep. dies in apparent suicide



Kentucky state Rep. Dan Johnson died from a “probable suicide” two days after allegations arose that he had sexually abused a teenage girl at the church where he was a pastor. Johnson was found with a single gunshot wound to the head.

Johnson was accused by a woman of molesting her when she was 17 after a New Year’s party in 2012, according to the Kentucky Center for Investigative Reporting. That was followed by calls for Johnson’s resignation from leaders of both parties.

In a since-deleted post on Facebook, Johnson wrote “GOD knows the truth, nothing is the way they make it out to be. I cannot handle it any longer . . . BUT HEAVEN IS MY HOME.”

## 100 largest churches mostly led by white men

Church Clarity, a group that seeks to get churches to publicly disclose their stances on all manner of topics, recently published a detailed analysis of America’s 100 largest churches, based on information from Outreach Magazine, a Christian publication.

The study shows that 93 percent of America’s 100 largest churches are led by a white pastor. Only 7 out of the 100 of the churches on Outreach’s list are led by a person of color, yet nearly 40 percent of the U.S. population is made up of people of color.

Another statistic shows that only one of America’s 100 largest churches has a female pastor.

Nicole Crank of Faith Church in West Palm Beach, Fla., is the only woman, and she is listed as a co-pastor alongside her husband, David.

The study also found that there are no LGBTQ-affirming churches among the 100 largest churches in America. According to the analysis, just 35 percent of megachurches have clear LGBTQ+ policies, and 54 percent actually hide their positions deep inside their websites.

**American Infidel:**  
**Robert G. Ingersoll**

**By Orvin Larsen**  
Prof. Larsen writes with affection and respect of this illustrious 19th century freethinker.

**Buy it from FFRF online**  
**shop.ffrf.org**

**JUST PRETEND**  
*A freethought book for children*

**By Dan Barker**  
A fun, illustrated book allowing children of all ages to explore myths like Santa Claus and compare them with ideas like the existence of God.

**Buy it from FFRF online**  
**shop.ffrf.org**



## FFRF NEWS

# FFRF’s ‘Freethought Matters’ TV show debuts

FFRF has launched a new TV program for a local — and a national — audience.

On Jan. 7, FFRF unveiled its newest project: a weekly television show, in its hometown of Madison, Wis. “Freethought Matters,” a half-hour talk-show format generally hosted by FFRF Co-Presidents Dan Barker and Annie Laurie Gaylor, airs on CBS affiliate Channel 3 Sundays at 11 p.m.

“We consider ‘Freethought Matters’ partly as an antidote to the Sunday morning church hour,” Gaylor says. “But, mostly, we want to acquaint the community with the range of fascinating nonreligious authors and activists.”

The guests include heavyweights such as Harvard evolutionary psychologist and best-seller Steven Pinker, FFRF’s honorary president, The New York Times’ newest columnist Michelle Goldberg, comedian Julia Sweeney and Nation columnist Katha Pollitt, each of whom spoke at FFRF’s most recent convention in Madison. Pinker’s interview will air shortly after his much-awaited book, *Enlightenment Now*, comes out in February.

The debut guest was Chris Johnson, a photojournalist who produced the book, *A Better Life: 100 Atheists Speak Out on Joy & Meaning in a World Without God*,



Photo by Chris Line

**FFRF Co-Presidents Dan Barker, left, and Annie Laurie Gaylor sit on set with photojournalist Chris Johnson during filming of the first episode of “Freethought Matters,” FFRF’s new TV show.**

with a film version of the same name. His upbeat interview acquaints viewers not only with nonbelieving celebrities, but the global diversity of atheists. Today, “Nones” (those identifying as atheists, agnostics and not with any religion) are outpacing denominations such as Catholicism at nearly a quarter of the overall population and more than a third of Millennials.

For those who are not in the Madison area, you will be able to view the timely interviews the day after the shows air by visiting FFRF’s YouTube channel.

“We want to reach the unmassed masses with the truly ‘good news’ of freethought,” says Barker.

Other upcoming guests include Iranian-born secular London-based activist Maryam Namazie, science journalist and Los Angeles-based TV host Cara Santa Maria, Chicago black atheist activist Kimberly Veal, well-known atheist blogger Greta Christina of San Francisco, renowned sculptor Zenos Frudakis, and American Indian composer Brent Michael Davids, who lives on the Stockbridge-Munsee reservation in Wisconsin.

Upcoming guest hosts include Amit Pal, FFRF’s director of communications, formerly a longtime editorial staffer at The Progressive. The director of the show is Bruce Johnson, who recently joined FFRF’s staff after years at public television, and the producer is Laurny Seering, FFRF’s communications coordinator. FFRF extends thanks for camera help to FFRF Legal Fellow Chris Line, and pinch-hitters Marian Herzog, Mike Remington, Mike Foley and Veronica Plum.

## FFRF’s NY Times ad tweaks Trump



FFRF placed a full-page ad in The New York Times on Dec. 21, chastising President Trump for his all-out assault on the First Amendment.

The light-hearted ad about Trump’s war on secular rights ran on the day of the Winter Solstice. “President Trump’s great big Christmas present to the Religious Right . . . is a great big war on the separation of church and state,” the ad states.

Pictured under that headline are four fat stockings, labeled “Religious Vouchers,” “Cabinet Zealots,” “Church Politicking” and “Stacked Judiciary,” stuffed with cash, crosses and gifts. Underneath them are miniature stockings, each with a piece of coal, with greeting cards addressed to “Women’s Rights,” “LGBT,” “Planned Parenthood,” “Muslim Immigrants” and “Civil Liberties.”

To view a larger version of the ad, see the wrap that this issue of Freethought

Today arrived in.

The ad is partly a response to Trump’s “Merry Christmas” campaign. “There’s no ‘war on Christmas,’” remarks Annie Laurie Gaylor, FFRF co-founder. “That’s Fox News’ phony construct. But there most definitely is a concerted war on the First Amendment’s cherished principle of separation between government and religion.”

FFRF Co-President Dan Barker says, “While we kept the tone of our message light, we don’t minimize the grave harm already inflicted on America’s wall of separation between church and state.” Barker cites as an example Trump’s executive order pertaining to so-called religious freedom, which Attorney General Jeff Sessions has turned into a weapon to use against civil liberties and secular government.

In the coming year, FFRF expects to be battling campaigns to fund vouchers for religiously segregated schools at the expense of secular public schools, resisting further attempts to repeal the Johnson Amendment that bars church politicking and combatting additional nominations of right-wing zealots to lifetime appointments on the federal judiciary.

## FFRF appeals exclusion in ‘Bible in Schools’ case

A parent and child are appealing a ruling in November in FFRF’s case that seeks to put a full stop to blatantly unconstitutional “Bible in the Schools” classes in a West Virginia county.

Plaintiffs Elizabeth Deal and her child, Jessica Roe, are appealing to the 4th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals a district court’s unjust ruling that they did not have standing to sue the school system. Jessica attended schools within Mercer County, but was moved out of



the district last year to avoid the illegal classes, which FFRF’s lawsuit stopped for this year.

Senior U.S. District Judge David A. Faber in November dismissed a high-profile lawsuit filed by FFRF on the grounds that the plaintiffs lacked standing or brought claims that were not yet ripe. FFRF had filed the suit on the behalf of four plaintiffs earlier this year against Mercer County Schools, the board of education, the superintendent and a school principal. Farber’s dismissal on jurisdictional grounds was without prejudice, meaning that the case can be refiled if the school system resumes any bible classes. The court did rule that “Jane Doe” (another parent of a current elementary student) and FFRF have standing, but that the case was no longer “ripe,” since the classes were suspended.

Plaintiffs FFRF and Jane Doe have not appealed the decision as it pertains to “ripeness.” FFRF could bring suit against the school system if the bible classes return to elementary and middle schools. FFRF Senior Counsel Patrick Elliott, serving as co-counsel, notes FFRF has accomplished a great victory in halting the classes, but remains concerned that the school district may try to resume the inappropriate indoctrination.

Bible indoctrination classes were taught in Mercer County Schools for more than 75 years until the FFRF lawsuit. FFRF’s legal complaint lists examples of the proselytizing curriculum. Lesson 2 promotes creationism by claiming humans and dinosaurs co-existed. Students are asked to “picture Adam being able to crawl up on the back of a dinosaur! He and Eve could have their own personal water slide! Wouldn’t that be so wild!”

Elizabeth Deal and her daughter are asking to have their injury recognized, nominal damages and assurances the classes will not resume.

## Judge sides with FFRF against Texas AG

A district judge on Dec. 13 rejected the Texas attorney general’s attempt to meddle in an FFRF lawsuit against an overly prayerful judicial official.

In March 2017, FFRF and three individuals filed a federal lawsuit to stop a Texas justice of the peace from imposing prayers at the start of each court session.

Texas Attorney General Ken Paxton held a press conference on May 17 to announce his intent to interfere with the lawsuit against Judge Wayne Mack. FFRF called out Paxton for his “hyperbolic speculation” and set the record straight on the attorney general’s deliberate mischaracterization of the issues raised in FFRF’s lawsuit. Now a judge has affirmed the correctness of FFRF’s stance.

“The fact that FFRF in other cases has brought Establishment Clause challenges to different practices by different Texas officials does not transform this case into a statewide attack on all Texas officials such that any state agency may intervene as of right,” U.S. District Judge Ewing Werlein Jr. wrote. Previously, before starting each of his court sessions, Mack introduced a “visiting pastor,” outlining his credentials, advertising the church he is from and where it is located. The guest chaplain often read or sermonized from the Christian bible, then asked attendees to bow their heads and pray. By spring 2015, Mack inaugurated changes, having the bailiff introduce the prayer prior to Mack entering the courtroom. Notably, Mack chose to lock the courtroom doors prior to the chaplain-led prayers.

In July, FFRF filed a response to deny Mack’s motion to dismiss the lawsuit.



Ken Paxton



Wayne Mack



Make your own nontheistic cyber billboard at [ffrf.org/unabashed](http://ffrf.org/unabashed).



# FFRF historic victory

## Housing allowance enforcement enjoined

A federal judge who recently ruled in favor of FFRF’s challenge of the clergy housing privilege ordered the suspension of the IRS regulation governing the giveaway (pending appeal). “This is a decision ultimately affecting all clergy and retired clergy nationwide who’ve received this unconstitutional tax



Dan Barker



Barbara Crabb

privilege,” notes FFRF Co-President Dan Barker, one of the plaintiffs. In the same order, U.S. District Judge Barbara B. Crabb then immediately stayed her injunction pending an expected appeal. If Crabb’s decision is upheld, her order mandates that her injunction will become effective 180 days after the appeal process is completed in order to allow an orderly transition. Crabb had on Oct. 6 declared unconstitutional a provision in the tax code that excludes from gross income a housing allowance paid to a “minister of the gospel.” But she held off on final action until FFRF, the federal government and religious intervenors each had a chance to weigh in on the remedy.

One option included an injunction requiring the IRS to extend the benefits to the plaintiffs, including Barker and FFRF Co-President Annie Laurie Gaylor, who were designated a housing allowance by FFRF they were not allowed

to claim. Another option was to nullify the entire statute, which both FFRF and the federal government endorsed — and that is the option Crabb ultimately chose. Barker and Gaylor, who, as atheistic heads of a nonreligious group, are similarly situated to members of clergy, charged that the statute is discriminatory and violates the Establishment Clause of the First Amendment barring governmental preference for religion.

The housing allowance was passed in 1954 to reward “ministers of the gospel” for carrying on “a courageous fight against [a godless and anti-religious world movement].” The statute allows housing allowances paid as part of clergy salary to be subtracted outright from taxable income. Clergy may exempt up to the fair market rental value of their home. The housing allowance may pay not just rent or mortgage, but also for such things as home improvements, maintenance, repairs, dishwashers, cable TV, phone fees and bank fees.

The congressional Joint Committee on Taxation has reported that the exemption amounts to more than \$700 million a year in lost revenue. The Religion News Service calculated that the allowance increases the take-home pay of some pastors by up to 10 percent. Christianity Today found that 84 percent of senior pastors receive a housing allowance of \$20,000 to \$38,000 in added (but not reported) compensation to their base salary. A growing subset of highly paid ministers who live in multimillion dollar mansions are able to exclude hundreds of thousands of dollars from income taxation.

In 2013, Judge Crabb first ruled in FFRF’s favor in its original challenge. Crabb’s original finding sent “shockwaves through the religious community,” according to the Evangelical



### Gaylor v. Mnuchin case part of H&R Block tutorials

The nation’s most famous tax preparation service now features a recent FFRF legal triumph as part of its tutorials.

H&R Block’s class required for its tax professionals in 2018 includes a section on FFRF’s historic federal court victory that declared unconstitutional the clergy housing allowance. (See accompanying story.)

The briefing appears under “Module 4: Hot Topics.”

The plaintiffs in the case are FFRF Co-Presidents Annie Laurie Gaylor and Dan Barker, and Ian Gaylor representing the estate of Anne Nicol Gaylor, FFRF president emerita. The co-presidents argued that as leaders of a freethought organization they are similarly situated to clergy. Yet when FFRF designated a housing allowance for the co-presidents and

as part of Anne Gaylor’s retirement, the IRS refused to allow them to deduct the allowances.

The trio first sued in 2013, winning at the district level, which created a national outcry by the clergy. When the case was appealed, with virtually every denomination chiming in against the ruling, the 7th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals threw the case out on standing, saying the plaintiffs had failed to request a refund. Taking the cue, they requested refunds, and when they were denied, went back to court.

“We’re flattered our historic challenge of this inequity is a hot topic with tax professionals,” says Annie Laurie Gaylor.

FFRF is delighted to be of educational value — for tax preparers and everyone else.

# FFRF member gets ‘atheist’ flag up in N.H.

FFRF has proudly raised its unique flag to honor freethought and to protest a New Hampshire town’s Ten Commandments monument.

On Jan. 2, FFRF Member Richard Gagnon hoisted the “A” flag in Somersworth, N.H. The flag remained up in the “Citizen’s Place” traffic island through the end of January. The red “A” was adopted by Richard Dawkins as a symbol of atheism and agnosticism.

“Let us all come together as believers and nonbelievers. Judge us not by who we are. Judge us by how we treat one another,” Gagnon said.

In 2017, the city installed two flagpoles near a contentious Ten Commandments monument for community groups to celebrate events. The addition of something other than a Judeo-Christian symbol is an attempted gesture by the city to get around legal precedent against stand-alone Ten Commandments markers on public property.

“The 3,000-pound monolith was

knocked down in August 2016, setting off a new round of discussions as to whether or not the religious symbol violates the constitutional provision of separation of church and state,” the local paper reports. “In determining whether the Ten Commandments monument should be restored, Mayor Dana Hilliard offered a plan to create a citizen’s park, adding two flagpoles which could be used by civic groups to celebrate important events.”

FFRF’s flag was initially meant to go up on Dec. 4. Due to an anticipated backlash to a December display, Hilliard suggested a postponement, and Gagnon agreed to the move. Hilliard declared January as “Diversity and Tolerance Month.”

FFRF has asked for several years that the Ten Commandments monument be removed. In the meantime, FFRF hopes the flag will provide some balance, albeit temporarily, to Somersworth’s blatantly Christian endorsement.



Photo by Kimberley Haas/Union Leader Correspondent  
Somersworth Mayor Dana Hilliard, left, and FFRF Member Richard Gagnon show off the freethinking atheist flag in front of a portrait of Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. Both the flag and the portrait were on display in Somersworth during the month of January.



FFRF VICTORIES

FFRF stops unconstitutional prayers

By Molly Hanson

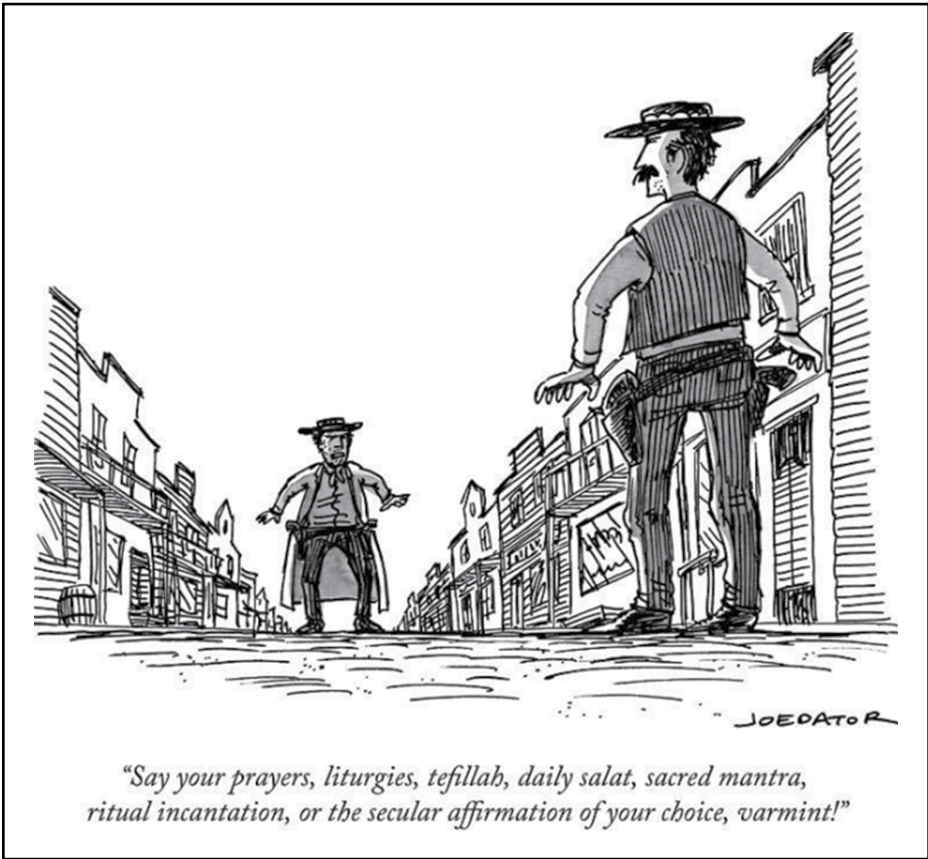
In the past month or so, FFRF has recorded several victories in six states against schools or cities regarding unconstitutional prayer. (FFRF's other recent victories are on page 9.)

Alabama

After it was reported to FFRF that a second-grade teacher at Ashford Elementary School in Alabama was leading her students in daily prayer before lunch, FFRF took action.

FFRF Legal Fellow Chris Line wrote to Houston County Schools Superintendent David Sewell on Dec. 4 to remind the district that public school teachers may not lead their students in prayer or otherwise endorse religion to students.

A response was received on Dec. 6 from Sewell informing FFRF that employees had been notified of their obligation to abide by federal and state laws regarding the separation of church and state.



of the school to ensure that the teacher stops praying and that the district makes lawful movie choices in the future.

**Minnesota**

It was brought to FFRF's attention that the Little Falls City Council in Minnesota was opening each year's first meeting with a Christian prayer. Members of the Franciscan Sisters have given the opening invocation in 2016 and 2017, and have been exclusively given the opportunity to do so.

On June 26, 2017, FFRF Senior Counsel Patrick Elliott wrote to Mayor Greg Zylaka informing him that the city must end the practice of having a Franciscan Sister give the yearly invocation because it creates the unlawful appearance that the city endorses Catholicism above other beliefs. Elliott noted that the nonreligious and members of minority religions should be permitted to deliver invocations. FFRF sent a follow-up letter on Dec. 15.

The city administrator responded on Dec. 28 informing FFRF that the city council would no longer place an invocation on the agenda for future council meetings.

Utah

On Aug. 17, FFRF wrote to the Tooele County School District in Utah over unconstitutional promotion of religion by the district superintendent.

It was brought to FFRF's attention that at the 2017 annual and mandatory meeting the district has at the beginning of its school year, Superintendent Scott Rogers talked about the importance of prayer and how it is necessary in education.

He then invited a pastor up on to the podium to deliver a Christian prayer. FFRF Legal Fellow Chris Line wrote to Rogers warning him against the unconstitutional endorsement of Christianity.

An attorney representing the school district responded on Dec. 20 informing FFRF that Rogers had been advised against having prayer at future meetings.

FFRF was assured that Rogers indicated he would comply with the district policy and constitutional mandate against promoting prayer.



California

FFRF got involved after being informed that the city of Buena Park, Calif., was hosting an annual Mayor's Prayer Breakfast.

Although a nonprofit organization was promoted as presenting the prayer breakfast, the city's website was advertising the event and instructing the public to send RSVPs and payments for tickets to Buena Park City Hall and to call the Office of the City Manager phone number for more information about the religious event.

FFRF Staff Attorney Elizabeth Cavell wrote to the city clerk on Nov. 10, informing the city that the hosting of the prayer breakfast posed serious First Amendment violation concerns. Cavell asked that the city cease all sponsorship and organization of the event, and to disassociate Buena Park

and the mayor's office from the event.

The city attorney responded on Dec. 22 indicating that Buena Park would be handing over more responsibility to the nonprofit organization and discontinuing the city promotion and ticket sales. The city also plans to change the name of the event.

Kansas

A concerned parent reported to FFRF that the principal of Oskaloosa Junior/Senior High School in Kansas had led students, parents and faculty in a prayer at the 2017 Fall Athletic Banquet, which was held to recognize all of the students who were in sports and activities for the fall semester. Additionally, it was reported that the school's Veterans Day event included prayer.

In a letter sent on Dec. 15 to Oskaloosa Public Schools Superintendent Jon Pfau, FFRF Legal Fellow Chris Line informed the district that it is unlawful for any school-sponsored event to include prayer.

Pfau called Line on Dec. 18 assuring FFRF that there will be no more school-sponsored prayer in the future.

Kentucky

After receiving multiple reports from concerned parents that a Ken-

tucky public elementary school was promoting religion to its students, FFRF got involved. It was brought to FFRF's attention that a teacher at Valley Elementary School in Pikeville, Ky., was requiring students to say a prayer while they lined up for lunch: "God is great. God is good. Let us thank him for our food. By his grace we are fed. Thank him for our daily bread."

Additionally, another parent reported to FFRF that as part of a Christmas party, the school planned to take its second-grade students to see "The Star," a Christian adventure comedy retelling the nativity of Jesus. The plot of the film follows the biblical account of the birth of Jesus.

FFRF Legal Fellow Chris Line wrote to an attorney representing Pike County Schools on Dec. 14, informing him that public school teachers may not lead their students in prayer, encourage prayer or otherwise endorse religion to students. Line also warned the district that bringing public school students on a field trip to a Christian movie as part of a Christmas party is a blatant and unconstitutional promotion of Christianity.

An attorney informed FFRF in a Dec. 19 phone call that he would discuss the violations with the principal

NOTHING FAILS LIKE PRAYER  
CONTEST

Our goal is to see secular citizens flood government meetings with secular invocations that demonstrate why government prayers are unnecessary, ineffective, embarrassing, exclusionary, divisive or just plain silly.

The person who gives the best secular invocation will be invited to open FFRF's annual convention in 2018, receiving an all-expenses-paid trip to San Francisco Nov. 2-4, along with a plaque and an honorarium of \$500.

MORE INFO AT:  
ffrf.org/outreach/nothing-fails-like-prayer

Include FFRF  
In Your Estate Planning

ffrf

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 contact Annie Laurie Gaylor at (608) 256-8900, [info@ffrf.org](mailto:info@ffrf.org)

Freedom depends  
on freethinkers

A note to FFRF Members  
Don't miss a single issue  
of Freethought Today  
& Private Line!  
If the expiration date  
of your FFRF membership  
on your address label says  
March or earlier . . .  
Please Renew Now!

FFRF Memberships:  
\$40 single; \$50 household;  
\$100 gung-ho; \$250 sustaining  
Memberships are tax deductible!

Freethought Today is  
published 10 times a year.

ffrf

P.O. Box 750 • Madison, WI 53701  
[ffrf.org/donate](http://ffrf.org/donate)

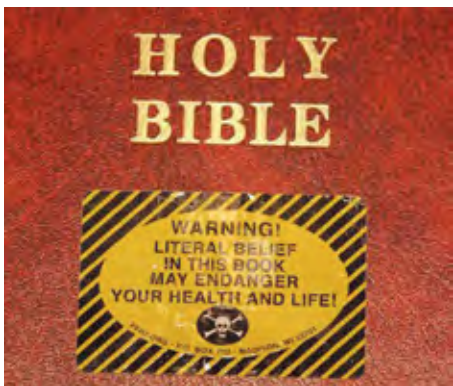


# Gideons blocked from schools in Michigan

A concerned parent informed FFRF that on Oct. 20, members of Gideons International were passing out New Testaments to all students of reading age outside of Fennville Elementary School in Fennville, Mich., while they waited to be picked up after school. This distribution reportedly took place on school property, just 20 feet from the school door.

It is unconstitutional for public school districts to permit Gideons International to distribute bibles as part of the public school day on school property, FFRF informed Fennville Public Schools.

“Courts have uniformly held that the distribution of bibles to students at public schools during the school day is prohibited,” FFRF Legal Fellow Chris Line wrote to Fennville Public Schools Superintendent Jim Greydanus. “In striking down a school district’s policy permitting Gideons to distribute bibles in classrooms, the 7th Circuit stat-



ed, ‘the Gideon Bible is unabashedly Christian. In permitting distribution of ‘The New Testament of Our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ’ along with limited excerpts from the Old Testament, the schools affront not only nonreligious people but all those whose faiths, or lack of faith, does not encompass the New Testament.”

The Gideons International is self-described as an interdenominational association of Christian business and

professional men who are members of Protestant/evangelical churches. (The organization doesn’t allow women to be full-fledged members.) Its website states that it is “dedicated to telling people about Jesus through sharing personally and by providing bibles and New Testaments.” The Gideon website openly refers to public schools as a prime target.

Public schools have a constitutional obligation to remain neutral toward religion and to protect the rights of conscience of young and impressionable students, FFRF contended. In allowing Gideons to distribute bibles to elementary school students, the district was impermissibly endorsing religion by placing its “stamp of approval” on the religious messages contained in the bible.

In contacting the superintendent, FFRF noted he may have had no prior knowledge of the bible distribution. Gideons often operate by deliberately avoiding superintendents and school

boards, advising their members to seek permission at the lowest level of authority.

The superintendent confirmed FFRF’s suspicions and informed it that this sort of incident would not recur.

“I have investigated the incident and have found that there was indeed a violation of district policies by those responsible for the distribution,” Greydanus wrote back. “Those responsible did not seek, nor receive, my permission to distribute materials on campus as required by policy.”

FFRF is glad to be of assistance and appreciates the superintendent’s assurances.

“We have taken complaints over aggressive Gideon tactics for four decades,” says FFRF Co-President Annie Laurie Gaylor. “We teach our children not to accept gifts from strangers. Then there are these grown men preying on a captive audience of young students. The Gideons should be ashamed of themselves.”

By Molly Hanson

## Colorado town ends worship event support

FFRF has ended an annual unconstitutional religious event put on by a Colorado town.

Each year, the town of Gypsum was hosting a community worship event called “Praise in the Park” as part of its summer celebration, “Gypsum Daze.” The event included live performances of worship music from local area churches. The town’s website was advertising “Praise in the Park.”

In a letter sent on July 18, FFRF Legal Fellow Chris Line informed Gypsum Town Manager Jeff Shroll that the town has a constitutional obligation to remain neutral toward religion, and that by organizing and promoting a worship event, Gypsum unlawfully entangles itself with religion. An attorney representing the town responded on Dec. 26, notifying FFRF that the town will not be participating in any future Praise in the Park programs.

## Kentucky school ends religious violations

A concerned student contacted FFRF to report that students and staff at Christian County High School in Kentucky had participated in a See You at the Pole event on school property in September 2017, during which staff led students in prayer. Additionally, FFRF learned that a teacher at the school had been preaching Christianity to his students.

See You at the Pole is a Christian-oriented prayer rally organized each year around a bible verse. FFRF Legal Director Rebecca Markert wrote to Superintendent Mary Ann Gemmill on Nov. 7, informing her that by advertising the event, the high school created the appearance that the district unconstitutionally endorses the event’s Christian message.

Furthermore, Markert informed Gemmill that it is illegal for a teacher to proselytize to students. Public schools have a duty to ensure that their teachers are not encouraging religion in their classrooms and must not promote a particular religious viewpoint with their curriculum.

A legal representative of the district responded on Dec. 5 assuring FFRF that the violation had been discussed with the principal of the school and the teacher and would not occur again.

## Religious project stopped in Ohio school

An Ohio public school will not be promoting religion in the future after a concerned parent reported to FFRF that Big Walnut High School was participating in “Operation Christmas Child,” a Christian ministry the school had been participating in for 25 years.

FFRF Patrick O’Reiley Legal Fellow Chris Line wrote to Superintendent Angela Pollock on Nov. 2, informing her that the school district violated the constitution by taking part in a charity project sponsored by Samaritan’s Purse — a religious organization.

On Dec. 3, Pollock informed FFRF that, while the program had already concluded, the students and staff

would brainstorm new options for the future to ensure they would be compliant with constitutional obligations to keep religion out of school.

## Bible study no longer sponsored by S.C. city



It was brought to FFRF’s attention that the city of Newberry, S.C., was regularly sponsoring a Christian “Bibles and Badges” bible study. The studies were being held in city facilities and the city was listed on social media as the meeting host. The city’s official Facebook page was promoting the bible studies, which repeatedly included calls for members of the public to attend.

On Nov. 22, FFRF Senior Counsel Patrick Elliott wrote to Mayor Foster Senn, informing him that hosting and promoting a Christian bible study fails to respect the First Amendment’s mandate that the government remain religiously neutral by endorsing Christianity over all other faiths and no faith.

FFRF received a letter on Dec. 5

from Senn, in which he wrote that the Bibles and Badges group was no longer meeting and that the city Facebook site will no longer list meeting notices of the group.

## FFRF quiets worship music at Indiana school

FFRF was informed that a choir director for Loogootee middle and high schools in Indiana had been using her position to promote religion to students in the school’s choir program.

The program had been performing overwhelmingly Christian music and choir students were being required to sing in various churches. FFRF Legal Fellow Chris Line wrote to Loogootee Community Schools Superintendent Chip Mehaffey on Nov. 10, requesting that the school district begin an immediate investigation into the violation.

Line informed Mehaffey that it was inappropriate for a public school teacher to teach songs of Christian worship and devotion in a public school setting. Additionally, Line noted, taking public school students to church strongly signals an unconstitutional endorsement of Christianity.

On Nov. 10, a legal representative of the district informed FFRF that the district will not make arrangements for students to perform at churches in the future and will ensure that outside performances arranged by the school will be performed in nonreligious venues. FFRF was also informed that the choir instructor had been told to make secular song choices.

## Alaska

Continued from page 1

has the sole stated mission of winning converts to a particular religion, unconstitutionally supports both that religious worship and that religious mission.

The Sitka City Assembly eventually paid heed to FFRF’s counsel.

“After deliberation that spanned several meetings, St. Michael’s Cathedral will not receive \$5,000 from the city for exterior work,” a local radio station reported. “At a short meeting on Tuesday, the Sitka Assembly voted 4-3 against donating the money for renovations to the historic building. The ordinance,


originally presented to the assembly on Nov. 7, continued to stir up debate over the separation of church and state.”

A Sitka Assembly member who voted the right way understood the implications of giving the church the city grant.

“It’s pretty clear that by doing this, you will be advancing the church’s goal,” Aaron Bean said. “Any money that they wouldn’t have to otherwise pay a contractor to do the work that they’ve been neglecting for years is going to end up furthering their agenda.”

Yip Harburg,  
from his book:

## Rhymes for the Irreverent



Yip Harburg wrote the lyrics for ‘The Wizard of Oz,’  
‘April in Paris’ & ‘Brother Can You Spare a Dime?’

### Do Unto Others?

“Love thy neighbor as thyself?”  
Hide that motto on the shelf!  
Let it lie there, keep it idle  
Especially if you’re suicidal.

Published by the Freedom From Religion Foundation

**Buy it from FFRF online - [shop.ffrf.org](http://shop.ffrf.org)**



# Julia’s guide to religious-themed movies

Here is an edited version of the speech Julia Sweeney gave on Sept. 16 at FFRF’s 40th annual convention in Madison, Wis. She was introduced by FFRF Co-President Dan Barker:

You’ve seen Julia Sweeney on “Saturday Night Live” for many years. You’ve seen her in the movies and you’ve seen her on “Sex in The City,” where she played a nun. Julia is also an author of a number of books, including *If It’s Not One Thing, It’s Your Mother* and *God Said, ‘Ha!’* Julia is also a playwright and she’s written several one-woman monologues, including “In the Family Way,” “God Said, ‘Ha!’” and “Letting Go of God.”

Please welcome Julia Sweeney.

By Julia Sweeney

Omigod, I’m having so much fun, I love this convention. I really am vowing never to miss it again, ever! It’s so important and so great.

This was the assignment I gave myself: I’m going to watch financially successful religious movies that were released in the last year and give you my opinion of them. I’m a huge movie person. It’s my hobby and my love, my everything. But I had to stop my movie-going love affair to watch these Christian movies — which was a real sacrifice, people, but I did it for you!

I had to think about what that means — religious movies. It is a really interesting thing to think about because the “horror” genre is enormous. I found that, like religious movies, you really had to buy into a lot of stuff in those films to try to understand them. And I hate horror films, so I just thought I’m ruling out horror films, but then there is a film that came out called “Annabelle: Creation.” It cost \$15 million to make and it’s earned \$100 million, so it’s hugely successful and it’s all about a demonically possessed doll.

And there was another, which was a prequel called “Annabelle” in 2014. I was thinking that the Catholic Church must be so embarrassed about these horror films that take their ideology to the most ridiculous extent.

But what does the Catholic Church really have to say about these horror films? I immediately found an article dated Aug. 20, 2017, in the National Catholic Register, a mainstream Catholic publication featuring an interview with a priest about what he thought about “Annabelle Creation.” I want to read part of it to you: “What children read, what they see on the , an FFRF



Photo by Ingrid Laas

Comedian and actress Julia Sweeney, an FFRF honorary director, regaled the FFRF convention audience with humorous takes on religious movies.

screen, can inspire them toward greater faithfulness. Conversely, it can lead them into the sordid world of the occult, even opening them to demonic possession. — Father Robert, a priest for more than 10 years and an experienced exorcist.” So, I’m just reading this going, “What? He knows firsthand the unintended consequences when children or adults open the door to demonic activity?” Remember, this is a mainstream Catholic publication.

Let’s get back to religious movies. Mel Gibson’s movie “The Passion of the Christ” made so much more money than any one ever thought. But the thing is, it’s really just a violent porn film. Christians should hate this movie; it’s like watching two hours of Jesus being scourged. There’s one minute of Jesus saying, “Turn the other cheek” or something and two hours of just out-and-out violence. Yet it became this huge popular movie at churches. That’s what started the movement of churches and Hollywood coming together and making these films.

There are basically two big producers in Hollywood of Christian films. One produces down-and-dirty cheap films and the other produces the main studio big ones. The down-and-dirty ones are all made by this company called Pure Flix. Many of you may

have seen the first one they released called “God’s Not Dead.”

### ‘God’s Not Dead’

If you want to be depressed/totally entertained, you should rent “God’s Not Dead.” In the movie, there is this professor who’s sort of like a Richard Dawkins, except he’s not at all. The film begins with this young kid who goes to college and takes Philosophy 101. On the first day, the professor tells his students they must sign a paper saying that God is dead. He’s not even going to teach the class unless they accept that God is dead. Everyone in the class sheepishly writes “God is dead,” except for this one kid, who says “I can’t sign that paper.” He also tells the professor that not only is he going to debate him in three debates, but that he will prove to the professor that God is not dead.

Of course, the three main atheists in the film are portrayed as crazy, God-hating villains. It’s like every single one of them isn’t really an atheist, they’re just mad at God. For example, at one point, the student asks the professor why he hates God so much, and the professor says, “Because he took everything away from me that I loved!” Oh, omigod!

The movie portrays another atheist as only caring about making money. This character is mean to his girlfriend, and when she tells him that she has cancer, he dumps her right during the same dinner, because he’s an atheist and that’s what they do. Plus, his mother, who is a Christian, suffers from Alzheimer’s and he doesn’t take care of her. And there’s this great scene where he visits his mother and she is just blankly watching the static on the TV screen. He says to her, “Mom, I’m an atheist and you know I just love to make money. You prayed and believed your whole life and you’ve never done anything wrong. You’re the nicest person I know and I’m the meanest, angriest person I know.” (You know, how mean and angry people are always making that announcement?) “But now you have dementia, and my life is perfect. Why don’t you explain

that to me?” And then she suddenly comes out of her dementia (you know, how demented people just suddenly click back in?) for this one moment to reply, “Sometimes, the devil allows people to live a life of trouble because he doesn’t want them turning to God. Your sin is like a jail cell, except it’s nice and comfy and they leave the doors wide open. Then time runs out, the cell door slams shut and it’s too late.” Then she turns to him and says, “Excuse me, who are you anyway?”

This movie was made for \$2 million and has made \$140 million. The overall point of all these Pure Flix films is not even about Christianity. No one ever really talks about what it means to be a Christian or have any difficulty being a Christian besides saying, “I love Jesus,” and that’s the end of it. Their life’s great. Pure Flix is really all about vilifying secularists and portraying them as terrible people. That’s the whole point of the movie.

### ‘God’s Not Dead 2’

Because that was so popular, they had to make “God’s Not Dead 2.” At least it could be “T-O-O” or something like that. No, it’s just “God’s Not Dead 2,” which was made for \$5 million and took in \$23 million; not as much as the first, but still a pretty good return on that money. Annie Laurie and Dan, you might be in the wrong business, right?

“God’s Not Dead 2” stars Melissa Joan Hart as a history teacher in a public school. She tries to keep her Christianity to herself and cares for her father, played by Pat Boone. And in class, they’re talking about nonviolent resistance, and she uses MLK and Gandhi as examples. A girl in the class, whose parents are atheists (which means that their son died and they have no feelings about it, and that’s how you can tell that they are atheists!) raises her hand and asks, “Wasn’t Jesus a pacifist?” But because the teacher knows she’s not supposed to mention Jesus’ name in the public school, she replies that, according to the writers of the bible, Jesus did say “Love your enemies.”

But now, of course, she’s broken the rule by mentioning Jesus and she’s hauled before the school board, where they tell her that she can’t mention Jesus in a public school. She replies that she was asked a question and she was just teaching history and he’s historical. The school board tells her that she will need to sign a statement saying that she made a horrible mistake. And she says something to the effect of, “I’d rather be with God against the world than be with the world and against God!”

Then the parents of the girl complain that they can’t believe the teacher said the word “Jesus” in history class, and that they’re going to get the ACLU on the case and sue the school and make millions of dollars doing it! And you’re going to get into an Ivy League school, daughter, because you’re going to be a famous girl who had that horrible teacher who mentioned Jesus in class. So, Melissa Joan Hart goes home to her father, who says, “That’s the thing about atheism — they don’t take away the pain. They don’t take away all the hope. They just take away the soul of God, and seem to forget that the most basic human right of all is the right to know Jesus.” Is it really? That’s the most ba-



Photo by Ingrid Laas

Julia Sweeney has been a cast member on “Saturday Night Live” and has authored several books and written and performed several one-woman monologues.



sic human right? I’m all for you guys, because this is what we’re up against.

‘Old Fashioned’

The next flick is called “Old Fashioned.” It’s about a Christian carpenter who runs an antique shop, but he used to be wild in college. In fact, he made those “Girls Gone Wild” videos, but now he’s just the town carpenter who has accepted Jesus into his heart. And then there is this free-spirited girl who just gets in her car and drives until she runs out of gas, and that’s how many rules she has in her life! She stays wherever, until she can save enough money to buy another tank of gas and then she moves on to the next town.

Her name is Elizabeth and she runs out of gas near his store. The attraction between the two is immediately obvious and he tells her that she can rent the apartment above his antique store. But when she needs something fixed, he tells her that he’s sorry and can’t come in because he has a personal rule to never be alone in a room with a woman he’s not married to. She responds, “Oh, so you’re only alone in a room with your wife?” He responds that he’s not married. That begins the romance between them, where he reveals himself to be the most screwed up, controlling person in the world! He takes her to a preacher, who makes them do workbooks that will supposedly reveal if they will be compatible together before they can go on a date. It’s so insufferable.

This movie opened against “Fifty Shades of Grey,” which, I have to say, is kind of smart. It’s true. I mean Hollywood comes out with a lot of crass, sexual stuff that really isn’t for everyone. Not just because people are Christian or prudish about it, but for me “Fifty Shades of Grey” is a horrific film. It just breaks my heart that there aren’t better options than those, like it’s really got to be “Fifty Shades of Grey” or this crazy wacko Christian movie?

‘The Case for Christ’

Next I watched “The Case for Christ,” that Lee Strobel story. I had read the book when I was actually going through my personal faith journey. *The Case for Christ* book by Lee Strobel, which sold a zillion copies, is about a Chicago reporter who’s trying to prove God doesn’t exist, but then realized that God does exist!

Now it has been made into a movie which didn’t do as well, costing \$3 million and only made \$17 million at the box office. The character who plays Strobel has great ‘80s longish hair and is a rising star at the Chicago Tribune.

One day, his daughter chokes on something at a restaurant, and a woman who knows how to do the Heimlich maneuver (which is a miracle that someone in a restaurant would know how to do the Heimlich maneuver!) then saves his daughter’s life. When Strobel thanks the woman, she tells him that Jesus sent her there. “I was going to go to Applebee’s, but came here and saved your daughter because Jesus knew I had to.”

This inspires his wife to become a Christian. Strobel becomes very upset by his wife’s new-found faith and decides to write a story for the Chicago Tribune proving there is no God so that his wife will read his article and she’ll realize that there is no God. But first he gets some great advice from his managing editor on what angle he should use to prove there is no God. His editor tells him all he needs to do is debunk the resurrection story and it



Photo by Ingrid Laas

FFRF Legal Director Rebecca Markert, left, stands with Julia Sweeney and Julia’s daughter, Mulan, for a quick photo during the convention.

will all fall like a house of cards.

Strobel begins investigating the resurrection, trying to prove it didn’t happen. But he keeps finding out it did, by going to people like Faye Dunaway, who plays an important psychologist at a university. He asks her how the gospels can be true when the four gospels so obviously contradict themselves. Her answer was that when witnesses give testimony, they are always contradicting each other. (So the very fact that the gospels contradict each other proves that they’re true?) Then, as he is turning to leave, she asks him a question: “Do you have daddy issues?” To which he responds, “It’s true. I do hate my father, so it must mean that I hate God!”

I just keep wondering why are they trying to convince people with facts at all. I mean, why don’t they just say, “Believe it on faith”? That’s what I find so interesting. My theory is that people who don’t have good critical-thinking skills are kind of wandering around in the Christian world thinking that if you really looked into it, it could be proven that it was true, so you don’t have to prove it’s true. You can just say that it’s on faith, but if you did look into it, you would find out it was indeed true. So these movies are being made where people kind of sound like they’re saying facts and they sort of sound like they’re good critical thinkers, except that it’s completely absurd and ridiculous. But they wrap it up nicely with “all is right,” and they can even prove the resurrection.

‘I’m Not Ashamed’

This next movie is a hard one. It’s one of the most ridiculous films. It’s called “I’m Not Ashamed,” and it’s about a girl who was killed in Columbine, where they retroactively went back and made her a much, much bigger Christian than she ever was. Supposedly, right before she was killed in Columbine, she went up to about 10 different people and told them that God loved them. She wanted to date guys with Down syndrome and other guys who were just horrible, but she told them that everything was going to work out OK. After she was killed, the story grew, but since then has been disproved. According to a witness, one of the Columbine killers asked her if she believed in God. She said, “Yes,”

and they said, “Well, then, go be with your God.” But then later that same guy said that he didn’t know if that’s actually what was said.

‘Heaven Is for Real’

Let’s move on to the big-money movies. Sony now has a division called “Affirm Films,” where they make big-budget movies with big stars, or religious movies such as “Heaven Is for Real,” about the guy whose 4-year-old son went to heaven after his appendix burst. But before they were operating on him, the 4-year-old was completely primed and coached with all this religious imagery. After he came out of surgery, they asked him very leading questions, like: “Did you talk to God? Did God have wings? Were there rainbows around?” Todd Burpo and Lynn Vincent wrote the book about it, and it sold 20 million copies. The movie, based on the book, stars Greg Kinnear, whom I’ve never met but I feel a little “peery” with him, since he is more of a comedian. And I just feel like, “What? Why, why would you think it’s real?” It cost \$10 million to make and earned over \$100 million.

‘Miracles from Heaven’

I think that might be why they then made “Miracles from Heaven,” starring Jennifer Garner. The film is about a woman whose daughter has an intestinal problem that all these doctors

try to fix by putting tubes in her lower intestines, but it doesn’t work. But then, one day, her daughter plays in a tree and falls down the middle of this dead tree, hits her head and suddenly her intestines start working again. It’s a miracle!

Then it’s so great, at the end, we see the mother is crying because she was going to lose her faith, too. But when her daughter gets well, she believes in God again. It becomes pretty obvious that the filmmakers are targeting both a religious and a slightly skeptical audience. They want to get everybody.

The movie ends with Garner saying, “God loves my daughter and me because we prayed so hard and now she’s going to live.” And then she says, “You know, Einstein once said . . .” (By the way, if Einstein ever came back and heard of all the times he was misquoted, he would never stop throwing up!) “Einstein said, ‘There are only two ways to live your life — as though nothing is a miracle or as if everything is a miracle.’”

So Garner’s character says that and realizes that everything is a miracle. The sun came up; it’s a miracle! The grass is growing; it’s a miracle! My husband’s faith, my house, my car; it’s a miracle! But that, too, has been debunked. Einstein didn’t even say that.

I love these quotes from famous

See Sweeney on page 12



Photo by Ingrid Laas

FFRF Honorary President Steven Pinker bends over to give Julia Sweeney a hug following Pinker’s speech at the convention on Sept. 16.



# Sweeney

Continued from page 11

people that turned out to be debunked. My favorite one is the George Eliot quote: “It’s never too late to become whoever you are meant to be.” She never said that, and the majority of George Eliot’s book’s themes are basically that sometimes you’re too old to be anything. Really. Her theme is the opposite of that quote. Yet I have seen that saying on refrigerators at least 10 times.

## ‘Risen’

Then there is the film “Risen,” about a Roman centurion in 33 A.D., who is sent to investigate whether this guy named Jesus has risen from the dead. He is part of a Roman tribune and basically becomes Columbo, investigating this crazy guy Jesus. The Roman tribune goes out and interviews all the apostles and, let me get this straight, Columbo investigates the resurrection?

My favorite thing is that the centurion has seen Jesus die, so he knows what he looks like and goes into this room where the apostles are, and there is Jesus. Jesus says something like, “Hey, that’s right, it’s me!” So Columbo thinks, “I guess I have to believe, too, because I am so confused.”

The apostles ask him to join them and they all go out to a desert area that has some water. Several of the apostles and the centurion get on a boat and they go out to fish. The apostles throw out a fishing net on the left side of the boat and when they pull it back in they have caught nothing; there’s no fish. Seemingly out of nowhere, Jesus appears on the sand and tells them to try the right side of the boat. Then they throw the net over the right side of the boat and there’s lots of fish! Then the Roman throws off his robe yelling, “I believe! I believe!”

## ‘The Shack’

Omigod, you guys! I kid you not, this is the plot of “The Shack”: A guy named Mack has three daughters and one of them is killed, so he loses his faith in God. (Can I just say here that I’m so tired of people who believe in God until their own child dies or get sick and then, they question their faith? Do they not look around at the world or know anyone who has ever had trouble with anyone? OK, back to “The Shack.”) So this guy gets a letter in the mail, telling him to meet Papa at the shack. Now, that’s interesting because Papa is the name that he, his wife and his daughters called God. He goes to the shack



Photo by Ingrid Laas

Julia Sweeney hams it up for the camera at FFRF’s convention.

for the weekend and that’s where he meets God, who is, I kid you not, Octavia Spencer. Yes, it’s God as a character actress. She invites him in the cabin and confirms the she is, indeed, God. And says she is there with two other gods — her son Jesus, a Jewish-looking guy who’s a carpenter who literally comes out holding a hammer, and the holy spirit, who is this Asian chick who looks like she’s taken Quaaludes. She says, “Hey, man, yeah, I’m the holy spirit.” And then Mack hangs out at the shack with God, Jesus and the holy spirit.

And it’s so Oprah-esque God stuff. Like Max says to Octavia Spencer, “God, wait a minute. I thought you’re supposed to punish people; you’re a mean God!” And Spencer says, “Who told you that? Having to live with the fact that you know you sinned is punishment enough.” — which I personally find so heinous. I mean, the truth is there’s a lot of people who’ve sinned and have done terrible things, who don’t really care that they’ve done terrible things. That is one of the things that I hate about the kind of Oprahfied view of God, where it’s like, “Hey, everybody’s just on a journey and they’re just in a different place.” It’s like, well, actually some people do need to be punished and kept away from other people. — Oh, this is my favorite thing: the son, the carpenter, takes Mack on a boat ride. There’s a boat ride with Jesus as he takes you out in the middle of the

lake. Jesus then gets out of the boat and Mack is like, “What? I can’t believe it!” and then Jesus says, “Come on, you can do it, too!” So Mack stands on the water and Jesus says, “Let’s run!” And then they run across the water!

That movie was made for \$20 million and earned \$100 million.

## ‘The War Room’

OK, I’m just doing one more: “The War Room.”

The great thing about it is that is has an all-African-American cast. This one cost \$3 million and made \$12 million. There’s a woman who’s a real estate agent and has a really awful husband. Omigod, he’s so terrible. And at the beginning, she was using a lot of Christian kind of words, like she says to her friend, “My husband is so difficult. Submission is hard.” — That’s such a creepy thing to say!

And then her friend says, “You know, submission is ducking, so God can kick your husband.” — How creepy is that? — And then she goes to this woman’s house and she’s going to sell her house and it’s Miss Clara, and Miss Clara has taken a closet in her house and put all of these biblical sayings on it. And she goes in there and that’s her “war room,” where she tells God how to fix the world. And she convinces the real estate agent that she should do that. And the real estate agent cleans out a closet and then there’s a big, hilarious

montage of her cleaning out her closet to put up signs of Jesus and the sayings of Jesus. Her husband, meanwhile, is in another city courting another woman, about to have an affair. She finds out about it and prays to God to do something. And the film cuts back and forth between her, in her war room praying to not let her husband cheat on her, and then back to the husband who is flirting with the young woman. Then, all of a sudden, the husband starts gagging from terrible indigestion and he throws up. That’s what God did to stop him from having the affair.

## Glad it’s over

OK. I just want to say my family is going to be so happy for this to be over because it’s so depressing watching these movies. At first it was funny, like “God’s Not Dead.” Whoa, this is ridiculous! And then by like the tenth movie, I was on my side in the fetal position and my daughter came home from school and asked, “What’s the matter?” And I told her that I just watched “The Case For Christ,” the whole thing! My daughter says, “When does this end?” I said, “When we go to the Freedom From Religion Foundation convention!”

All right. Now, I know you’re depressed about it. Part of me the whole time was thinking I have to stop my life and write atheist movies, I guess. But, you know, atheist movies are just movies!

I think it’s right to think that we’re going to come up with some. I can’t decide if these films are a terrible sign of the future, or is this kind of a last gasp? When you go online and you read the comments section about these movies, half the people hate them because they’re secularists like us who just hate the world, and the other half of them are really conservative Christians who think that they’ve misinterpreted the bible in some way.

It’s not like it’s universally accepted, although they have made a lot of money and now Pure Flix has about five movies coming, including one called, “Same Kind of Different As Me,” starring Greg Kinnear again.

And I know I was supposed to get up here and just be funny only. I’m so sorry about that, but I do hope that I have educated you a little bit about the horrendous Christian film landscape out there.

Thank you for having me.

# Team

Continued from page 1

stepped up FFRF’s ongoing work to help protect the Johnson Amendment, which keeps nonprofits nonpartisan. Under it, churches and tax-exempt 501(c)(3) nonprofits may not endorse or oppose political candidates. They may discuss and advocate on issues; they may not use tax-exempt resources for political purposes.

The House version of the tax reform bill gutted the Johnson Amendment. The Senate version left it untouched.

The team tracked every attempt to repeal the Johnson Amendment and mobilized FFRF members from across

the country to contact their senators and representatives, arming them with the tools and talking points needed to make an impact.

Other state/church separation groups and nonprofits also worked to keep the amendment intact. The final bill left the Johnson Amendment alone.

“This win for secularism is probably bigger than most people realize. It keeps billions of dollars in dark money out of churches and stops a desperate religious power grab,” explained Seidel.

“FFRF has done more than our members know,” said FFRF Co-President Dan Barker, when discussing the Johnson Amendment victory. “We’ve had 30 meetings with legislators about this issue and did a lot of behind-the-scenes work to protect this important rule.”

The Strategic Response Team has

four basic duties:

- Representing freethinkers with elected officials.

The team oversees FFRF’s Educate Congress Campaign. Unveiled in 2017, the campaign involves FFRF attorneys taking turns lobbying in Congress and in state legislatures. Three week-long lobbying campaigns involving six attorneys took place in 2017.

- Overseeing FFRF action alerts, a thankless task that Editorial Assistant Molly Hanson handles with aplomb.

In 2017, more than 100 alerts, many at the federal level, went out, utilizing Engage software, making it a matter of seconds for members to easily contact members of Congress over timely legislation.

- Following legislation that impacts state/church separation, for good or ill.

“We tracked about 75 pieces of legislation in 2017,” said Jayne, who

is assigned to the response team for that purpose. Prior to September, FFRF Junior Counsel Sam Grover ably tracked legislation, also testifying before Wisconsin legislative committees.

- Overseeing rapid response.

“We keep our finger on the pulse of secularism and work to quickly respond to any challenges,” explains Seidel.

This includes writing letters about potential violations; drafting FFRF statements in response to important legal developments or current affairs; and writing op-eds, letters to the editor, blogs and articles to educate the public on these issues.

Also involved in the team are Barker and Annie Laurie Gaylor, Markert and Director of Communications Amit Pal. All staff attorneys participate in the Educate Congress Campaign.



Jeff Mateer



Convention speech

Do you know an American Indian atheist?

Here is an edited version of the speech given by Brent Michael Davids at FFRF’s 40th annual convention in Madison, Wis., on Sept. 16, 2017.

FFRF Co-President Dan Barker introduced him:

*I’ve known Brent Michael Davids for quite a while. If I can use the word in a nonreligious sense, we’re kind of like brothers. He is a member of the Mohican tribe of Indians, and I’m a member because of my great-grandmother of the Delaware Lenape tribe. They are somewhat related tribes.*

*Brent Michael Davids is an internationally acclaimed multi-award-winning composer. He’s composed orchestral pieces, done a lot of film composing and composed for the Kronos Quartet and the Chanticleers. He was named by the Kennedy Center as one of 25 top American genius composers, he’s toured internationally, the Rockefeller Foundation gave him an award and the National Endowment for the Arts has named him among the most-celebrated choral composers. He integrates his vast knowledge of American Indian culture and traditions, including his ability to play flute, with Eurocentric orchestration.*

*Welcome, Brent Michael Davids.*

By Brent Michael Davids

I’m slightly intimidated because I’m sure the audience is brilliant, and I don’t usually speak in front of people. I’m usually behind the scenes writing the music, and someone else is doing the performing. Yes, I’m a composer of concert music and film scores. And I’m a citizen of the Stockbridge-Munsee Band of the Mohican Nation. I live on my reservation here in Wisconsin, but we’re not originally from here.

We’ve had our own “trail of tears” several times, removed from our original territory in New York and Massachusetts, from what’s now called the Hudson River. The original name of the river is “Mahheconnituck.” “Mohican” means the “People of the ever-moving waters” and refers to the Mahheconnituck, which rises and falls with the ocean tides. Our population in the 1600s was 22,000, and our current population is 1,500.

If you’re familiar with the fictional book by James Fenimore Cooper, I often say I’m the “next to the last of the Mohicans”! Our tribe is younger than Dan Barker’s tribe, the Lenni Lenape; we refer to his people as the “grandfather” nation, but we belong to the same Algonquian language family.

Cornstalk girl

My first self-awareness of nonbelief came by way of a recurrent daydream about a cornstalk girl across a road that I was prohibited from ever crossing as a 4-year-old boy. At that time, as a child, I felt that this cornstalk girl and I had a mental connection, so we could speak together without saying anything out loud. She was way across the road at sunset, in a corn field I could never visit, her tassel hair ablaze in gold and orange as the light went low over the horizon. Sometimes the field looked like it was set on fire, and we mentally talked till sundown.



Photo by Ingrid Laas

In his speech to the FFRF convention audience, Brent Michael Davids said, “I came to realize that the church was being run by old white men in the back of the sanctuary, basically making things up as they went along.”

But one day I wondered, “How is this possible?” There are no wires, and thoughts carried by the wind don’t make sense. The wind is flowing in only one direction, and our communication is two ways. And, we’re talking much faster than the air would allow (the reasoning of my 4-year-old self).

What was interesting is that I had a fleeting intuition that the cornstalk girl’s thoughts were actually my own, “Ah, she’s me!” I’d invented an imaginary friend.

Later, I was baptized into a church, grew up in it, and forgot my former daydream completely. I accepted all the beliefs and practices of Christianity as normal, without questioning them, and tried my best to be good.

One summer, I went to a church camp and had a great time. Of all the church activities, summer camp was my all-time favorite. After a wonderful time at camp, I came back to normal church life in Chicago.

Our priest asked me if I might organize others to collect the offertory, as they were making an effort to include young people in church activities. I was 15. I agreed, and asked another person to help me collect the donations. Our job was to walk up and down the aisle and pass a bowl around to everyone.

A few days later, my parents got a call from the church, and they had a concerned look on their faces. The priest had phoned to schedule what was called a “priesthood visit” with me. These “visits” had two purposes,

either to admonish someone for doing wrong, or to talk about advancing one’s service into the priesthood. My folks and I thought perhaps the church was grooming me to become a deacon, after my successful coordination of the offertory.

Two priests came one evening and whisked me off to a nearby restaurant for a talk. They admonished me for doing something against the church, and threatened to revoke my membership if I didn’t repent. Apparently, I was not supposed to ask a girl to assist in the offertory. I simply nodded, giving assurances that I did not know I had done anything wrong.

The girl I had asked to assist me was a friend from camp. At camp, friends would always ask others to help out with everything. I was shocked that I had done anything wrong. It was also shaming, because word spread and rumors started about my possible transgressions.

I was treated as a sinner who had wronged God, and I had no idea why. I felt the opposite, in fact. If I had done something so evil, why didn’t I feel bad about it? I was imagining that people who are truly bad must really enjoy their evil acts, so in my own lack of remorse, I thought I must be really evil!

But then, I started to realize there’s a difference between what church people think versus their religious claims. And I further reasoned, if that were true, than there’s no single Christianity, because there must be as many different Christianities as

there are Christians. I reasoned that a singular Christianity doesn’t exist, and therefore the claims to knowing the “one true religion” are a falsehood. I came to realize that the church was being run by old white men in the back of the sanctuary, basically making things up as they went along. The cornstalk girl dream returned.

Around that time, I started composing music. I also eventually went on to study religion, and worked toward both music and religion degrees simultaneously. I finished the master of music degree, but not the master of religious studies. My music career took off, but I had gained what I wanted from the religious studies. I wanted to get the same training as those two priests. I suppose one could say I lost my faith, but for me it was more like remembering my non-belief. In the end, I recaptured the memory of my inquisitive, creative, little boy self who had confidence in his own intuition.

Invisible Indians

Today there are 567 federally recognized Indian nations. The current Indian population in America stands at 0.9 percent, where it was once closer to 100 percent. America was founded on a systemic genocide to obtain rich land and resources. But, America moreover identifies itself with Gov. John Winthrop of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, who paraphrased from the Sermon on the Mount, saying that the colonists would create “a city upon a hill.”

Seeing America as a beacon for the rest of the world is a more palatable alternative to the darker truth. Today, America’s genocide is ignored — effectively rendered invisible.

Equally so, America’s living reminders also are ignored. The indigenous history of America is not far from the minds of the tribes, however, and it also shapes Indian attitudes toward belief and nonbelief.

The first colonial encounters led to murderous land grabs, in what I think of as the “Extermination” period. The idea was to satiate the hunger for land and resources by compelling the signing of exploitative treaties and killing the inhabitants.

The myth of Christopher Columbus in 1492 stains our textbooks because he was really a murderous slave trader who didn’t even set foot in America. He funded his trips with the promise of a return in gold and spices, which he would take from whomever he conquered.

In 1609, Hendrick Hudson first sailed into the Mahheconnituck on a ship called the Half Moon, and met two Mohicans on the shore. A retelling of the encounter in 1881 by John Heckewelder, an American missionary, describes Hudson’s lust for land.

“[Hudson’s men] asked only for so much ground for a garden spot as, they said, the hide of a bullock would cover or encompass, which hide was spread before them. The Indians readily granted this apparently reasonable request; but the whites then took a knife, and beginning at one end of the hide, cut it up to a

See Davids on page 14



# Dauids

Continued from page 13



Brent Michael Davids

long rope, not thicker than a child’s finger, ... they then took the rope at one end, and drew it gently along, carefully avoiding its breaking. It was drawn out into a circular form, and being closed at its ends, encompassed a large piece of ground. The Indians were surprised at the superior wit of the whites, but did not wish to contend with them about a little land, as they had still enough themselves.”

## Reservations

The first official Indian reservations were established under President Grant in the 1870s, mostly in response to the discovery of gold in Indian territory (though removal to lands later designated as reservations were set up under the 1830 Indian Removal Act, and the 1851 Indian Appropriations Act). The desire for Indian land was at a fever pitch, and Indians were being forcibly removed all across the country.

However, in 1879, a Ponca chief named Standing Bear faced the extinction of his people in a forced removal. A third of his tribe had already died from it. With the help of a newspaper man, Standing Bear sued Gen. Crook and the U.S. Army for violating his civil rights. He won the case, and the court ruled that Indians are “persons within the meaning of the law” and could not be forced onto reservations.

So, in 1879, Indians were finally considered people, and Standing Bear’s case effectively ended the res-

ervation roundup period.

Well, Indians could now sue the government, so the next idea was to indoctrinate the children. The first boarding school, Carlisle Indian Industrial School, was founded in 1879 by Capt. Richard Henry Pratt. Pratt got the idea for Carlisle from his work at Hampton, a school for freed black slaves. Pratt’s motto was “Kill the Indian within him to save the man,” and the boarding school was a forced assimilation factory.

Very young children were sent alone by train to Carlisle for periods of five years, prohibited from contacting their families. Not speaking English, they often didn’t know where they were going or why. When they arrived, they were placed three to a room, from differing tribes, so they would be forced to speak English as a common language. Their hair was chopped short, which to them was a signifier of death. They were prohibited from their own cultures and forced into Christianity, including daily mealtime hymns.

They were malnourished, frightened, abused, and some even died at the school. In 1914, the school came under federal investigation for alleged misconduct. In 1918, the school was closed. But many more schools, modeled on Carlisle, appeared in the West.

Through all of these periods, and several others not mentioned, American Indians have suffered from abusive stereotyping. In Gov. Winthrop’s time, from writings in his journal, we know that Indians were viewed as “devils” who lived in a nature that was considered heinously “evil.”

The first colonists faced harsh conditions and they viewed nature as malevolent. Indians were viewed as wild savages. Jump ahead to a later century, and writers like Henry David Thoreau and Walt Whitman exemplified a modern change, with the idea of nature being inherently good. At this point, Indians had a benevolent nature, but, still plagued by the primitive stereotype, became “noble savages.”

Even today, Christian Indians, traditional Indians, city Indians, reservation Indians and nontheistic Indians all live under the shadow of pervasive stereotypes and abusive

history. And unlike the beacon of the United States of Amnesia, we see it face-to-face.

## Indian atheists

So, do you know an American Indian atheist? If you know Dan Barker and perhaps come to know me, then the answer is yes. And maybe you know others, too. Of course, all Indians are not alike. The cultures are different, and so are the languages and modern realities. The 0.9 percent indigenous population suffers the greatest hardships per capita, the highest rates of suicide, alcohol abuse, fetal-alcohol syndrome, incarceration, unemployment — you name it. But American Indians have a unique view of the world, one that values extended kinship ties not only for humans, but for animals and Earth, as well.

Not to call what Indians do “religion,” perhaps “life-way” is better, but whatever we call this, it’s not proselytizing, and it’s not hierarchical. Indian life-ways exist in systems of cause-and-effect and of reciprocity, where the definition of personhood may extend outside the human species, and Indian life-ways don’t traditionally seek dominion over the Earth. They are life-and-death systems of reciprocity where the nonhuman “others” are seen as extended kin — family.

So, where a Western view might advocate saving an exotic species from extinction (man vs. nature), an Indian view might wish to form a kinship relationship with a nonhuman “relative” and find a balance for mutual benefit. It’s not a dominionist view, like time inching its way along a ruler. It’s cyclic and relational thinking.

I personally think it’s at this level of Indian reciprocity — the life-and-death, barter-and-exchange, cause-and-effect world of extended kinship ties that extend beyond humans to the Earth and everywhere — where I see potential intersections with those of us who are the “Nones.”

Yes, there are magical stories in Indian life, a continent formed on the back of a giant turtle, animals changing into people changing back into animals again, cannibal giants like Bigfoot and Sasquatch, abominable snow beasts roaming the land eating people, giant thunderbirds swooping down to snack on your children, or hungry witches that live inside the rocks.

There are Indians who take these magical stories as actual history, and some who see them as cultural or allegorical stories. Some American Indians deny the fact of evolution by natural selection, preferring that the first Indians were formed from clay, or Christian Indians who believe they descended from Adam and Eve.

But some Indians are also scientists, like Fred Begay, a distinguished nuclear scientist who worked at the Los Alamos labs.

He had an interesting idea to use the Navajo stories about “light” to help inspire his research on lasers to heat plasma. We also have Indian atheists such as writer Sherman Alexie, who tweeted, “Being atheist means you’ll argue with grown-ass adults who essentially believe in Santa,” and Jimi Hendrix, who said, “Music is my religion.”

I wonder if the current 24 percent statistic of the number of Nones in



“I was going through old photos my grandmother had, and I found one of me at age 4,” Brent Michael Davids writes. “And amazingly, in the background, is the very field I could not reach, across the very road I was prohibited from crossing, though it’s not visible in this photo. Someone took a photo of me at the time I still had my imaginary cornstalk friend.”

America holds true for American Indian populations, too. I can’t find any studies about that. But some of the Indian stories already leave a door open, if we wanted to troll the Christian God story.

The Yaqui creation story, for example, describes a time before God. The Indians were already there, prior to God, challenging the notion of an all-powerful creator of the universe. One day, the Indians heard a tree start singing. No one understood. After a special person arrived to translate, they learned the singing tree is God speaking about his coming arrival. Some Indians chose to accept God and become Yaqui, while others decided not to accept him and became ants who live underground.

So, God wasn’t around at the beginning, and didn’t create the universe or the Indians or the trees!

But, for example, the scientific method is cause-and-effect, and — minus the magical stories — the American Indian life-ways are, as well. What I’m suggesting is that there may exist, at a basic level, a ready-made meet-up for Indians and atheists. It would require more interaction, more understanding, and the formation of genuine relationships.

The arts may be another way for Indians and atheists to meet. Writer Heid E. Erdrich is an atheist and a poet. She writes, “As an Ojibwe tribal member, I come from deeply faithful people whose spiritual beliefs and practices infuse culture, language, governance, medicine — everything. And yet, as I open my life to my inherited culture, I find . . . my belief or lack thereof does not matter to my engagement of Ojibwe ways.

“Still, it pains me that my poems, and most Native American writers’ poems, are inevitably read as spiritual, which means religious.

“The idea of an American Indian atheist is unusual at best, unthinkable at worst. . . And now I shall make a profession of faithlessness. It seems required. As an atheist, I am not sure I can satisfy.

“I engage many Ojibwe practices as part of my way of living a good life, yet in my core understanding of the way of creation, I do not believe one all-powerful deity exists. To put it more directly, I have faith in and relation to creation itself rather than faith in a creator.”



Brent Michael Davids is a citizen of the Stockbridge-Munsee Band of the Mohican Nation.



# No, Christians don't face persecution in U.S.

This column originally ran in the Washington Post on Dec. 12 and is reprinted with permission.

By Bethany Allen-Ebrahimian

One word explains why a record number of white evangelical Christians threw their support behind a lewd, religiously illiterate presidential candidate last year. The same word also explains why 65 percent of white evangelicals in Alabama supported accused child molester Roy Moore in his unsuccessful campaign for the Senate.

That word is not “abortion.” It’s not “homosexuality.” It’s not even “racism.” The word is “persecution.”

According to a survey by the Public Religion Research Institute, a majority of white evangelicals believe that Christians face discrimination in the United States and are more likely to say that Christians, rather than Muslims, experience this.

Evangelicals supported first Donald Trump and then Moore because they view both as protectors.

Persecution refers to systematic religious discrimination and marginalization. It is the opposite of power. A weak group can be persecuted, but a powerful group cannot.

Are Christians a weak and marginalized group?

Here are the facts. Christians are vastly over-represented in national politics, not underrepresented. While roughly 70 percent of the U.S. population identifies as Christian, 91 percent of Congress identifies as such — a percentage that has remained roughly the same since the 1960s. The proportion of Christians in many state legislatures is even higher. Every member of the Supreme Court appears to be religiously affiliated (though not all of them are Christian), and no atheist has ever sat on that court. That overrepresentation means that either Christians have superior access to the mechanisms of



Bethany Allen-Ebrahimian



Photo by Shutterstock

President Trump is supported by evangelicals because, in part, they view him as a protector against Christian persecution.

electioneering or that being Christian is such a boon to candidacy that most people claim to be Christian regardless of their personal beliefs. Either of these possibilities fully precludes the possibility that Christians as a group experience formal marginalization or informal scorn that bars them from the halls of power. The opposite is true.

Meanwhile, atheists and the religiously unaffiliated — the supposed perpetrators of anti-Christian persecution — are vastly underrepresented in government. In fact, there is only one religiously unaffiliated member of Congress, Rep. Kyrsten Sinema, D-Ariz. There are no open atheists.

If someone writes a book claiming that global warming is a hoax, we ask, “What is your evidence?” We do not pat them on their heads, express appreciation for how genuine their feelings are, and leave it at that.

But when someone published a book claiming that American Christians face looming persecution and even extinction, as influential Christian columnist Rod Dreher did in his best-seller

*The Benedict Option*, journalists did not ask, “What is your evidence?” It doesn’t seem that anyone has interviewed sociologists and political scientists, or even quoted basic statistics, to see whether this claim squared with reality.

New York Times columnist David Brooks’ main criticism of the book was that Dreher “answers secular purism with religious purism” — not that the fundamental claim of his book was wildly inaccurate. A nearly 8,000-word New Yorker profile plumbed the depths of Dreher’s personality and family life without ever addressing whether his book had any basis in reality. A recent Washington Post article referred to Christians as “beleaguered.”

Why are we reluctant to challenge such claims? It’s the result of a tacit social contract, an uneasy truce after the 20th-century wars over science and the role of religion in the public sphere. According to this social contract, institutions outside the religious sphere will not use scientific methods to criticize religious beliefs, so long as those beliefs are not combined with sweeping political claims that extend far beyond the walls of the church.

The reluctance to fact-check Dreher, or any other Christian claiming persecution, is the social contract at work. We journalists inherently under-

stand that we must suspend our usual judgment when writing about religion.

But evangelical Christians have long chafed at the strictures of that social contract. Now, with the election of Trump and the rise of Moore, they are in open rebellion against it. They want their beliefs to extend outside the walls of their churches and into bakeries, businesses, doctor’s offices, public bathrooms, Congress, the court system and the presidency — and they don’t want these actions to be subjected to legal and social scrutiny. They take such scrutiny, and any resulting opposition, as persecution. It’s a powerful rallying cry that has now swelled into a force capable of rewriting laws and oppressing the truly vulnerable.

When Christians make factually untrue claims that then go on to influence elections, law-making and eventually the lives of people outside the walls of the church, that social contract has been violated.

That means that journalists and public intellectuals can no longer give a pass to Christians who claim persecution. We must fight falsehoods with the full force of our professional training — logic, facts and research. This does not mean attacking Christian religious beliefs themselves, but rather, challenging inaccurate assertions about the state of the world we all share.

How will we know when American Christians are genuinely under threat? When they start changing their names from the obviously biblical “Andrew” and “Mary” to the more secular “William” or “Jennifer” in order to avoid hiring discrimination. When Christians in Congress hide their faith and instead loudly claim to be atheists. When Christians are regularly blocked from buying homes or renting apartments in the good parts of town. When the president of the United States calls for Christians to be banned from the country. Then we can start taking claims of religious discrimination at face value.

But until such times, American Christians who say they are being persecuted are simply wrong.

Bethany Allen-Ebrahimian is a contributing writer at Foreign Policy magazine.

## THEY SAID WHAT?



Roy Moore

Today, we no longer recognize the universal truth that God is the author of our life and liberty. Abortion, sodomy and materialism have taken the place of life, liberty and the pursuit of

happiness. . . . We have stopped prayer in our schools. . . . We have even begun to recognize the right of a man to claim to be a woman, and vice versa. Immorality sweeps over our land.

**Roy Moore, in his “campaign statement” following his election loss to Doug Jones for the open Alabama Senate seat.**

ABC News, 12-13-17

I’d gladly execute a convicted adulterer, sodomite or bestialiter. Biblical law is a blessing’.

**Larry Secede Kilgore, Republican challenger to Texas Gov. Greg Abbott, in a tweet that has since been taken down.**

Twitter.com, 12-22-17

You can stay if you want because you need it more than we do.

**President Trump, telling reporters to stick around for the prayer before a cabinet meeting.**

USA Today, 12-20-17

I trust in a big God. I feel like I was

wildly successful. . . . I didn’t win, but I moved the debate. So I didn’t shed a tear when I left the contest because I felt like, you know, I fulfilled the calling that God gave me.



Michele Bachmann

**Michele Bachmann, former Congresswoman, asserting that she “was supposed to run for president” in 2012 in order to make the repeal of Obamacare the central issue of the Republican platform, and is now thinking about running for the Minnesota U.S. Senate seat vacated by Al Franken.**

The Jim Bakker Show, 12-27-17

We admire him. He’s our hero. It’s like having the Stanley Cup come to your tournament. He’s so cool, so identifiable.

**Angèle Regnier, co-founder of Catholic Christian Outreach, on St. Francis Xavier, whose right forearm, thought to have baptized tens of thousands of converts, will be “on tour” through Canada. He died in 1552.**

CBC News, 1-3-18

The reason is God lays claim to all firsts.



Paula White

So when you keep for yourself something that belongs to God, you are desecrating what is to be consecrated to God.

**Paula White, one of Trump’s “spiritual advisers,” who wrote on her website that fol-**

**lowers should send her donations of up to one month’s salary, and that those who don’t could face “consequences” from God, as he demands the money as a “first fruits” offering.**

Huffington Post, 1-9-18

**Woe to the Women: The Bible Tells Me So**

By Annie Laurie Gaylor

A concise, easy-to-read book that will challenge your concept of the bible as “a good book.” Illustrated. 264 pages.

**Buy it from FFRF online shop.frf.org**



# Atheist in Jordan finds safe haven in U.S.

## Nonbelief Relief aids Mohammad Alkhadra to escape potential death

*Nonbelief Relief gave Mohammad Alkhadra \$5,000 to help get him safely out of Jordan and to Austin, Texas. He is an American citizen who grew up in Jordan and faced death threats because of his outspoken atheism.*

*A Jordanian civil engineer and a human rights activist, Alkhadra founded the Jordanian Atheists Group in 2013. He later organized help for endangered ex-Muslims to leave the country.*

*After receiving the aid from Nonbelief Relief, he messaged FFRF, writing, "Thank you so much. I don't know where I would be right now without your help."*

*Here is his story:*

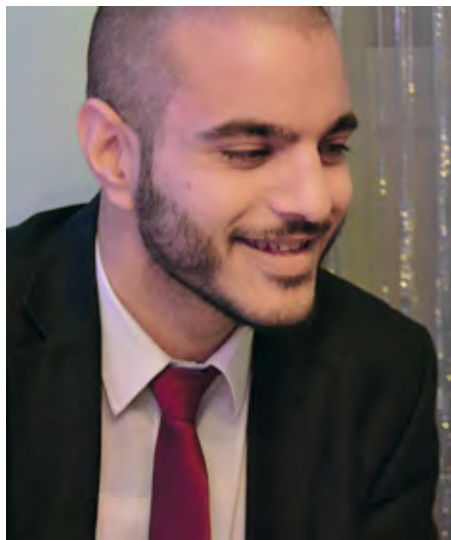
By Mohammad Alkhadra

**"J**ordanian writer Nahid Hattar killed outside the Supreme Justice Court." That 2016 headline did not just deliver the shock and sorrow of losing a prominent writer and an atheist in Jordan, it felt that he could have been any of us.

On Sept. 25, 2016, Hattar was killed by three bullets outside the court in the Jordanian capital of Amman, where he was standing trial on charges of insulting God after he shared on social media a cartoon depicting a bearded man lying in bed with two women and smoking, asking God to bring him a drink.

I thought about Hattar's murder for a long time and I realized that as an atheist in Jordan, just one social media post that attracts local attention is what could be the end.

I was given the Islamic name Mohammad Alkhadra long before I knew I was one. Now, at the age of 25 with



Mohammad Alkhadra

five years of being an atheist, the fact of being born in a Muslim family strikes fear in me and fellow ex-Muslims.

It all began with my curiosity: Why would one follow the religion of his family just because he was raised in it? Isn't it just like the pagans who refused Islam because they thought they were right based on being raised pagans? How do we know what we know?

As my search into becoming a more reasoned Muslim continued, I was baffled by the ability of the faithful to highlight only the peaceful and moral aspect of their faith, while negating what would be considered inhuman in Islamic history and sharia. As I was on the path of learning how to convince people of Islam, I had to first figure out how to convince them of Allah.

But then I watched Richard Dawkins talking about evolution on YouTube. Evolution wasn't something we really studied in school. I really wanted to know why this evolution theory existed, as it looked like rubbish to me.

But I soon realized how uneducated I was, and the deeper I went, the more I believed that the concept of God itself was unreasonable.

I thought I was the only guy in Jordan who came up with this scary concept. I actually cried when I saw a two-hour program on the history of the universe. How small are we in this universe, and how important we think we are to imagine that everything has to revolve around us.

I later found a Facebook group for atheists in Jordan. It didn't have much activity, and had zero action outside the realm of what we thought was the safe internet. It was a lonely period, where everyone around you is different and you don't know what would happen if you spoke about your ideas. If everyone who thought like I did kept it to themselves, I would probably be in some country preaching Islam. Or worse, I might have joined those who

want to achieve the caliphate.

I started commenting on public posts, and although I did get a few negative reactions, some people contacted me and told me they thought in a similar way. I added them to that group and finally decided that it was time to create a community for us. We no longer had to be alone in real life.

There were 28 of us who showed up. Men and women from all backgrounds, from ages 16 to 45. It was fulfilling that we could actually have a part of our lives where we had like-minded friends — a family of those facing threats of death.

Many of those gatherings happened before I received a call that one member, who had recently joined us, was in danger. He used to be an imam and his appearance on the "Black Ducks" show,

run by Egyptian Ismail Mohamed, made him the most well-known apostate in Jordan.

We thought that Jordan, instead of places like Pakistan or Saudi Arabia, was a safe haven, but it wasn't. We got him a safe place to stay and later got him out of Jordan.

We are not Islamophobes, but we are the ones who will be sent to jail for blasphemy or be killed under Islamic law. I chose to speak against this madness in July in London at the International Conference on Freedom of Conscience and Expression, the largest gathering of ex-Muslims in history.

The moment I returned from London to the airport in Amman, the police looked at me as if I were smuggling something. Many people are detained by the intelligence service upon arrival for all sorts of reasons. I was afraid it was my turn. Once I was safe at home, I got notices from fellow atheists to delete all messages linking me to them. Everyone was then afraid to contact me because if I got arrested, they thought I would bring down the whole community with me.

I spent the last five years not knowing whether every time I left the house would be the last time. After the speech in London, it was at every moment I wondered that. I then met with a friend who got a message from a U.K. number telling him that Hattar is gone, and soon you will be gone, too. If that was the case for him, what awaits me?

Previously, I had received messages like "We will come cut your family in front of you before we kill you," but that was a while ago. However, once the video of me speaking at the conference was available, I knew it was only a matter of time before it got shared around enough until someone carried out my death sentence.

And that is why I have sought refuge in the United States.

## Egyptian committee seeks to criminalize atheism

The Committee on Religion in the Egyptian Parliament has disclosed plans to pass into law a bill that makes atheism a criminal offense.

Current law says atheists can be prosecuted for expressing their disbelief in public, but the committee's proposal would go further and criminalize disbelief itself.

In 2014, shortly after Abdel-Fattah el-Sisi was sworn in as Egypt's president, the government announced that it was preparing a national plan to crush atheism.

A few months later, Al-Shabab, a government-linked newspaper, stated that atheists were "the country's second enemy after the Muslim Brotherhood" and quoted a psychologist saying that "atheism leads to mental imbalances and paranoia."

Saudi Arabia adopted a similar position in 2014 when "promotion of atheist thought" became officially classified as an act of terrorism.

### Bangladeshi social media activist detained

Bangladeshi immigration police detained Asaduzzaman Noor, known as Asad Noor on his YouTube channel, at Dhaka airport on Dec. 25.

Inspector Mohammad Shahidullah said hundreds of Muslims staged

**The charge against him is that he hurt religious feeling by mocking Prophet Mohammed and made bad comments against Islam, the prophet and the Koran.**

— Police Inspector Mohammad Shahidullah

demonstrations against Noor in 2017 after the head of an Islamic seminary filed a case against him.

"The charge against him is that he hurt religious feeling by mocking Prophet Mohammed and made bad comments against Islam, the prophet and the Koran on Facebook and YouTube," he said.

Noor was charged under Bangladesh's strict internet laws and could face up to 14 years in jail if found guilty.

Rights groups have accused the Bangladesh government of muzzling dissent and targeting atheist bloggers who have used social media to criticize religion.

In 2013, four Bangladeshi bloggers were arrested after nationwide protests in which Islamic groups demanded the execution of atheist commentators. They were later

freed.

In recent years, atheist and secular voices have been targeted by Islamist extremist groups, who have hacked to death a dozen bloggers, publishers and activists, and forced others to flee overseas.

### In Malaysia, 'active persecution' of atheists

Malaysia has been singled out and listed among seven countries worldwide that practice "active persecution" of the nonreligious in a global index released Dec. 5, following a so-called "hunt" against atheists starting earlier this year.

In 2017's Freedom of Thought Re-

port by the International Humanist and Ethical Union, Malaysia was given a score of 4.5, with 5 being the worst possible score.

Malaysia had scored 4 for the categories of "Constitution and government" and "Education and children's rights," but 5 for "Family, community, society" and "Freedom of expression, humanist values."

"This country is found to be declining, with human rights including freedom of thought and expression under serious assault," the report said of Malaysia.

Shahidan Kassim, minister in the Prime Minister's Department, had said that in Malaysia, atheists should be "hunted down" by authorities.



**FREEDOM FROM RELIGION FOUNDATION**

P.O. Box 750 • Madison, WI 53701 • (608) 256-8900 • FFRF.org

### 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. FFRF has more than 31,000 members. FFRF is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit and donations are tax deductible for income tax purposes.

FFRF's email address is [info@ffrf.org](mailto:info@ffrf.org). Please include your name and physical mailing address with all email correspondence.

FFRF members wishing to receive online news releases, "action alerts" and "Freethought of the Day" should contact [info@ffrf.org](mailto:info@ffrf.org).



# FFRF prevails in record 9 lawsuits in 2017

By Rebecca Markert

FFRF prevailed in nine lawsuits last year, the most ever in a single year for FFRF, with three of those victories occurring in the span of eight days. FFRF also filed four new lawsuits in 2017. It won:

**FFRF v. City of Shelton**

FFRF, with member Jerome H. Bloom, filed suit March 22, 2016, in U.S. District Court, Conn., against the city of Shelton and its mayor and parks director after their request to put up a display in a city park was denied. In February 2017, FFRF reached a successful settlement with Shelton in which the city agreed not to allow private unattended displays in Constitution Park, the source of the original censorship.

**FFRF v. New Kensington-Arnold School District**

FFRF and two parents filed suit on Sept. 14, 2012, against the New Kensington-Arnold School District in Pennsylvania in a challenge to a 6-foot-tall Ten Commandments monument in front of Valley High School. The federal lawsuit was victoriously settled on Feb. 15, 2017, when the school district agreed to remove the Ten Commandments marker and pay attorneys’ fees.



Plaintiff Marie Schaub stands on the spot where a Ten Commandments monument used to be.

**FFRF v. City of Santa Clara**

FFRF, with member Andrew DeFaria, sued the city of Santa Clara, Calif., on April 20, 2016, to remove a large Latin cross from a city park. FFRF initially complained to the city about the unconstitutional display in 2012. In January 2017, the city removed the cross and donated it to Santa Clara University, a Catholic institution. The settlement was finalized in March 2017 and the city of



Before and after photos show the cross has been removed from this park in Santa Clara, Calif.

Santa Clara agreed to pay attorney fees.

FFRF also won in the first round in the following lawsuits:

**Kondrat'yev v. City of Pensacola**

FFRF and the American Humanist Association filed suit over a government-owned cross in the city of Pensacola, Fla., on May 4, 2016. On June 19, 2017, Senior U.S. District Judge Roger Vinson ordered the cross in Bayview Park removed within 30 days. The city has retained the Becket Fund for its appeal to the 11th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals and oral arguments are set to be heard by the court in the spring.

**FFRF v. Gov. Greg Abbott**

FFRF filed a federal lawsuit on Feb. 25, 2016, challenging the removal of its approved Bill of Rights display from the Texas State Capitol by Texas Gov. Greg Abbott only three days after it was erected on Dec. 18, 2015, lambasting it as indecent, mocking and contributing to public immorality. On Oct. 13, 2017, U.S. District Judge Sam Sparks ruled that Abbott violated FFRF’s free speech rights. Abbott is appealing the ruling.

**Gaylor v. Lew**

FFRF renewed its challenge against the clergy housing allowance, which permits clergy to be paid partly through a housing allowance, which is subtracted from taxable income. FFRF Co-Presidents Annie Laurie Gaylor and Dan Barker’s request for a housing allowance refund for the year 2012 was denied by the IRS. On Oct. 6, 2017, U.S. District Judge Barbara Crabb issued a declaration that the tax benefit is unconstitutional. In December 2017, she issued an order to the IRS to stop enforcing the exception.



**FFRF v. County of Lehigh**

FFRF and several of its local members filed suit on Aug. 16, 2016, against Lehigh County, Pa., to remove a Latin cross from the official county seal and flag. On Sept. 28, 2017, Judge Edward Smith ruled that the Lehigh County seal and flag violate the Establishment Clause of the First Amendment. The county has voted to appeal FFRF’s victory.

**Williamson, et. al. v. Brevard County**

FFRF, together with Americans United for Separation of Church and State, the American Civil Liberties Union, and the American Civil Liberties Union of Florida, filed a federal lawsuit on July 7, 2015, challenging censorship of nontheists by Brevard County (Florida) Board of County Commissioners. On Sept. 30, 2017, U.S. District Judge John Antoon struck down the Brevard County, Fla., Board of County Commissioners’ exclusion of nontheists from giving pre-meeting invocations. The county has filed a notice of appeal.

**FFRF v. Mercer County Board of Education**

FFRF filed a civil rights lawsuit against Mercer County Schools on Jan. 18, 2017, over the school system’s egregiously unconstitutional “Bible in the Schools” classes for elementary school students. The bible instruction, taught by itinerant teachers who possess “a degree in Bible,” begins in first grade. Classes are held weekly and include creationism and other religious instruction. The district dropped the bible classes as a result of FFRF’s lawsuit. So, on Nov. 14, 2017, Judge David Faber dismissed the case on jurisdictional grounds, finding that one family

did not have standing and that the case was not yet “ripe” for review. Two of the plaintiffs filed an appeal to the 4th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals. FFRF could refile the lawsuit should the school system resume bible classes.

## FFRF files 3 new lawsuits

**FFRF v. Judge Wayne Mack**

FFRF filed a lawsuit against Justice of the Peace Wayne Mack on March 21, 2017, due to his refusal to end the practice of opening each of his court sessions with chaplain-led prayer. FFRF is joined by several local plaintiffs, including Jane Doe and John Roe, attorneys who regularly practice before Judge Mack, and Jane Noe, a Montgomery County.

**Hart v. Thomas**

FFRF and the ACLU of Kentucky filed suit on Nov. 22, 2016, on behalf of Ben Hart, who was denied a personalized license plate by the state of Kentucky. Hart’s request for a personalized license plate reading “IM GOD” was rejected by Kentucky DMV officials who claimed the message was “obscene or vulgar,” but then later said that it was because the plate was “not in good taste.” The lawsuit challenges certain portions of the regulations governing personalized license plates as unlawful, namely those that allow government officials to deny plates based on vague notions of “good taste” as well as those barring personalized plates from communicating religious, anti-religious or political messages.

**FFRF v. Trump**

On the National Day of Prayer (May 4, 2017), FFRF filed a lawsuit against President Trump, challenging his “religious liberty” executive order as it pertains to church politicking. As advertised by Trump, the executive order effectively provided preferential treatment to churches and would result in obligations on secular nonprofits that are not imposed on churches. In motions to dismiss filed in August and December, Trump’s lawyers admitted the religious liberty order does nothing and that the current law is unchanged. In response, FFRF voluntarily dismissed its federal lawsuit in December.

*Rebecca Markert is FFRF’s legal director.*

## FFRF

Continued from page 1

is a Christian ministry that travels throughout the Midwest putting on assemblies in public schools.

The number of total letters does not include the many follow-up letters sent or the time FFRF’s legal staff spent responding to questions from FFRF members and members of the general public. More than 4,300 queries about potential violations were lodged with FFRF last year, mostly through our online form: Report a State/Church Violation.

The top 10 states (where FFRF sent the most letters of complaint):

1. Texas
  2. Florida
  3. California
  4. Alabama
  5. Ohio
  6. Tennessee
  7. Wisconsin
  8. Missouri (tie)
  8. North Carolina (tie)
  10. Georgia (tie)
  10. Illinois (tie)
- Top 10 issue areas:
1. Public schools

2. Religious displays
3. Government prayer
4. Government funding to religion
5. Crosses on public property
6. Holiday displays
7. National Day of Prayer (tie)
7. Social media (tie)
9. Legislative prayer
10. Miscellaneous

## Friend of the court briefs

FFRF submitted seven amicus — or friend of the court — briefs in religious liberty cases around the country. Being able to draft and submit more briefs in federal courts around the country provides FFRF a chance to weigh in on Establishment Clause cases it’s not part of and gives FFRF the opportunity to offer its voice to cases that touch on religious liberty and rights of nonbelievers. Two of those briefs were filed before the U.S. Supreme Court.

FFRF submitted an amicus brief to the U.S. Supreme Court in the Muslim travel ban cases involving President Trump’s restrictions on travel from certain Mus-

lim-majority countries. FFRF’s brief argued that the executive order on the travel ban violates the Establishment Clause. The administration was explicit in its first order that immigration policies should restrict Muslim refugees and favor Christian refugees. FFRF also made the novel argument in its brief before the Court that the executive order violates Article VI of the U.S. Constitution that prohibits a religious test for office or public trust. New iterations of the travel ban caused the court to remove the case from its calendar and new lawsuits are wending their way through the courts. FFRF will submit another brief if necessary.

FFRF also filed an amicus brief in the famous case, *Masterpiece Cakeshop Ltd. v. Colorado Civil Rights Commission*, heard before the U.S. Supreme Court in December 2017. A Colorado baker refused to bake a cake for a gay marriage, contending his rights under the Free Exercise Clause of the First Amendment let his place of public accommodation discriminate against gay customers. FFRF argued that the baker seeks to radical-

ly redefine “religious freedom” as the right to impose one’s religious beliefs on others.

## Legal staff news

FFRF hired Madeline Ziegler as a full-time intake attorney, after her tenure as the Cornelius Vanderbroek Legal Fellow. Ryan Jayne also joined our legal team as a staff attorney after his tenure as the Diane Uhl and Eric and Elaine Stone Legal Fellow.

Our legal fellowship program continued with the hiring of two new fellows: Chris Line, who was an intern/extern with FFRF for the duration of his law school career at the University of Wisconsin Law School, was awarded the Patrick O’Reiley legal fellowship; and Colin McNamara started with FFRF in September as the Robert G. Ingersoll legal fellow after graduating from the University of Richmond School of Law in Richmond, Virginia.

FFRF also hosted seven law student interns, including two students from top 10 law schools.



# LETTERBOX

## Washington Post guilty of Christmas overkill

I know it was the Christmas season, but the Washington Post was guilty of dismal overkill on the subject, including treachery sermons from pundits such as E.J. Dionne (“The radical Christmas miracle”) and Michael Gerson (“A season of hope, even in a time of grief”). Plus, there was stuff in the paper about evangelicals who were gaga over a trip to the Bible Museum, and budding journalists from an evangelical school who think it’s OK to twist reality and facts to suit their bible-based beliefs.

This is not a Christian nation. Some, like myself, believe religions bear much responsibility for the bigotry and hate in the world. (Evangelicals are taught to despise LGBT people, for example. Why do we take their ugly beliefs seriously?) How about greater respect for reason and less for superstition?

How about an interview with a scientist, atheist or humanist? How about a story about somebody who finds meaning in leading a good life without an imaginary friend called God? Our rational voices should be heard, too.

**Carolyn D. Lewis**  
Delaware

## Thanks for restoring Ingersoll statue



Here is a photo of us from our visit to the restored Robert G. Ingersoll statute in Peoria, Ill. Thank you to FFRF for spearheading the restoration of freethinker Ingersoll and keeping his proud heritage alive and remembered.

**Steve Petersen and Shirley Moll**  
Minnesota

## FFRF desperately needed in our country now

Once again, please accept the enclosed \$1,000 check as an unrestricted gift to help further the courageous, principled work of FFRF.

I thought our country had reached a low point in 2016, but we have sunk even lower, and our nation even more desperately needs FFRF. As a Life Member, I remain extremely grateful to FFRF leadership, management and staff members for their dedication and perseverance.

**Scribner Messenger**  
Maryland



## No more worthy cause than being a Life Member

Thank you for all you do each and every day to protect our democracy and work to maintain the separation of state and church. Words cannot express my profound gratitude and appreciation. I am proud to be a member of this awesome organization!

Becoming a Life Member of FFRF is something I’ve been considering and wanting to do for a while. But then life happens, I get busy and just put it off. Not this year. Now, perhaps more than ever in our nation’s history, I need to become a Life Member. I can’t conceive of a more worthy cause.

**Kathy Johnson**  
California

## Young freethinker ran away from nightmares

I was pleased to see Ron Reagan’s TV ad. It has now been many months and several editions of Freethought Today later. You have my thanks.

I actually became aware of my freethinker self 50 years ago, when I was in first grade. I was agnostic before I knew what it meant.

I’ve read testimonials, such as Jackie Brown’s article in the December issue. I can empathize with her. Adults can place guilt and doubt inside a kid’s head. I have a narrative of my own.

When I was young, I attended Sabbath School. One morning, the teacher tested me.

“Do you love Jesus?” she asked. “Yes, I love Jesus,” I answered. She asked if I love my mom and dad. “Yes, I love my mom and dad.” Then she asked if I love Jesus more than mom and dad. I said, “No. I love my mom.”

She then told me if I didn’t change my ways and put Jesus before everyone, including my mom, I was on my way to perdition. Guilt. That’s a heavy load to put on a 6-year-old.

I started having a recurring dream. A booming voice would come down and say, “Rodney, I’m watching you!” I was scared.

In first grade, I got my first pair of tennis shoes. I could run so fast the wind would blow back my hair. The dream came again that night. “Rodney, I’m watching you!” I remember I took off running. I yelled back over my shoulder, “Oh, yeah? Try and catch me!”

Brave words for a first-grader. I never had the nightmare again.

**Rod Lewis**  
Oregon

## Anne Nicol Gaylor quote a rebuttal to Newton’s

Here is the letter to the editor I wrote that appeared in the Concord Monitor:

“Atheism is so senseless . . . this did not happen by chance,” says Sir Isaac Newton, implying the existence of a divine planner. Trouble is, as great a scientist as he was, science has marched on and we need not rely on the supernatural to explain the operation of our solar system. Physics and astronomy do that quite nicely. Please allow a rebuttal to his dubious insight about atheists with a quote from a freethinker. “There are no gods, no devils, no angels, no heaven or hell. There is only our natural world. Religion is but myth and superstition that hardens hearts and enslaves minds.” — Anne Nicol Gaylor, Freedom from Religion Foundation. I would dearly like to see this quote posted as prominently as Sir Isaac’s. I can provide more quotes from modern and historical freethinkers, if the Monitor is so inclined, to provide a challenge to religious thinking.

**Jack Shields**  
New Hampshire

## Here’s a meaningful gift for FFRF and my love

As a Lifetime Member and proud sponsor of a paving stone at your headquarters, I would like to sponsor a Lifetime Membership for my best friend, love of my life and wife (all one person!) who I was very fortunate to meet in this one and only life.

Thank you for all that you do legally and for your monthly publication. Both are greatly appreciated.

Unfortunately, imaginary friends and imaginary lines are the greatest threat that we can, hopefully, survive.

As Carl Sagan said, make it meaningful.

**Matthew J. Koch**  
Illinois

## FFRF provides light in revolting times

What a year! As we drown in the undertow of relentless greed, corruption, deception, privatization of all things public and spikes in hate crimes, we find ourselves incredulous that the perverse tax reform legislation will widen inequality gaps and redistribute wealth up to the top 1 percent.

And yet, in the midst of relentless political and (un)natural disasters, we have been so inspired by the 98 percent of black women in Alabama who saved democracy (again) and the courage of

women across the country to stand up and speak out against sexual violence in Hollywood, Congress and the media. We honor the DACA youth, indigent leaders and (un)documented immigrants who collectively resist. We so respect Colin Kaepernick and those athletes who took a knee and we support queer and trans youth who demand dignity and bathrooms. We stand in solidarity with #blacklivesmatter and #metoo, galvanizing a nation in resistance.

And on our list of thanks, we are so grateful that your organization continues to carve a vibrant, loving corner for peace, justice and imagination in deeply contentious times.

The Fine Family Foundation has meager resources, but boundless appreciation for what you do. In that spirit, we send you a small contribution to honor the light you keep lit even during these “revolting” times.

Thank you for the sweet slice of justice you create.

**Board Members**  
**Fine Family Foundation**  
New York

## FFRF gives me support I had been missing

I’m a new member to FFRF as of March 2017. I want to thank you for all that y’all do up there in Wisconsin, as we say here in Arkansas. It’s quite challenging at times living here among all the evangelical Christians, but you make it much easier.

I felt at first that I had no support (as in “support group”) from people, but now I feel like I have a specific support system when watching “Ask an Atheist,” listening to Freethought Radio, and reading Freethought Today. I’m quite thankful.

**Richard M. Thomas**  
Arkansas

## Donation will help hold up wall of separation

Kindly accept my donation of \$5,000 for 2017. This past year has been, and I do not doubt that future years are going to be, profoundly challenging for American nonbelievers. I hope my donation will serve as an adequate expression of my confidence in you as defenders of the wall of separation of state and church and will materially help you in that regard.

**James Wood Bailey**  
New Jersey

## Are we not drawn onward to new era?

I have charitable donation money burning a hole in my pocket this year and I thought of you. Thanks for all you do.

One of my hobbies is palindromes, and I hereby volunteer to be your official palindromist whenever the “spirit” arises.

This one is about a guy who slangily tells his religious friend that there is one important issue to be aware of: There is no all-seeing all-knowing deity and the Freedom From Religion Foundation opens up one’s mind to see this clearly:

*Dog, one to note: No seer. FFRF frees one to note no god.*

Hope this brought a smile to your face.

**Win Emmons**  
Texas



# CRANKMAIL

Here is the latest batch of mail we received that doesn't quite cut it for our Letterbox section. Printed as received.

**Crossville, TN.:** Get out of Crossville, Tennessee and stay out. Your presence here offends me. I demand that you stop any and all action in Cumberland County. We believe in God here and do not need any of your stupidity here. Our State law allows the Ten Commandments in our schools and the first Amendment to our Constitution does as well. I do not see what is so hard to understand about that. — William Ward

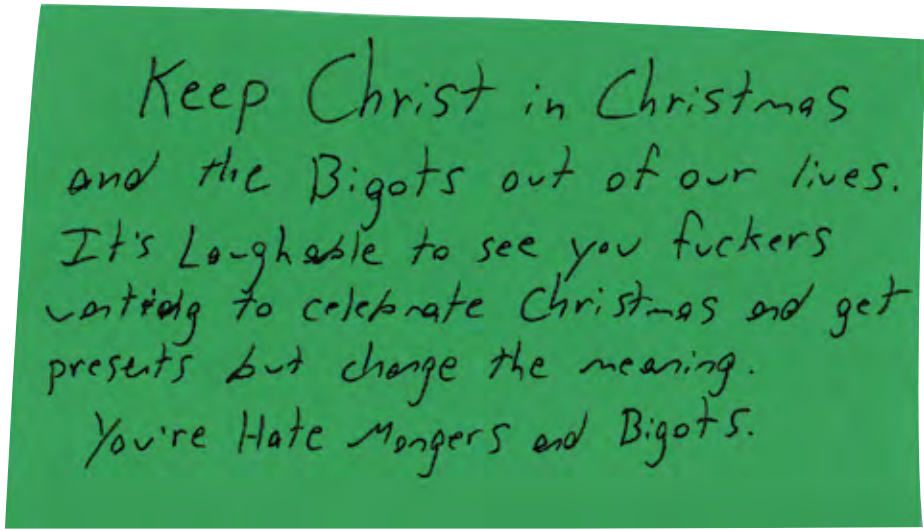
**Beaufort county schools:** A heartfelt 'screw you' for your organizations bullying tactics and threats that caused Beaufort county schools to halt a VOLUNTARY mentoring program. I could understand if it was FORCED. What a sack of nuts, worse than the Spanish during the inquisition. I guess this is what happens when micro-penises unite. This organization is nothing more than a collective of angry, disaffected, loser adults with nothing else worth doing. — Lucion Depot

**Education:** your groups views are ill-advised, unfounded, Unconstitutional. Your ignorance has no shame--most Americans are ignorant of their history. Can I volunteer to travel to your group and teach AMERICAN HISTORY? — Steve Cordell

**Recent Cowardice:** 1. Go to hell 2. Take your colleagues with you. 3. Mind your local issues. 4. In conclusion go to HELL! You represent the scum of the scum of the earth. — David McLendon

**Senator Logan:** You fucking people make me sick. Nothing better to do but complain about a State Senator, not even in your State, volunteering for a charity. Fucking liberals. — Brian Koskelowski

**School prayer:** You bullies suck ass !! GO GOD



!!! Pussies — Duncan Joyns

**You:** Shows what fucking morons and haters you are. Karma coming for you! PRAYING for you!! NOT! Karma is coming...your mama sick? Karma! Dog die? Karma! Fuck off!! — Barbara Theisen

**Small orgination files lawmsuit:** I see in Evansville you are protesting a coach of a football team praying with his players. Can you say Adolph Hitler? Your little organization is no better than him. Communists! — Jay Beier

**God Loves you:** God forgives you all, and God still loves you. it is not to late to change... one day one of your kids or family is going to be on their

death bed, and who are you going to pray to? — David Poole

**VIOLATION:** ACCORDING to the FOUNDING FATHERS of the U.S. YOU ARE a VIOLATION of the Constitution go to Washington D.C. and try to find a building in that city that DOESN'T HAVE SOMETHING about GOD and the BIBLE in it or on it.... Do YOURSELVES and this COUNTRY a favor and GET OUT and TAKE ALL of the LIBERAL POLITICIANS with you Because NONE of you BELONG HERE you are NOT AMERICAN CITIZENS. — Paul Chandler

**The First Amendment:** The first amendment gives us Freedom of religion(not from it). Basical-

ly, your organization is unconstitutional. — Stephen Johnson

**Religion:** I am no atheist or liberal. I detest both and they are close minded and fucked up in the head. Unlike you morons I think for myself and I oppose religion too but at least I know what I'm talking about. You idiots don't think or speak for me. I do that for myself. This is a totally clueless organization — Richard Thorpe

Perish: All of you perish in your total wickedness!!! — Ron Witt

**Flag:** Go to HELL!!!!!! Oh wait a minute, you all are already headed there!!!!!! BWAHHHHHHHHH! — Don Antifall

**I'd like to donate:** It must suck to be on the wrong side of everything. I'm sure if you ever have a horrendous accident and are near death you will be begging God to save you or spare your child. What a bunch of useless douchebags. — Billy Johnson

**Pathetic:** If the bible is "so bad" then go write your own bible and then try to get people build their lives around it. I'll be happy to read the inevitable shitty writings that you'll come up with. The only good thing atheists do, is to unite religious people in their hatred of the pathetic, useless atheists. — Whitney Deangelo

**THIS IS OUR TIME:** Freedom From Religion Foundation is the rebirth of the Communist Party. Social Haters, Sicko Perverts. America, let's start identifying these animals by name and address. It is time to start cleaning these vial animals from our towns, let's send them back to hell. We have cleaned our town, and other towns are starting. Put a name and face on the Haters. Seek out this Vile Animal and Destroy it. — Abner Lansing

## IT PAYS TO COMPLAIN

### New mayor ends invocation at city meetings

By Justin Scott

On the morning of Jan. 8, exactly 280 days after I first complained, the new mayor of Waverly, Iowa, announced that there would no longer be controversial and divisive prayer at council meetings.

This came after the city experienced two consecutive years of predominantly Christian prayers led by Mayor Charles Infelt, a former longtime pastor, who violated the *Lemon* test and Establishment Clause by changing the previous prayer process with no secular purpose. (The previous practice included the mayor inviting various religious leaders to the council chambers to offer a prayer.)

I first challenged Infelt to provide a more inclusive prayer practice on the night of April 3, 2017. It was met with hostility by the mayor. At one point, I was told that if atheists don't like his religious invocations, they should just "be tolerant" of his "theistic" prayers. I refused to be fazed or back down.

Month after month, I'd speak up during public comments and demand a change in the prayer practice. Some council members joined in verbalizing their discomfort with prayer before meetings, but never pushed the mayor to change the process. Eventually, I was able to get the mayor to implement a formalized prayer policy, but only after I was quoted in the media as saying

A few weeks after the election, Mayor Soash reached out to me and we agreed the best and only way forward for the city was without prayer.



Justin Scott speaks at FFRF's annual convention in 2016 in Pittsburgh after receiving FFRF's Freethinker of the Year award.

the whole prayer practice reeked of "Christian arrogance and Christian privilege."

Believe it or not, Infelt did end up allowing a non-Christian to deliver an invocation, inviting a Muslim college student to deliver an Islamic prayer to open the first June 2017 meeting. Unfortunately, the next five meetings in a row all featured Christian prayers.

This all came to an end in December 2017, when a runoff election was held between Infelt and Dean Soash, thanks to a very small margin of victory by Infelt in the November 2018 election. To the surprise of many in Waverly, Soash won in a landslide, winning outright in all of Waverly's five wards, as well as the absentee ballot total.

A few weeks after the election, Soash reached out to me and we

agreed the best and only way forward for the city was without prayer.

Despite the fact that I never got the chance to deliver an invocation and despite the fact that it wasn't Infelt ending the prayer practice that he wrongly implemented, I am still overjoyed with the result, as it's more than I was initially asking for. To know that I played a part in getting another city in Iowa to ditch a practice that left atheist and nonreligious citizens feeling unwelcome and like second-class citizens in their own city is very rewarding. It truly does pay to complain.

I want to thank Mayor Soash for sticking to his word of reaching out to me after being sworn in as the new mayor, listening to my concerns and taking bold action by discontinuing prayer. I also want to thank all of the support I received from citizens of Waverly — both atheist and religious — as well as the ongoing support from FFRF.

Justin Scott is an FFRF member from Iowa.

### Letter to mayor gets results

By Dianne Centa

I live in Portage County, Ohio, and had heard that there was a nativity scene on the courthouse lawn — from comments in the anonymous "Sound off" column of the local paper. Then the paper ran a photo and story about it. I responded with a letter and promptly received a reply from the mayor. What a pleasant surprise! Here was my letter:

Mr. Mayor, It seems from the article in the Record Courier that you are supportive of the presence of a nativity scene on the courthouse lawn. Let me remind you: it is impermissible for the government



Dianne Centa

(city and county included) to promote a religion or to promote religion over nonreligion.

You say "it's representative of large numbers of folks in Portage County" and "it's been accepted by the majority of people." This is irrelevant. Many of our laws, including the First Amendment, exist to protect the minority from the tyranny of the majority.

Remember that little phrase "separation of state and church." (Before you object, I know that those words are not in the Constitution, but we all know that the meaning is there.) The nativity scene should be removed, or, if you want to create a mess, you could open up the courthouse lawn as an open forum.

Let us, please, consider policy for next year and not repeat this violation. — Sincerely, Dianne Centa

Here was his reply:

Dianne, I have no argument with your position. This will not be a problem next year. Thank you for your comments. — Frank Seman



# BLACK COLLAR CRIME

Compiled by Bill Dunn

## Arrested / Charged

**Harry L. Thomas, 74, Medford, NJ:** Aggravated sexual assault, 3 counts of sexual assault and 4 counts of endangering the welfare of minors. Thomas, pastor at Come Alive Church, is charged with assaults against 4 minors between 1999 and 2015.

He's also co-founder of Creation Festival, said to be the largest Christian rock festival in the U.S. *Source: Courier-Post, 12-7-17*

**Renato C. Bosi, 57, Barrigada, Guam:** Child abuse and 4 counts of criminal sexual conduct. Bosi, pastor of Living Lighthouse Church, a Baptist congregation, allegedly touched a teen girl's private parts at his home in 2016. She told police that Bosi sent her inappropriate messages, including one that said, "Pastors get tempted, too." *Source: Pacific Daily News, 12-6-17*

**Mark W. Miller, 48, Sand Springs, OK:** 2 counts of obtaining money by false pretenses over \$500. Miller, lead pastor at Broadway Baptist Church, is accused of scamming 7 parishioners out of about \$46,000 by borrowing money and refusing to pay it back. Sources said he has a gambling addiction. *Source: Sand Springs Leader, 12-5-17*

**Pablo C. Cartagena, Panorama City, CA:** Multiple sexual assault counts. Cartagena, youth pastor at an unidentified church on Van Nuys Blvd. from 2007-12, is charged with assaulting his 3 stepchildren and a 10-year-old family friend. Alleged victims are a girl between 6 and 12 years old in 2005-06, a teen girl assaulted twice in 2008-09 in the shower, a developmentally disabled girl assaulted in her bedroom in 2008-09, and the 10-year-old, assaulted in connection with a church function. *Source: KABC, 12-2-17*

**Manuel Mora, 52, South Brunswick, NJ:** Endangering the welfare of a child and criminal sexual contact. Mora, pastor at All Nations Church, is accused of having "ongoing sexual contact" with a 17-year-old girl. *Source: nj.com, 12-1-17*

**Ricardo Bauza, Hobbs, NM:** Misdemeanor criminal sexual contact. Bauza, pastor of St. Helena Catholic Church, has not been seen in Hobbs since August but an arrest warrant has been issued. According to the complaint, Bauza is accused of getting in the shower at the rectory with a 24-year-old church member who had asked to use Bauza's shower because his wasn't working and then washing the man's genitals with a loofah and his hand.

The incident was first reported to the Diocese of Las Cruces, the complaint said. Bauza is diocesan co-director of vocations.

The complaint also states a woman told police she saw Bauza standing naked in a hallway twice in 2016 with his back turned to her as she was cleaning the rectory. She alleged she overheard him telling the man it was "okay" to shower with him, likening it to a "boy's locker room." *Source: News-Sun, 11-30-17*

**Todd S. Tomko, 54, Quincy, IL:** Felony cruelty to children and 3 counts each of aggravated sexual battery and indecent liberties with a child. Tomko, pastor of Parkview Church since his retirement as a U.S. Marine colonel in 2016, is accused of incidents with 3 alleged victims in Virginia starting in 2002.

Tomko was sentenced to 60 days' confinement and fined \$10,000 in May 2016 in Virginia after pleading guilty to conduct unbecoming of an officer and a gentleman for having an inappropriate relationship with a female Marine corporal. He also pleaded guilty to possession of anabolic steroids and unprescribed testosterone, violations of a military protective order and drunkenness at a court arraignment. *Source: Herald-Whig, 11-29-17*

**Walter E. Brazington Jr., 55, Broken Arrow, OK:** Procuring for prostitution and possession of a firearm while in the commission of a felony. Brazington, an "apostle and prophet" for the All Nations Evangelistic Team, is accused of operating a massage parlor where prostitution occurred.

"Walt has been preaching the gospel since 1981, and he isn't stopping anytime soon! It is time for the final harvest to begin," the All Nations website says. "In 1989, God completely and miraculously healed Walt from three incurable diseases — Leukemia, Mesothelioma and Cyclo Meglo Virus.

He was also healed of a sudden massive heart attack on Dec. 22nd 2008. (With that came a visit to heaven three days later on Christmas Day.)" *Source: Tulsa World, 11-29-17*

**James F. Talbot, 80, Dittmer, MO:** Gross sexual assault and unlawful sexual contact. Talbot, a Jesuit Catholic priest who was defrocked after a 2011 assault conviction in Massachusetts, is accused of molesting a preteen boy in 1997-98 when Talbot was pastor at St. Jude Parish in Freeport, Maine.

In 2003, 14 men reached a settlement of claims against Talbot totaling \$5.2 million. *Source: Press Herald, 11-28-17*

**Christopher Gattis, 58, Chester, VA:** 3 counts each of 1st-degree murder and using a firearm in the commission of a felony. Gattis, Grace Lutheran Church youth ministries coordinator, is

charged with shooting his wife Jeanett Gattis, 58, her daughter Candice Kunze, 30, and Kunze's boyfriend, Andrew Buthorn, 36, on Thanksgiving Day. They all lived together.

The women's bodies were found in the kitchen and Buthorn's was in the front yard. *Source: Times-Dispatch, 11-24-17*

**Romello Leach, 22, Colorado Springs, CO:** 8 counts of sex assault on a child under age 15/pattern of abuse and sex assault on a child/position of trust. Leach, a licensed Protestant pastor associated with several churches that meet at the Satellite Hotel, admitted to his ex-wife that "it happened," the arrest affidavit said.

According to the complaint, the girl called Leach with deputies present and he admitted he'd had sex with her "on at least four occasions and [was] the father of her child." She gave birth on Sept. 15, about 2 months after turning 15. *Source: KMGH, 11-23-17*

**Michael G. Rich, 56, Birmingham, AL:** 3 counts of possession of child pornography. Rich, pastor of St. Andrew's Episcopal Church, was arrested after police got a tip about his internet activity. During a 5-day sting operation, investigators identified 22 children who had been sexually exploited.

More than 2 dozen men were arrested, including 7 Alabamians who traveled to Columbus, GA, with the expectation of having sex with a minor. *Source: ABC News, 11-21-17*

**Timothy Simon, 33, Stephenville, TX:** Possession of or promoting child pornography. Simon is youth minister at Graham Street Church of Christ.

Stephenville Police Chief Jason King said the investigation began several weeks ago and is ongoing but declined further comment. *Source: Empire-Tribune, 11-18-17*

**Felix Bamfo, Adidogomé, Togo:** Murder. Bamfo, pastor of the Brotherhood of the Cross and Star Church, is accused of killing and dismembering the body of Evelyn Homawu near his home. Homawu's husband told police she had gone to visit Bamfo on Nov. 12 and never returned. Bamfo's wife and his son, Kindness Mba, 24, were also arrested. *Source: Ghana News Agency, 11-17-17*

**Lee P. Wiegand, 63, Canby, OR:** 9 counts of 2nd-degree sex abuse involving an underage female in 2011-12 when Wiegand was pastor at First Baptist Church and School. Police said the alleged abuse doesn't involve the church or school. *Source: KOIN, 11-16-17*



**Timothy Cohen, 63, Clifton Hill, Australia:** 32 counts of indecent assault and gross indecency, including sexual penetration of a child. Cohen, an Anglican priest, is charged with incidents in the 1970s and 1980s.

He was convicted in 2015 of assaulting a 12-year-old girl in 1978 and received a suspended 3-month sentence. *Source: Herald Sun, 11-12-17*

**Curtis Van Dam, 36, Sioux Center, IA:** 101 felony counts and 39 misdemeanor counts related to child molestation involving several alleged victims under age 14. Van Dam taught 5th grade at Sioux Center Christian School but was fired after being arrested in October. He was also a youth sponsor at a local church.

The initial complaint alleged he had an 11-year-old disrobe and "urinate in a bottle" while he watched. Charges date from alleged incidents on school property starting in August 2014 and include mutual touching of genitals. *Source: Des Moines Register, 11-10-17*

**Peter W. Leon, 66, Wells, ME:** Endangering the welfare of a dependent person intentionally,

knowingly or recklessly, criminal restraint, criminal trespass of a dwelling, criminal mischief and theft of less than \$500. Leon, pastor of Wells Branch Baptist Church, is accused of trying to take over the finances of a wheelchair-bound elderly resident at an assisted living facility where he volunteered as pastor.

Leon allegedly took the woman without permission to her bank to withdraw money, although a conservator is in charge of her affairs, and changed the locks on her unoccupied former home to prevent it from being shown and sold. *Source: Press Herald, 11-9-17*

**Gregory Bolusan, Henderson, NV:** Burglary, attempted robbery and robbery. Bolusan, pastor at Grace Bible Church, is accused of taking about \$64,000 in 3 incidents in August, September and October at the M Resort Casino, where his wife is a shift manager.

According to an online post, "Pastor Greg believes that the city of Las Vegas, also known as the city of sin, needs people who will take time to build authentic relationships by winning the lost into a relationship with Jesus." *Source: KTNV, 11-6-17*

**Larry J. Zeitzmann, 56, Washington, MO:** Sexual misconduct and 3rd-degree assault. Zeitzmann, board president at Crosspoint Christian School, is accused of misconduct involving a 14-year-old female student. "We believe that there are more victims," said prosecutor Bob Parks.

Zeitzmann allegedly told the girl he would leave his wife to marry her and that he "loved her very much," the complaint said. Zeitzmann retired as fire chief in 2015. *Source: Missourian, 11-4-17*

**Richard E. Jacklin, 65, Goodrich, IL:** Aggravated sexual assault, criminal sexual assault and sexual misconduct. Jacklin, pastor at Sacred Heart Catholic Church, is accused of assaulting a Shapiro Developmental Center resident, a 39-year-old man with an IQ of 47 who is partially paralyzed.

Jacklin has provided written and verbal confessions, Kankakee County State's Attorney Jim Rowe said at a hearing. Rowe said a Shapiro employee discovered Jacklin on his knees while performing a sex act on the resident. *Source: Daily Journal, 11-3-17*

**Elliot J. Wickboldt, 30, McAllen, TX:** Sexual assault and indecency with a child with sexual contact. Wickboldt, pastor of Awaken Church, is accused of having a sexual relationship with a teen girl from July 2015 to Oct. 12, 2017, according to a

spitting in his wife's face, grabbing her by the jaw and slamming her head into the kitchen counter.

According to the arrest report, she defended herself with kitchen tongs and threw brownies in his face before fleeing their home. *Source: WJXT, 10-30-17*

**Martin Ramos, 43, Madera, CA:** Oral copulation, possession and distribution of child pornography and misdemeanor child molestation. Ramos, a Jehovah's Witness elder at McKinley West Kingdom Hall, is accused of molesting a 17-year-old girl he mentored. He worked as a police dispatcher and had known the family for about 3 years. *Source: Fresno Bee, 10-26-17*

## Pleaded / Convicted

**Laurence Soper, 74, Rome:** Guilty by jury of 19 counts of indecent and serious sexual assault. Soper, a Benedictine priest, was accused of abusing 10 boys at a Catholic school in London in the 1970s and 1980s. He moved to Rome in 2000 and fled to Kosovo with £182,000 from the Vatican bank after allegations were made in 2004. *Source: BBC, 12-6-17*

**Robert Gamel, 67, Merced, CA:** Pleaded no contest to possessing child pornography and guilty to violating probation. Gamel, lead priest at St. Joseph Catholic Church in Los Banos from 2009-14, is accused of possessing the same nude images of a teenage parishioner for which he was convicted in 2016 and served 6 months in jail.

During an April probation search at his home, the images from the 2016 conviction were found, printed on recycled church-related papers. Gamel told authorities "they were old photographs that he meant to get rid of but he had not gotten to." *Source: Los Banos Enterprise, 11-29-17*

**Joseph L. Niemeyer Jr., 56, Independence, KY:** Pleaded guilty to 1st-degree sodomy and 4 counts of 1st-degree sexual abuse, all involving a girl younger than 12. Niemeyer, who with his wife was a youth ministry leader at New Banklick Baptist Church, also volunteered with the Fellowship of Christian Athletes club at Twenhofel Middle School.

Assaults occurred at the Niemeyer home and not at the school or church, prosecutors said. *Source: Cincinnati Enquirer, 11-20-17*

**Jason M. Gorski, 44, Fort Mill, SC:** Pleaded guilty to 2 counts of lewd or lascivious acts with a minor under 14. At the time of the assaults in 2007-08, Gorski was an elder of a Jehovah's Witnesses congregation in Cypress, CA.

In 2009, 13-year-old "John Doe" reported the abuse to the congregation and Gorski was removed as an elder. The next year he moved to South Carolina and joined another Jehovah's Witnesses congregation. *Source: Orange County Breeze, 11-17-17*

## Sentenced

**John B. Feit, 85, Scottsdale, AZ:** Life in prison after a Texas jury found him guilty of raping and strangling Irene Garza, 25, a 2nd-grade teacher in 1960 in McAllen, Texas, where he was pastor at Sacred Heart Catholic Church. Feit, then 27, was implicated early on but was never charged due to the influence of the Catholic Church, especially when John Kennedy was running for president, prosecutors said.

A month before Garza disappeared, a female college student reported a man attacked her from behind in church and tried to suffocate her. Feit was charged with the attack, pleaded no contest and was sent to a treatment center for troubled priests in New Mexico, where he became a supervisor responsible for clearing priests for parish assignments.

Feit left the priesthood in 1972, married and worked at a St. Vincent de Paul charity in Phoenix. *Source: AP, 12-8-17*

**Joel M. Waltz, 47, Boone, IA:** 4 years in prison after pleading guilty to 2 counts of sexual exploitation of a minor while he was a youth pastor at Grace Community Church. Ames Police Cmdr. Geoff Huff said the victim met Waltz when she was 11 and was in foster care. She described him as a father figure before he told her he loved her when she turned 16 and started a sexual relationship with her. *Source: Ames Tribune, 12-6-17*

**James G. Crawford, 56, Redding, CA:** 4 years' probation and payment of fees and fines after pleading no contest to 3 misdemeanor counts of child endangerment not likely to produce great bodily injury. Crawford, pastor of Westside Church of Redding, was originally charged with 31 criminal counts, including 22 felonies, for inappropriate touching of 3 underage girls over a span of 7 years. *Source: Record Searchlight, 12-4-17*

**Shimen Liebowitz, 26, Kiryas Joel, NY:** 2 years in prison with 15 months' credit for time served after pleading guilty to conspiring to commit extortion. Co-defendants **Aharon Goldberg**, 56, an Israeli rabbi, and **Binyamin Gottlieb**, 34, received 3 years in prison and 1 year's probation, respectively.

They were found guilty of paying a private investigator \$73,000 to coerce a Brooklyn man into



giving his estranged wife permission she needed under Jewish law to divorce him, a consent known as a get. The investigator recorded his conversations and turned them over to the FBI. *Source: Times Herald-Record, 11-30-17*

**Charlie M. Hamrick, 55, Pensacola, FL:** 6 consecutive life sentences after a jury found him guilty of 6 counts of capital sexual battery of a child under the age of 12. Hamrick was accused of assaults, including oral sex, on the victim, now 28, when he was his Sunday school teacher at Pine Forest United Methodist Church and the boy was between the ages of 8 and 11.

He still faces multiple related charges involving other alleged victims. One boy told police that Hamrick pushed his hand down his pants while riding with him on a 4-wheeler, saying the safest way to ride was with his hand around Hamrick's erect penis. *Source: News Journal, 11-29-17*

An **unidentified Ethiopian imam**, 25, was given a noncustodial sentence of 18 months and was banned from Switzerland for 10 years after being found guilty of inciting violence by calling for the killing of Muslims who refused to join communal prayers and posting execution photos online.

The imam made the comments during Friday prayers at An’Nur Mosque in Winterthur in October 2016. He was also found guilty of working without a permit. The mosque closed in June. *Source: rt.com, 11-23-17*

**Sunia Ha’unga, 66, Gisborne, New Zealand:** Fined \$4,500 after admitting to possession of excess crayfish and breaching the Fisheries Act. Ha’unga, pastor of the Methodist-affiliated Gisborne Tongan Church, had 130 crayfish hidden inside boxes of oranges. The daily limit is 6. *Source: Gisborne Herald, 11-20-17*

**Gary Spear, 46, Mitchell, IN:** 18 months’ house arrest and 18 months’ probation after pleading guilty to child seduction. Spear, youth pastor at Mitchell Church of Christ, victimized Jocelyn Schlegel, now 22. “He manipulated me by using everything against me that I told him in counseling,” she testified.

She met Spear when she was 14. She told the court that Spear liked her to call him “daddy,” a word she finds hard to say anymore. “He controlled every aspect of my life by inserting himself whenever he saw a need. I needed a father, and there he was. I didn’t have a boyfriend, so he filled that void, too,” Schlegel said. “He’s the most dangerous predator. He is not out in the bushes. He’s befriending your mom.” *Source: Times-Mail, 11-17-17*

**Daniel P. Williams, 40, Huber Heights, OH:** 60 days in jail, all suspended, and 1 year probation after pleading guilty to loitering to engage in solicitation. Williams, pastor at Arrowbrook Baptist Church in Xenia, was arrested in August and originally faced 2 more related counts. He is married and has a daughter. *Source: WHIO, 11-17-17*

**Nikolai Kireyev, 39, Vitebsk, Belarus:** 5½ years in prison for human trafficking. Kireyev, a Russian Orthodox priest, was found guilty of trying to take 2 women to Russia to work as prostitutes. A 19-year-old woman from Tajikistan was sentenced earlier to 5 years for pimping. *Source: Radio Free Europe, 11-14-17*

**Barbara L. Snyder, 60, West Salem, WI:** 4 years in prison and restitution after pleading guilty to wire fraud and making false statements for embezzling over \$830,000 to support a gambling habit while she was secretary at St. Patrick’s Catholic Church in Onalaska. Snyder’s listing income of \$162,949 in 2015 led to charges of false statements on her tax return for under-reporting income and failing to disclose its source.

Although she worked at St. Patrick’s for over 30 years, authorities could only verify thefts going back 9 years. *Source: La Crosse Tribune, 11-11-17*

**Patrick McGinn, 56, Monaghan, Ireland:** 3-year loss of driver’s license after pleading guilty to driving while intoxicated. McGinn, pastor of St. Joseph’s Catholic Parish, had blood alcohol 4 times over the legal limit when stopped at a checkpoint last July. *Source: Irish Times, 11-10-17*

**Mohamad Jammal, Viborg, Denmark:** 2 weeks in jail suspended for making comments deemed threatening, insulting or degrading to a group because of their race, color, national or ethnic origin, belief or sexual orientation. Jammal, an imam at an unidentified mosque, was quoted in a newspaper interview in 2016 as comparing gays to pedophiles after an attack at a Florida nightclub killed 49 people. *Source: Fox News, 11-8-17*

**Fred Mack Jr., 65, Bolingbrook, IL:** 10 years in prison after a jury found him guilty of predatory criminal sexual assault of a child. Mack was a church pastor and friend of the victim’s family when she was in 7th grade. She testified he assaulted her as many as 100 times in 2002-04. *Source: Bolingbrook Patch, 11-6-17*

Civil Lawsuits Filed

**Dennis B. Zacheis**, a Catholic priest removed from ministry in 2010 for alleged financial regularities in Sullivan, MO, is being sued in Illinois by Missouri resident Gary Klein, 55, who alleges Zacheis sexually assaulted him while he was pastor at St. Margaret Mary Alacoque Catholic Church from 1975-78.

He now lives in a private home, according to the Archdiocese of St. Louis. It’s unclear why the complaint was filed in Illinois. *Source: The Missourian,*



11-13-17

**The Mormon Church and several stake leaders** are being sued in West Virginia by 12 plaintiffs alleging sexual abuse as minors by **Michael Jensen**. He was sentenced to 35-75 years in prison in 2013 for sexual assault while in a position of leadership and counsel to young church members.

Among the allegations are claims that Jensen locked a 4-year-old girl in a room and forced her to touch him sexually and that a 2-year-old boy had “abrasions or burns” on his upper thighs and genitals after being babysat by Jensen.

The complaint said that instead of reporting alleged abuse to authorities, the Hedgesville Ward of the Martinsburg Stake “did the opposite.” *Source: KSTU, 11-20-17*

**Vincent Owens**, pastor of Household Of Faith Empowerment Temple in Aurora, CO, and **the owners of ViSalus**, a Michigan company, are defendants in a class-action suit that calls ViSalus “a failed pyramid scheme” to sell weight-loss shakes, vitamins and energy bars.

Caprece Byrd, 51, Aurora, is a plaintiff. She alleges Owens, her former pastor, convinced her that selling ViSalus would be easy and that she and other distributors were promised equity at seminars held in the church basement.

According to the suit, “Stage-managed ‘get rich like me’ performances enticed innocent, unsophisticated people to buy distributorships, only to learn that the only way to make money from the distributor rights was to recruit others. Almost 400,000 people in the United States, including over 200,000 just in 2012 paid money to become a distributor and participated in a massive operation.” *Source: KDVR, 11-8-17*

Anglican priest **William Morton** and **3 Canadian Anglican bodies** are defendants in a suit filed by Cynthia Mae Moore, 60, who alleges Morton threatened to skin her alive and scraped her breasts with a box cutter in 2015 during their nearly 4-year extramarital affair.

Morton was convicted in 2016 of 2 counts of assault with a weapon and received a 15-month conditional sentence, a jail term that can be served in the community if the offender abides by court-imposed conditions.

Moore worked part time in the church office when Morton started counseling her about her marital problems. They eventually started a “romantic relationship” after Morton, who was also married, told her numerous times that he loved her, the suit alleges. *Source: CBC, 11-8-17*

Legal Developments

**James Rapp**, 77, a defrocked Catholic priest sentenced to 20-40 years in prison in Michigan in 2016 for molesting at least 10 boys, had his appeal denied by a state court. “The fact that [Rapp] was incarcerated outside the state of Michigan for other criminal actions and therefore was unable during that time to return ... is irrelevant,” stated the 3-0 opinion, which denied Rapp’s claim that the 6-year statute of limitations should have been followed.

The appeals court ruled that any statute of limitations was suspended when Rapp was locked up in Oklahoma on similar charges. He worked in 6 states before he was defrocked. “If there is a hell, you deserve to be first in line,” a victim told him at sentencing. *Source: mlive.com, 11-25-17*

**James J. Cunneen**, 58, a former Catholic Marist priest, was extradited to Australia from New Zealand on charges he molested 7 teen boys from a Marist school in Sydney between 1987-89. Cunneen left the priesthood in 1997 and has been running betting agencies in New Zealand after working for the Department of Education for 3 years. *Source: ABC, 11-23-17*

**Fernando L. Sayasaya**, a Filipino Catholic priest charged with molesting 2 boys in North Dakota churches in the 1990s, is being extradited to the U.S. after a court in Manila denied his appeal.

After the allegations in 1998, Sayasaya received permission to fly to the Philippines for Christmas and never returned to the U.S. *Source: CBS News, 11-22-17*

**Jonathan Wehrle, 67, Williamston, MI**, was bound over for trial at the end of a 4-day preliminary hearing on 6 counts of embezzlement of \$100,000 or more. It’s alleged Wehrle, pastor of St. Martha’s Catholic Church in Okemos, used parish funds to pay for work and materials at his 11,000-square-foot home. Auditors have said about \$5 million is missing.

Wehrle claimed he’d arranged with a now-deceased bishop to use the parish funds, but witnesses said they had no knowledge of such an agreement. *Source: State Journal, 11-17-17*

The **Watchtower Bible and Tract Society of New York** has been ordered by a California appeals court to continue paying \$4,000 for each day it does not turn over documents related to Osbaldo Padron’s 2013 suit against the Jehovah’s Witnesses for failing to warn congregants that alleged child abuser **Gonzalo Campos** was in their midst in San Diego. A lower-court judge ordered the daily fine last June. Watchtower hasn’t paid anything and the total has now mounted to over \$2 million.

Padron, a former church member, alleges he was 7 or 8 when Campos molested him. After at least 7 more allegations were lodged about child abuse occurring between 1982-95, Campos fled to Mexico.

The appellate judges called the Watchtower a “recalcitrant litigant who refuses to follow valid orders and merely reiterates losing arguments.” *Source: Center for Investigative Reporting, 11-16-17*

**Terry Wells, 42, Trenton, NJ**, who pleaded guilty to theft by deception in September, had his sentencing delayed. Wells, pastor of My Brother’s Keeper Outreach Ministries, admitted taking \$12,000 from the estate of a parishioner who died in June 2015.

As part of the plea, Wells was supposed to bring a \$12,000 cashier’s check to court but only brought \$5,800. He was ordered to pay the remaining \$6,200 by Jan. 5 or be tried on all 23 charges listed on his indictment. *Source: nj.com, 11-17-17*

The trial of **Jennifer McLeod, 36, Wheatfield, IN**, a teacher at Hebron Christian Academy, ended after the jury was unable to reach a verdict on 2 counts of child seduction by engaging in fondling or touching with a child 16 to 17 years old. The high school sophomore alleged the first “unusual” incident occurred in April 2015 when McLeod gave him a ride to a friend’s house and pulled over along the way to show him a video about religion. McLeod then stated that she wished he was 18 because they couldn’t have sex until then, police said.

The boy said McLeod on the last day of the 2015 school year kissed him “romantically” after commenting about his genitalia. McLeod claimed he made up the accusations because he was having problems with the academy’s basketball program and coach and wanted to attend the school where his brother coached. *Source: NWI Times, 11-2-17*

Allegations

**Eric Gyan**, pastor of St. Theresa of Avila Catholic Parish in **Gonzales, LA**, is being investigated by the Diocese of Baton Rouge for alleged abuse of a minor female in 1996, according to a press release. The diocese has notified “civil officials” of the allegation received in November. *Source: WABY, 12-16-17*

**Catholic priests and nuns** at a Daughters of Charity of St. Vincent de Paul orphanage in Larnarkshire, Scotland, were physically and sexually abusive, Theresa Tolmie-McGrane testified at a child abuse inquiry in Edinburgh. Tolmie-McGrane lived there from age 6 to 17 before it closed in the 1980s. In about 1970, she testified, she was dusting church pews when a priest sat her on his lap and

made her perform a sex act. Another time a nun walked in during a similar incident: “She called me a whore, she took my left arm and yanked me out of his lap and flung me across to the wall.”

Then, Tolmie-McGrane alleged, another nun took her to the hospital and warned her not to tell anyone or she would break her other arm and that “lying to protect a man of God” was OK.

Sick children had their faces rubbed in vomit or told to eat it, she testified, and were beaten by nuns, sometimes with the crosses they wore. Tolmie-McGrane said she twice told police officers about the abuse, which only resulted in more beatings. The answer she got in confession from other priests was to pray for the abusers, she said.

After an attorney at the inquiry said a nun had denied the allegations, Tolmie-McGrane, who works as a psychologist in Norway, replied, “All I can say is I have no reason to lie, but she maybe has a lot to lose.” *Source: The Independent, 12-6-17*

Now-deceased Catholic priest **Thaddeus Kotik** has been accused by 11 women of molesting them on Caldey Island off the coast of Wales in the 1970s and 1980s. A letter made public shows Kotik’s alleged abuse was reported to the Cistercian Order of the Strict Observance (Trappists) in 1990 but not to police. Kotik died in 1992.

The abbey has already settled with 6 plaintiffs, after which 3 more women came forward. Kotik befriended families who visited the island, the suit claims. After gaining parents’ trust, he would babysit and sexually abuse children, plaintiffs allege. *Source: The Guardian, 11-21-17*

**Muslim madrassas in Pakistan** are “infested” with sexual abuse, according to an Associated Press investigation that found hundreds of cases reported in the past decade in religious schools but not prosecuted.

“There are thousands of incidences of sexual abuse in the madrassas,” said a senior government official, speaking anonymously for fear of retribution. In 2004, another official disclosed more than 500 complaints of sexual assaults against boys in madrassas. He has since refused to talk, and there have been no significant arrests or prosecutions. *Source: AP, 11-21-17*

**A former senior staff member** at the Friends’ School in Hobart, Tasmania, is accused of sexual abuse by students who attended the school decades ago. The school adopts principles from the Religious Society of Friends, commonly known as Quakers.

The person accused “has not worked at the school for numerous decades,” said principal Nelson File. The matter has been referred to police. The school is also investigating independently. *Source: abc.net/au, 11-13-17*

Removed / Resigned

**Rodney E. Smith, Beaver Falls, PA**, had his ministerial credentials revoked after he pleaded guilty in a church trial to charges related to \$31,000 in missing or misappropriated funds while he was pastor of Chippewa United Methodist Church from 2001-17. He had retired after an audit of church finances and now faces a criminal charge of theft by failure to make required disposition of funds. *Source: Post-Gazette, 12-4-17*

**Michael Henchal**, pastor at St. Bartholomew Catholic Parish in Cape Elizabeth, ME, until retiring last July, was removed from ministry by the Diocese of Portland after it was discovered he was in a relationship with former parish administrator Kathy Jones. They’re now living together.

Bishop Robert Deeley told parishioners that Henchal, ordained in 1973, is not living up to his vows: “Retirement for a priest does not mean that he is absolved of the commitments and promises he made at ordination. As we all know, priesthood is a vocation, not simply a profession. This vocation includes perpetual celibacy.”

Online tax records show Henchal and Jones bought a house in New Braunfels, Texas, in June 2016. *Source: Press Herald, 12-3-17*

**Van Dinh, Livermore, CA**, pastor of St. Michael Catholic Parish, was put on leave by the Diocese of Oakland, which notified police after receiving an allegation of inappropriate behavior by Dinh. “The allegation did not involve a minor, but did fall within the protocol of the Diocese for clergy conduct,” a statement said. *Source: KRON, 11-27-17*

**Nicholas Mishek, 26, Omaha, NE**, dismissed as pastor at St. Robert Bellarmine Catholic Church after asking middle school students during confession if they masturbated or watched pornography, has been reassigned to St. Frances Cabrini Parish. The Omaha Archdiocese after outside psychological evaluations found him suitable to return to the ministry, a statement said.

In September, diocesan vicar for clergy Scott Hastings said the questions were a “serious boundary violation.”

Hastings said recently that Mishek isn’t specifically prohibited from seeing schoolchildren, but his immediate job, besides leading Mass, will be working with people in hospitals and retirement centers. *Source: World-Herald, 11-24-17*



# Janet Benshoof: A freedom fighter for women

By Annie Laurie Gaylor

I opened my New York Times on Dec. 21 to be greeted with the sad news that “Janet Benshoof, women’s champion, dies at 70.” I immediately thought back to my opportunity to rub shoulders with this brilliant woman.

I met Janet — a brainy, Harvard-trained attorney who quickly became a star reproductive rights litigator and innovator — after inviting her to speak at FFRF’s national convention. I and my mother, Anne Gaylor, FFRF’s principal founder and an early abortion rights activist, were especially impressed with Janet’s commitment to abortion as a right under the Establishment Clause. She “got it,” clearly understanding the religious basis of the war against reproductive rights.

We invited her to a convention in 1992, but didn’t get to meet her until the following year. To our disappointment, a sudden illness forced her to cancel at the last minute. So we joked when introducing her in Huntsville, Ala., in 1993 that Janet was “a speaker worth waiting a year for.” And, indeed, she was.

In her talk, “Fundamental Rights and Fundamentalists: Is There a Middle Ground?” she told us, presciently: “When I talk about fundamentalism, I’m not just talking about the old-fashioned, conservative sects that we knew about 20 or 30 years ago. I’m talking about the growing political religious structure in this country that seeks to oppose religious freedom for everyone and impose a religious theocracy.”

We awarded Janet, as president of the Center for Reproductive Life & Policy, a “Civil Liberties Heroine” award.



Janet Benshoof

## IN MEMORIAM

Among her many accomplishments up until that point was arguing a case before the Supreme Court against the Chastity Act passed by Congress. Janet argued against this based on the Establishment Clause, a strategy my mother and I felt had been sorely missing in legal arguments on the right to abortion. The Justice Department, ultimately, as a result of the court’s action in her case, was forced to adopt rigorous guidelines ensuring it didn’t promote religion.

She recounted that her first big abortion case was *Harris v. McRae*, lost by a 5-4 vote in the U.S. Supreme Court in 1980. That unfortunate ruling affirmed the right of Congress to pass the Hyde Amendment, cutting off federal funding for almost all abortions for women receiving Medicaid. Today,

about 35 states likewise cut off state funding, leaving indigent women and the working poor out in the cold when it comes to exercising their constitutional rights under *Roe v. Wade*. (And that’s why I’m co-administrator of the Women’s Medical Fund volunteer abortion rights charity, which helped more than 1,000 such Wisconsin residents pay for abortion care in 2017.)

As Janet explained to our sympathetic audience: “The Supreme Court in *McRae* struck down our claim that the Hyde Amendment violated the Establishment Clause.” But she noted her strenuous objection to such reasoning: “There was no secular justification for this discrimination when you looked at the legislative history and when you looked at what the law could do in monetary terms.”

I was pleased to sit by Janet during the banquet before her award and get a little better acquainted. After the evening was over, I happened to pass by Janet speaking animatedly to her husband on a pay phone at an open booth near the hotel ballroom (remember, this was 1993). It’s said those who overhear talk about themselves often hear ill. But my gratitude for her outstanding legal activism and leadership turned even warmer when I heard her generally sing praises of the convention. She then pulled out a notepad and started to read notes she had taken during Dan’s concert of some of his witty lyrics. We felt we’d met a kindred “nonspirit.”

Her feisty activism included once taking out a full-page ad in The New York Times when she was with the ACLU to embarrass the state of Utah, after she discovered a provision on the books could be read to mean the death pen-

alty for women who’ve had abortions. The provision was revoked.

But her career, as the Times’ significant obituary shows, extended far beyond the early 1990s when we’d been more closely observing it. Janet had initially directed the ACLU’s reproductive freedom project, then went on to found the separate Center for Reproductive Rights, a group that took the lead in litigating the endless attacks against *Roe v. Wade*. More recently, I learned, Janet established the Global Justice Center, which took such actions as training judges in Iraq on how to prosecute sexual violence against women under international law.

I was fascinated to learn that Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg, as Janet’s longtime friend, had officiated at her wedding. And I was comforted by the Times’ report that five days before her death from a rare and aggressive cancer, Ginsburg had sent Janet a note reading, in part: “Martin Luther King said the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice. To make that so it takes people of your commitment, will and grit.”

Janet used her legal degree to become a freedom fighter for women and equal justice, making an enormous difference both to individual women and the law.

Janet Benshoof’s commitment to equal rights under the law — to the forgotten women deprived of abortion rights due to religiously inspired discrimination — wins her a special place in my roster of “immortals” — whose work and legacy lives after them.

Annie Laurie Gaylor is co-president of FFRF.

## Join FFRF’s ‘Out of the Closet’ virtual billboard campaign

Declare and share your nonbelief! Although the nonreligious — nearly one in four U.S. citizens — are a significant



Keith Koetter

segment of the world population, many Americans have never knowingly met a non-believer. You can help dispel myths, educate and promote reason by adding your voice, face and message to FFRF’s friendly neighborhood freethinker campaign.

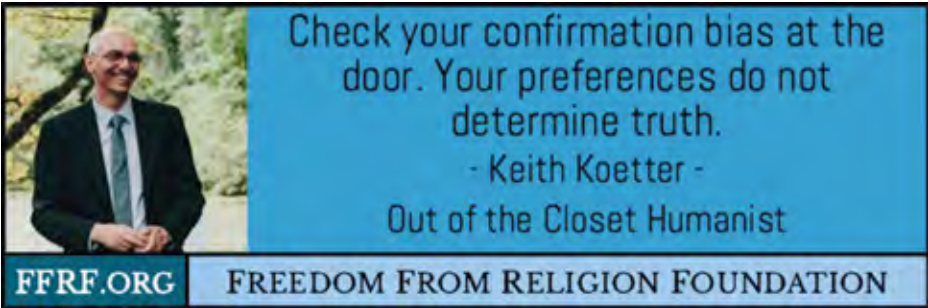
FFRF’s “Out of the Closet” billboards and bus signs are going up around the country. Although we can’t put everyone on a real billboard, every nonbeliever can participate in this unique “cyberboard” campaign by going to [ffrf.org/out](http://ffrf.org/out). (Yours might even be chosen, with your permission, for an actual billboard.)

This is your chance to proclaim you’re a freethinker and why. It’s working for the gay rights movement. Now it’s time for atheists and agnostics to come out of our closet. Many faces make Enlightenment work.

To be most effective, keep your statement succinct. Participants may wish to coin a quotable quote about religion that you’d like to see on a real bus sign or advertisement, or to make an affirmative statement about being a freethinker.

We encourage you to really “come out of the closet” and use your full name. Your “Out of the Closet” statement can become your Facebook or Twitter image, or even your banner. You can include things such as age, title, occupation, location or description for a personal touch.

We encourage you to really “come out of the closet” and use your full name. Your “Out of the Closet” statement can become your Facebook or Twitter image, or even your banner. You can include things such as age, title, occupation, location or description for a personal touch.



Keith Koetter, who was selected as a weekly winner for this virtual billboard and was featured on FFRF’s Facebook page, received an “Out of the Closet Atheist” cap, which he showcased for us recently.



Donald B. Ardell

## Donald B. Ardell St. Pete Beach, Fla. City Commission Nov. 28, 2017

FFRF Member Donald Ardell writes: “Knowing the mayor of St. Pete Beach, a fellow triathlete and good friend, I managed an invitation to deliver an invocation. I enjoyed the experience.”

Here is his invocation:  
I rise to offer a secular invocation that speaks to all citizens of St. Pete Beach. No need to bow your heads or close your eyes to consider a few reflections upon ideals and values that permanently unite, as opposed to temporal issues that momentarily separate us — in St. Pete Beach and elsewhere in America.

We share values that override by many times the hot-button issues of the day that divide us.

Yes, the people of this town, like Americans in the great cities and rural communities across the land, have vary-

## SECULAR INVOCATION

ing passions about our leaders and our political parties. We have very different preferences, for or against choices surrounding topics such as gun control, health care, taxation, family planning, immigration, global warming and religious privileges — and even a few not-so-great issues, like whether football players should be allowed to take a knee during the playing of the national anthem.

But the ideals and values we share can and surely will override these temporal perturbations. I refer to ideals and values not found in holy books, but in the U.S. Constitution and the Declaration of Independence. I refer to values concerning human rights, safeguards in favor of the family, provisions for education of the young, care for the health and well-being of all our people, support for critical thought, for reason and science and the pursuit of happiness.

These secular treasures give us our moral guides, regardless of which religions, if any, we embrace.

America’s greatest orator of the 19th century, Robert Green Ingersoll, suggested that intellectual liberty is our surest moral guide. Such intelligence leads to the growth of the ethical, of the idea of justice, of conscience, of charity and of self-denial, when necessary, for the common good.

Such liberty is as holy as our Constitution, as sacred as our flag. It is the blossom and fruit of justice, the perfume of mercy. Intellectual liberty, in summary, is the seed and soil, the air and light, the dew and rain of American progress, love and joy.



# FFRF greetings from around the country



When a crèche scene went up at Veterans Memorial Park in the city of Brodhead, Wis., not too far from Madison, the state capital and FFRF’s hometown, the state-church watchdog replied in the form of a freethinking display of its own. Here, FFRF Attorney Ryan Jayne stands next to FFRF’s “nativity” display.



With the help of local members Scott Elliott and George Haskin, FFRF placed a tongue-in-cheek banner proclaiming “Keep Saturn in Saturnalia” in the city of Warren, Mich. Saturnalia, observed during the time of the Roman Empire, was one of the largest of the winter solstice festivities. The slogan is meant to be a riff on “Keep Christ in Christmas,” and to remind the public of the real “reason for the season” — the winter solstice.

FFRF members and affiliates were able to put up 17 displays in 2017 all around the country, from Washington to Pennsylvania and many points in-between. Below are some of the places (and people) where FFRF signs and banners were displayed in December. Other displays were featured in the December issue of Freethought Today.



Elaine Stone stands next to the Bill of Rights display sign she made by taking the image and printing it on an outdoor mesh in Walnut Creek, Calif. She writes: “FedEx/Kinko’s did a great job of reproducing it. I just wrote in permanent marker, ‘Solstice is the Reason for the Season.’ I didn’t go for an explanation of what it meant because all I cared about was that there was something there to counteract the large crèche that is there every year. I live in a senior community and the crèche and my sign are on private property. The really good news is that it hasn’t been vandalized (yet), in contrast to our previous three constructions, all of which were knocked down. It makes a real statement without being offensive. The sign has been received very well by the few I have encountered who have mentioned it.”

Please join FFRF’s  
Resurrection Pledge Fund campaign  
at [ffrf.org/donate/resurrection-pledge](http://ffrf.org/donate/resurrection-pledge).



FFRF Member Paul Novak put up in the Iowa Capitol the Bill of Rights “nativity” display in December. The exhibit made its debut in 2016 in direct response to a nativity scene that went up for the first time in the Capitol. Among those who spoke at the nativity inaugural was then-Iowa Gov. Terry Branstad, who lent an official air to the proceedings. Branstad appeared to endorse the religious exhibit by remarking, “We are especially honored and pleased to have the nativity scene here in the Capitol building.” In December, Iowa Gov. Kim Reynolds attended the opening ceremony of the Thomas More Society-installed nativity for its repeat run, as did a state representative. The impropriety of such piety in the heart of Iowa’s legislative body has obliged FFRF to put up its own “nativity.”



Members of the Greater Sacramento Chapter of FFRF were able to put up the “nativity” display outside the California Capitol in December for the second straight year. From left to right, chapter president Judy Saint, Kathy Johnson, Janet Thew, Karrie Lucas and John Lucas.

## Another Winter Solstice sign vandalized

In what has unfortunately turned into an annual tradition, one of FFRF’s Winter Solstice banners was vandalized at the state Capitol in Washington.

Darrell Barker, president of FFRF’s chapter Unfettered Freethinkers of South Sound, got a call on Dec. 20 from someone at the Washington Capitol in Olympia saying that FFRF’s Winter Solstice sign was damaged. The banner sits not far from a nativity scene. On inspection, Barker saw that the ties had been cut and the frame twisted and toppled. Barker quickly restored the banner and frame.

The FFRF banner has been erected the last few years to counter a large nativity display that has appeared in recent times at the Capitol. In 2008, FFRF installed its sign inside the Capitol building to counter a life-sized nativity exhibit allowed for a second year within the Statehouse. Placement of the sign that year set off such a firestorm, when Fox News host Bill O’Reilly and others condemned its presence, that the governor ended public forums inside the Capitol. That was FFRF’s goal. However, the state is now permitting displays outside the Capitol, and a nativity scene has been placed there by a private group in a number of subsequent years. That’s why the FFRF banner is also on the scene.

The vandalism to the Washington display



FFRF’s Winter Solstice sign outside the Washington Capitol was vandalized.

is just the latest in a line of misdeeds done to FFRF’s signs and banners. In early December 2016, one of FFRF’s signs was covered in spray paint in Boca Raton, Fla., within 24 hours of it being put up. Shortly thereafter, a Winter Solstice “Let Reason Prevail” banner Manassas, Va., was stolen. And in Shelton, Conn., a banner was slashed by a vandal a few days before Christmas.

To alleviate some of the problems with the vandalism, beginning in late 2015, FFRF created a Resurrection Pledge Fund so that those displays can be “resurrected” in a timely manner. Donors may pledge any amount, but would pay only if any of FFRF’s displays are stolen, vandalized or destroyed. Donate at [ffrf.org/donate](http://ffrf.org/donate) and select

“Resurrection Fund” in the drop-down menu. With your help, we can ensure that thieves and vandals cannot censor FFRF’s freethought message without triggering a donation that will fund even more FFRF displays.

“Our sign is a reminder of the real reason for the season, the Winter Solstice,” says Dan Barker, Foundation co-president and brother of Darrell. “Christians don’t own the month of December.”



Darrell Barker, right, is joined by other members of the Washington FFRF chapter, Unfettered Freethinkers of South Sound, which put up the sign outside the Capitol.



# FFRF’s Winter Solstice celebration!



FFRF Co-President Dan Barker plays piano while Susan Hofer sings some nontraditional tunes. The pair finished with a crowd sing-along of “Auld Lang Syne.”



FFRF members and staff listen to Barker and Hofer during the Dec. 20 celebration. Donations by FFRF members and staff during the party raised nearly \$500 and an overflowing bin with 130 pounds of nonperishable food items for Second Harvest Foodbank in Madison, Wis.



Members were treated to appetizers, cheeses, “deviled” eggs and plenty of sweets.



FFRF members and staff mingle before the start of the annual Winter Solstice party in the Charlie Brooks Auditorium at Freethought Hall.



FFRF Co-President Annie Laurie Gaylor holds up a copy of the full-page ad that would run the next day (Dec. 21) in the New York Times. The ad calls out President Trump for pushing an agenda that goes against the Establishment Clause of separating religion from government.



Ivy Barker is excited to take home some leftover cookies from the party.



FFRF Member Jeff Brinckman, left, chats with FFRF Associate Counsel Sam Grover and Communications Coordinator Lauryn Seering.



Flowers, including this amaryllis, helped brighten the atmosphere on the next-to-shortest day of sunlight of the year.

Photos by Chris Line

## Save The Dates! 41st Annual FFRF National Convention



Mark your calendar now for the 2018 FFRF National Convention in San Francisco!  
The 41st annual convention will be held Nov. 2-4 at the Hyatt Regency.

*We hope to see you there!*

## Coming Next Month in Freethought Today



Steven Pinker’s  
FFRF  
convention speech