



# FREEDOM FROM RELIGION FOUNDATION

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*FAXED 661-723-6141 AND MAILED February 2, 2010*

Mayor R. Rex Parris  
City of Lancaster  
Lancaster City Hall  
44933 N Fern Ave  
Lancaster CA 93534

Dear Mayor Parris:

On behalf of our members in Lancaster, Calif., we are writing to express our shock and dismay over your insensitive and untrue comments that Lancaster “is growing a Christian community” and urging constituents to encourage that. The Freedom From Religion Foundation, with 14,600 members, including 2360 in California, is the nation's largest association of atheists and agnostics (freethinkers) and works to uphold the constitutional principle of the separation between church and state.

We wonder what your reaction would be if, someday, a Muslim is elected mayor of a community and urges residents to help “grow a Muslim community”? Imagine the uproar if a freethinking mayor were to urge constituents to help “grow an atheist community.” It was precisely to prevent such abuses that the founders of our nation adopted the first Constitution in history which left “God” entirely out—whose only references to religion in government are exclusionary, such as that there can be no religious test for public office, no establishment of religion by government.

As mayor, you took an oath of office to uphold the secular U.S. Constitution. A U.S. city may not adopt a religion. Individuals are free to adopt or reject religion, but a public official may not use public office to promote his or her religious views, much less claim his goal is to “grow a Christian community.”

In defending your remarks to LA's NBC TV News, you said: “Before I got elected and after, I've been saying this is a Christian community. We should live like it, we should act like it. In a Christian community, neighbors love their neighbors.” Yet your comments exclude all nonChristian neighbors, all your constituents who either adhere to other religious viewpoints, or none at all. The nonreligious sector is the fastest-growing segment of the U.S. population, reaching 15% nationwide, but 18% of the California population. As mayor you are offending and excluding a large segment of your population, in a manner which inevitably makes them feel like unwelcome second-class citizens, makes them political outsiders and may even make them targets.

In *Epperson v. Arkansas*, 393 U.S. 97, 104 (1968), Justice Abe Fortes for the Court noted:

Government in our democracy, state and national, must be neutral in matters of religious theory, doctrine, and practice. It may not be hostile to any religion or to the advocacy of no-religion; and it may not aid, foster, or promote one religion or religious theory against another or even against

the militant opposite. The First Amendment mandates governmental neutrality between religion and religion, and between religion and nonreligion.

In the landmark case, *Everson v. Board of Education*, 30 U.S. 1 (1947), in which the U.S. Supreme Court incorporated the Establishment Clause of the First Amendment to state citizens, the Court explained its meaning:

The 'establishment of religion' clause of the First Amendment means at least this: Neither a state nor the Federal Government can set up a church. Neither can pass laws which aid one religion, aid all religions, or prefer one religion over another. Neither can force nor influence a person to go to or to remain away from church against his will or force him to profess a belief or disbelief in any religion. . . . In the words of Jefferson, the clause against establishment of religion by law was intended to erect 'a wall of separation between church and State.'

Your proposal of a city ballot measure to authorize prayers to Jesus or to a specific deity flouts the intent of the Bill of Rights, which protects freedom of conscience from tyranny of the majority. We do not take a vote to determine the religion of a community.

Government prayer is unnecessary, inappropriate, and innately divisive. Citizens of all religions or no religion are compelled to come before you on civic, secular matters. Citizens should not be subjected to a religious show or test, or be expected to demonstrate religious obeisance at a government function. We fail to see why divine guidance is needed over such earthly matters, anyway.

Christians who know their bible are familiar with the biblical injunction of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount, condemning as hypocrisy public prayer. "Enter into thy closet, and when thou hast shut the door, pray to thy Father which is in secret" (Matt. 6:5-13). Observing a strict separation of church and state offends nobody, and honors not only the First Amendment, but the very tenets being professed during government prayers.

May we hear from you at your earliest convenience?

Very truly



Annie Laurie Gaylor  
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