

FREEDOM FROM RELIGION *foundation*

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June 21, 2011

VIA FAX AND U.S. MAIL
(512) 463-1849

COPY

The Honorable Rick Perry
Office of the Governor
P.O. Box 12428
Austin, Texas 78711-2428

Re: Rescind A Call to Prayer for a Nation in Crisis Event scheduled August 6, 2011

Dear Governor Perry:

On behalf of the more than 16,500 nonreligious members we represent nationwide — including over 700 members in Texas — our organization respectfully asks that you disassociate the Governor's office from "The Response: A Call To Prayer for a Nation In Crisis" and that you refrain from issuing prayer proclamations in the future. The Freedom From Religion Foundation (FFRF) is a national nonprofit organization whose purpose is to protect the constitutional principle of separation between state and church and to represent the views and rights of nonbelievers.

It is our understanding that you initiated "The Response: A Call To Prayer for a Nation In Crisis" which is scheduled to take place on August 6, 2011 at the Reliant Stadium in Houston, Texas. We understand you have invited the 49 other governors for this day of "non-denominational Christian prayer and fasting" to deal with "financial debt, terrorism, and a multitude of natural disasters." At the Response's website, you wrote: "As a nation, we must come together and call upon Jesus to guide us through unprecedented struggles, and thank him for the blessings of freedom we so richly enjoy."

We understand that the sole purpose of this event is to exhort Texans — and the nation — to engage in religious exercises. This event is described as "a non-denominational, apolitical Christian prayer meeting and has adopted the American Family Association statement of faith." The American Family Association statement of faith is as follows:

1. We believe the Bible to be the inspired, the only infallible, authoritative Word of God.
2. We believe that there is one God, eternally existent in three persons: Father, Son and Holy Spirit.
3. We believe in the deity of our Lord Jesus Christ, in His virgin birth, in His sinless life, in His miracles, in His vicarious and atoning death through His shed blood, in His bodily resurrection, in His ascension to the right hand of the Father, and in His personal return in power and glory.
4. We believe that for the salvation of lost and sinful people, regeneration by the Holy Spirit is absolutely essential.
5. We believe in the present ministry of the Holy Spirit by whose indwelling the Christian is enabled to live a godly life.
6. We believe in the resurrection of both the saved and the lost; they that are saved unto the resurrection of life and they that are lost unto the resurrection of damnation.
7. We believe in the spiritual unity of believers in our Lord Jesus Christ.

This exclusionary language should not receive official endorsement by the Governor's office.

In the proclamation you issued on June 6, 2011 to announce "The Response," you wrote, in part, "In the spirit of the Book of Joel, Chapter 2, Verses 15-16, I urge a solemn gathering of prayer and fasting. As those verses admonish: '15 Blow the trumpet in Zion, declare a holy fast, call a sacred assembly... 16 Gather the people, consecrate the assembly...' As Jesus prayed publicly for the benefit of others in John 11:41-42, so should we express our faith in this way." These references to scripture are not reflective of a person who was elected to represent everyone in the state of Texas, not just Christians. This quote was found on your government-issued website. Even if the state is not handling the details and sponsoring it, this type of action impermissibly conveys government endorsement of what should be a private event.

Your prayer proclamation was troubling in other ways. Your proclamation emphasizes a few rare instances in which leaders called for days of prayer, but none of those proclamations was sectarian to this extent.

Your proclamation makes a reference to Benjamin Franklin calling for prayer during the constitutional convention, which is misleading because you fail to acknowledge that in fact there was no interest in such prayer expressed by others, and no prayer took place. This is no surprise, as our U.S. founders wisely adopted an entirely godless and secular Constitution, whose only references to religion in government are exclusionary.

Under our secular Constitution, elected officials have neither the moral nor the constitutional authority to dictate to constituents to pray, much less to set aside a day "to pray" about our nation's well-being. Whether to pray, whether to believe in a god who answers prayer, is an intensely precious and personal decision protected under our First Amendment as a paramount matter of conscience.

As governor you represent not only Christians but atheists and agnostics, Jews, Muslims, Wiccans, and other minority religious views. Your initiation of the prayer gathering in your official capacity unabashedly promotes not just a religious event but a Christian event, sending an official message of endorsement of Christianity and of exclusion to many of your constituents.

You may, as a private citizen, attend or initiate any religious functions you like. But the federal and state Constitutions — and good etiquette — dictate that as governor you may not bless such events or allow your title as governor to be used in any purely religious event such as a prayer event.

As the Supreme Court has explained:

“If there is any fixed star in our constitutional constellation, it is that no official, high or petty, can prescribe what shall be orthodox in politics, nationalism, religion, or other matters of opinion or force citizens to confess by word or act their faith therein.” *W. Virginia State Board of Education v. Barnette*, 319 U.S. 624, 642 (1943)

It is a fundamental principle of Establishment Clause jurisprudence that the government cannot in any way promote, advance, or otherwise endorse religion. It can neither promote one religion over another, or religion over nonreligion.

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.” *Everson v. Board of Education*, 330 U.S. 1, 15 (1947)

Participating in and initiating the event is a stamp of endorsement not just of a Christian event, but a Christian agenda that is exclusionary to the nonreligious and the non-Christians. Entanglement between government and religion is inevitable at this event, once you lend your name as Governor to it. The Governor’s Office should take care to be above the fray of religious discord, and should not appear to be favoring one religious position over others.

Nothing fails like prayer. Our membership believes not in useless prayer, but in good works and action. We believe in public officials taking responsibility for the actions or inactions which have led to such crises. Prayer is the ultimate political copout. Prayer is what politicians fall back on when they don’t want to offer true leadership. Are we prepared to learn anything from these trying times? Or are we just going to pray (translation: do nothing)?

You took an oath to uphold a secular and entirely godless Constitution. We ask you to stop misusing your public office to inappropriately inveigh and exhort your constituents to pray. We ask on behalf of our Texas members that the Governor's Office remove its name as used as part of this event. We ask that you participate *as a private individual* (no use of your governor's title). May we hear back from you at your earliest convenience?

Very truly,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Annie Laurie Gaylor". The signature is written in black ink and is positioned above the typed name.

Annie Laurie Gaylor
Co-President