

FREEDOM FROM RELIGION *foundation*

P.O. BOX 750 · MADISON, WI 53701 · (608) 256-8900 · WWW.FFRF.ORG

November 14, 2023

SENT VIA EMAIL & U.S. MAIL: djohnson@puyallupwa.gov

The Honorable Dean Johnson
Mayor
City of Puyallup
333 S. Meridian
Puyallup, WA 98371

Re: Government-sponsored prayer group

Dear Mayor Johnson:

I am writing on behalf of the Freedom From Religion Foundation (FFRF) regarding your use of your public office to hold prayer services at city hall. FFRF is a national nonprofit organization with more than 40,000 members across the country, including more than 1,700 members and two local chapters in Washington. Our purposes are to protect the constitutional principle of separation between state and church, and to educate the public on matters relating to nontheism.

One of your constituents, a resident of Puyallup, has reported that you host a prayer group inside of city hall every Wednesday at 8am. Please see the attached screenshot from the “Puyallup Prayer” Facebook group inviting city residents to attend the religious gathering. Our complainant is an atheist who believes in the separation between church and state, and that city resources should not be used to promote your personal religious beliefs.

We write to request that you cease using your elected position as mayor to promote your personal religious beliefs by holding a prayer group on city property during the work day in your official capacity as mayor. You are free to practice your religion in your personal capacity, but you cannot abuse your position as a government official to host official government prayers at city hall using city resources. If you wish to host religious worship events, you must do so in your personal capacity and without using city resources.

As a government official, you are tasked with upholding the Constitution of the United States—including the Establishment Clause. By holding prayer meetings at city hall during the work day, you do the opposite. You serve a religiously diverse community that consists not only of Christians but also Jews, Muslims, atheists and other non-Christians. When you use your position to support your personal religious beliefs, you needlessly alienate your constituents who are part of the thirty-seven percent of Americans who are non-Christian, including the nearly one in three Americans who now identify as religiously unaffiliated.¹ You send the message that you

¹ Gregory A. Smith, *About Three-in-Ten U.S. Adults Are Now Religiously Unaffiliated*, Pew Research Center (Dec. 14, 2021), www.pewforum.org/2021/12/14/about-three-in-ten-u-s-adults-are-now-religiously-unaffiliated/.

and your office not only prefer those citizens who are religious, but that you prefer those who subscribe to Christianity over all other religions.

Government employees can worship, pray, or hold religious events when acting in their personal capacities. But they are not permitted to provide prestige to their personal religion through the machinery of a government office. Your elected office belongs to “We the people,” not the office’s temporary occupant. As an elected official, you are charged with great responsibility and have been given significant trust by citizens in your community, including those citizens who do not share your religious viewpoint.

We ask you to honor the Constitution and respect your Establishment Clause obligations by ending this government-sponsored prayer group. If you wish to host a prayer group, you can permissibly do so without using government resources in a church or other private property. Thank you for your time and attention to this matter.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Chris Line". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style with a long horizontal stroke extending to the right.

Christopher Line
Staff Attorney
Freedom From Religion Foundation

Enclosure



Puyallup Prayer



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Please join us on Wednesday mornings for a time of prayer for our city. Praying for a spiritual awakening in Puyallup. The gathering is held on the 5th floor of city hall and hosted by our Mayor. All are welcome!

