

FREEDOM FROM RELIGION *foundation*

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The Honorable Robert Burns
Monroe City Council
300 W Crowell Street
Monroe, NC 28112

Re: Unconstitutional prayer and religious promotion at Monroe City Council meetings

Dear Mayor Burns and City Council members:

We are writing on behalf of the Freedom From Religion Foundation (FFRF) regarding concerns surrounding the promotion of religion and regular Christian prayers at Monroe City Council meetings. FFRF is a national nonprofit organization with more than 40,000 members across the country, including more than 900 members and a local chapter in North Carolina. Our purposes are to protect the constitutional principle of separation between state and church, and to educate the public on matters relating to nontheism.

A concerned area resident has reported that the Council regularly opens its meetings with Christian prayers. On December 12, 2023, the opening prayer included a request that the “City of Monroe turn back to...God”:

Let us pray. Almighty God, we come before You in the name of Jesus to say thank You. We thank You for who You are as the creator and sustainer of life. We thank You for your love towards us. We thank You for your many abundant blessings that You freely give us. We thank You for our life that we get to live. God, as we reflect on the middle of the Christmas season, we thank You for Jesus Christ, the savior of the world. We thank You for the coming king, the messiah, the son of God, and we thank You for the good and gracious king entered into human history so that our sin debt would be paid for once and for all in Christ at the cross. Thank You for your redeeming love. We thank You that the grave cannot hold you, and we acknowledge your lordship over life and death, and all creation, including the City of Monroe. We come before You at this time acknowledging your goodness. We thank You for newly elected Mayor Rob Burns and his wife Lauren. We thank You for their six children and the blessing of family. We are asking your blessing in favor over Rob and his family as Rob steps into this role as the new mayor of the City of Monroe. We ask that the City of Monroe would turn back to You, God. Please use newly elected mayor Rob Burns along with other influential leaders in

this city that there would be a shift in the culture here to love and to life. And that this city would be known for righteousness by their love for You and their love for their neighbor. It is in You that we trust and we trust in your word. Thank You for electing Rob Burns, and we believe like Proverbs 29:2 says, “When the righteous thrive and increase, the people rejoice.” And Lord, I want to pray Numbers 6:24-25 over Rob, his wife Lauren, and their entire family as they enter into this incredible opportunity and place of leadership in the City of Monroe. Rob, and others around, I am praying that the Lord bless you and keep you. The Lord make his face shine on you and be gracious to you. The Lord turn his face toward you and give you peace. In Jesus’ name we pray, amen.

The February 13, 2024 meeting included not only an opening Christian prayer, but a performance of “Better is One Day in Your House,” by Wingate University’s gospel choir Soulful Sounds Ensemble. Following the gospel performance, Pastor Tim Cruse from Shining Light Baptist Church delivered a Christian prayer:

Let us pray together. Father, we love You tonight and thank You for your goodness, Lord. Truly, as Your word says, ‘I’d rather be a door keeper at the house of my God than to dwell in the tents of the wicked.’ Lord, I would pray that You would help us today. Lord, in this sitting to honor You in every way. Lord, to do what is right. Lord, to recognize that there is right and there is wrong. We pray that You would strengthen with courage and conviction and compassion all those who are purposed to do what's right. Lord, be with our mayor and council members. I pray You bless them. Give them wisdom. Lord, we pray for Your protection and Your watch care over our city. Lord, for any evil or wicked design, Lord, that You would frustrate it.

We know that You’re able, Lord, because You love us, and You love our city, and we love our city. Lord, we love having the opportunity, dear God, to celebrate a freedom; and all the great gifts of Your goodness. I pray that You would help us now. Move us forward together as a city, for good, for Your glory. In Jesus’ name, amen.

We write to request that the Council immediately refrain from opening its meetings with prayers, which are inevitably Christian, and other religious performances because these practices are unnecessary, inappropriate, and divisive. All Council members are of course free to pray privately or to worship on their own time in their own way. However, they do not need to worship on taxpayers’ time and dime. The Council ought not lend its power and prestige to religion by scheduling, hosting or conducting governmental prayers and treating its meetings like Christian worship services.

Citizens, including Monroe’s nonreligious citizens, are often compelled to come before the Council. The opening prayer excludes those who are among the 37 percent of Americans who are non-Christians, including the nearly one in three adult Americans (28 percent) who are

religiously unaffiliated.¹ It is coercive, embarrassing and intimidating for nonreligious citizens to be required to make a public showing of their nonbelief (by not rising or praying) or else to display deference toward a religious sentiment in which they do not believe, but which their Council members clearly do. Government-sponsored prayer “has the improper effect of coercing those present to participate in an act of religious worship.” *Santa Fe Indep. Sch. Dist. v. Doe*, 530 U.S. 290, 312 (2000).

Observing a strict separation of church and state offends nobody, includes everybody, and honors the First Amendment. Christians who know their bible are familiar with the biblical injunction of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount, condemning public prayer as hypocrisy: “And when thou prayest, thou shalt not be as the hypocrites are: for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and in the corners of the streets, that they may be seen of men. Verily I say unto you, They have their reward. But thou, when thou prayest, enter into thy closet, and when thou hast shut the door, pray to thy Father which is in secret; and thy Father which seeth in secret shall reward thee openly.” Matthew 6:5-6.

In order to demonstrate the Council’s respect for the diverse range of religious and nonreligious citizens living in Monroe, we urge you to concentrate on civil matters and leave religion to the private conscience of each individual by ending the practice of hosting Christian prayers and religious performances at your meetings. Please inform us in writing of the steps you are taking to resolve this matter.

Very truly,



Annie Laurie Gaylor & Dan Barker
Co-Presidents

¹ Gregory A. Smith, et. al, *Religious ‘Nones’ in America* (Jan. 24, 2024), <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2024/01/24/religious-nones-in-america-who-they-are-and-what-they-believe/>