

# FREEDOM FROM RELIGION *foundation*

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May 24, 2022

**SENT VIA U.S. MAIL AND EMAIL**

**ward3@akronohio.gov**

Margo Sommerville  
President  
Akron City Council  
166 South High Street  
Akron, OH 44308

Re: Christian Prayer at Meetings

Dear President Sommerville and Council Members:

I am writing on behalf of the Freedom From Religion Foundation (FFRF) regarding the City of Akron's practice of including prayer at its meetings. FFRF is a national nonprofit organization with more than 36,000 members, including more than 1,000 members and two chapters in Ohio. Our purposes are to protect the constitutional principle of separation between state and church, and to educate the public on matters relating to nontheism.

It is our understanding that the Akron City Council opens meetings with prayer, which are invariably Christian.<sup>1</sup> We understand that a concerned resident of Akron recently raised concerns with the consistently Christian prayer delivered at the meetings. In a Beacon Journal article, a member of the Council agreed that "Council chambers should be an inclusive and welcoming environment for everyone who enters this public space."

Not surprisingly, the prayers are exclusively Christian because the Council has outsourced the job of finding someone to give the prayer to a local Christian organization. The article ends with an invitation for "any community faith leader who is interested in leading a prayer" to reach out to the Council's clerk. At the May 16 meeting, a Christian prayer was delivered by a member of the Council.

Opening meetings with a practice that excludes members of the community is contrary to an environment that "should be an inclusive and welcoming environment for everyone." Inviting other faith leaders to deliver prayers does not fix the wrong because prayer is a religious practice, which automatically excludes all nonreligious citizens.

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<sup>1</sup> Marshall, Abbey. "Why does Akron City Council open with a prayer? Resident asks for diversity, inclusivity" *Akron Beacon Journal* (May 15, 2022), available at <https://www.beaconjournal.com/story/news/2022/05/15/akron-city-council-criticized-offering-mostly-christian-prayers/9716205002/>.

The Supreme Court has repeatedly declared that the “First Amendment mandates governmental neutrality between religion and religion, and between religion and nonreligion.” *McCreary County, Ky. v. Am. Civil Liberties Union of Ky.*, 545 U.S. 844, 860 (2005); *Wallace v. Jaffree*, 472 U.S. 38, 53 (1985); *Epperson v. Arkansas*, 393 U.S. 97, 104 (1968); *Everson v. Bd. of Educ. of Ewing*, 330 U.S. 1, 15-16 (1947). “[T]he Establishment Clause prohibits the government from ‘promot[ing] or affiliat[ing] itself with any religious doctrine or organization.’” *Milwaukee Deputy Sheriffs’ Ass’n v. Clarke*, 588 F.3d 523, 528 (7th Cir. 2009).

Prayer at government meetings is unnecessary, inappropriate, and divisive. The best solution to respect the diversity of Akron’s citizenry and to provide a welcoming environment is to discontinue invocations. City Council members are free to pray privately or to worship on their own time in their own way; they do not need to worship in public on taxpayers’ time. As a local government, citizens are compelled to come before you on important civic matters, to seek licenses, permits, to participate in important decisions affecting their livelihoods, property, children, and quality of life. The Council’s prayers alienate non-Christians, including the nonreligious, who currently make up the fastest growing segment of the U.S. population by religious identification at twenty-nine percent.<sup>2</sup> It is coercive and intimidating for these nonreligious citizens to come to a public meeting and be required to either make a public showing of their nonbelief or show deference to a religious sentiment they do not believe in.

In order to demonstrate the Council’s respect for Akron’s diverse range of religious and nonreligious citizens, we urge you to concentrate on civil matters and leave religion to the private conscience of each individual by ending the practice of government prayer at the Council’s meetings.

Sincerely,



Karen M. Heineman  
*Patrick O’Reiley Legal Fellow*  
*Freedom From Religion Foundation*

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<sup>2</sup> Gregory A. Smith, *About Three-in-Ten U.S. Adults Are Now Religiously Unaffiliated*, Pew Research Center (Dec. 14, 2021), available at [www.pewforum.org/2021/12/14/about-three-in-ten-u-s-adults-are-now-religiously-unaffiliated/](http://www.pewforum.org/2021/12/14/about-three-in-ten-u-s-adults-are-now-religiously-unaffiliated/).