

FREEDOM FROM RELIGION *foundation*

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

May 4, 2021

SENT VIA EMAIL & U.S. MAIL: tallegood@acworth.org

The Honorable Tommy Allegood
Mayor
City of Acworth
4415 Center Street
Acworth, GA 30101

Re: Sponsorship of National Day of Prayer event

Dear Mayor Allegood:

I am writing on behalf of the Freedom From Religion Foundation (FFRF) regarding a constitutional concern with the City of Acworth's official promotion of and participation in National Day of Prayer events. FFRF is a national nonprofit organization with more than 35,000 members across the country, including more than 500 members and a local chapter in Georgia. 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 Acworth resident has reported that the City of Acworth regularly promotes and participates in National Day of Prayer events. The 2021 National Day of Prayer event is listed on the City's official website, and in the past, the City has issued an official proclamation to mark the National Day of Prayer. The Acworth Police Department has also posted about this event on its official Facebook. The Department's post notes that "representatives from... the city will be sharing comments at the event." Please see the enclosed screenshots.

As you may be aware, the National Day of Prayer is a sectarian event. It originated with the Reverend Billy Graham during his evangelical crusade in Washington, D.C. in 1952. He expressed an openly Christian purpose, seeking an annual prayer proclamation by the President because he wanted "the Lord Jesus Christ" to be recognized across the land. Subsequently, the National Day of Prayer Task Force was created to "communicate with every individual the need for personal repentance and prayer, mobilizing the Christian community to intercede for America and its leadership." The task force issues annual National Day of Prayer proclamations and submits them to the President, choosing a theme with supporting scripture from the bible. This year's theme is "Lord Pour Out Your Love, Life, and Liberty" based upon the New Testament verse 2 Corinthians 3:17.

In its announcement of the theme for 2021, the task force reveals that its idea of "love, life, and liberty" amounts to religious assimilation through proselytization. It writes¹:

¹ https://www.nationaldayofprayer.org/introducing_the_national_day_of_prayer_2021_theme.

Everyone needs to know that they were created by God and that He loved them so much He put His image in them and authored their value and purpose that no person can take away from them. As followers of Jesus we must come together in obedient unity and love that spreads God's glory across the earth. We must share this message of love and life, so that our neighbors, co-workers, classmates – so that all the world would come to repentance, that NONE may perish and know the LIBERTY, the freedom from the stain and shame of sin. Everyone can have freedom ring in their hearts, liberty that pronounces you, "NOT GUILTY" from the One true Judge. God alone knows your heart, knows everything about you; everything you have thought, done and had done against you. God alone is our judge and in Christ alone, we experience authentic, eternal LIBERTY.

The task force has a Statement of Faith that is exclusive to Christians, including that "The Holy Bible is the inspired, only, infallible, authoritative Word of The Living God" and a belief in "the spiritual unity of believers in our Lord Jesus Christ."²

We ask that Acworth drop its support for this divisive, evangelistic vision for America and cease promoting and participating in National Day of Prayer events.

The City of Acworth's promotion of, and participation in, National Day of Prayer events poses constitutional concerns. The Establishment Clause of the First Amendment prohibits the government from organizing or endorsing a religious event. As the Supreme Court has put it, the Establishment Clause "mandates government neutrality between religion and religion, and between religion and nonreligion." *McCreary Cty., 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. Ark.*, 393 U.S. 97, 104 (1968); *Everson v. Bd. of Educ. of Ewing*, 330 U.S. 1, 15-16 (1947). The City's official promotion and participation in this National Day of Prayer event, which is advertised by the City and features representatives from the city, creates the appearance of favoritism toward Christians.

In 2002, a Georgia federal court enjoined a city and mayor from organizing, advertising, promoting or endorsing a prayer breakfast. *Newman v. City of East Point*, 181 F. Supp. 2d 1374 (N.D. Ga. 2002). In that case, the court restricted the use of city funds, employees, resources and supplies in facilitating the Mayor's Prayer Breakfast. *See id.* As a result of the city's activities (making and sending invitations, issuing press releases, advertising the event, etc.), the court stated, "an objective observer would most certainly conclude that the City of East Point has endorsed religion, specifically Christianity, by its actions." *Id.* at 1381.

Legal arguments aside, participating in and promoting this event is unnecessarily divisive. The event sends the message that the City not only prefers religion over non-religion, but also Christianity over all other faiths. It alienates non-Christians in Acworth by turning them into political outsiders in their own community. The National Day of Prayer is explicitly designed to

² *Statement of Faith*, NATIONAL DAY OF PRAYER TASK FORCE (last visited Apr. 16, 2021), www.nationaldayofprayer.org/statement_of_faith.

exclude the 24% of Americans who are nonreligious and, more broadly, the 30% of Americans who are non-Christian.³

We hope you'll agree that the City of Acworth should strive to appear equally welcoming of all residents, regardless of whether they are Christian, practice a minority religion, or are nonreligious. The City, including the Acworth Police Department, must refrain from further organization, participation in, and promotion of religious events. Please inform us in writing of the steps taken to respect the right of conscience of all Acworth residents and to send a message that is inclusive of the minority religious and nonreligious among you.

Sincerely,

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

Christopher Line
Staff Attorney
Freedom From Religion Foundation

Cc: Wayne Dennard, Chief of Police *via* **wdennard@acworth.org**

Enclosures

³ Robert P. Jones & Daniel Cox, *America's Changing Religious Identity*, PUBLIC RELIGION RESEARCH INSTITUTE (Sept. 6, 2017), *available at* www.ppri.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/PRRI-Religion-Report.pdf.

NATIONAL DAY OF PRAYER PROCLAMATION

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Alderman Brett North presented the Annual National Day of Prayer Proclamation. National Day of Prayer is observed on the first Thursday of the month, May 5, 2016, whereas community leaders and pastors gathered in front of the Acworth City Hall to speak and share brief comments with the community, along with musical performances from community churches and schools. Citizens are encouraged to join the City of Acworth in earnest prayers for our cities, counties, state and nation, asking God's light to illuminate the minds and hearts of His people so that we may meet the challenges that lie before us with courage, wisdom and justice.



Acworth Police Department

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Community Leaders will be hosting the National Day of Prayer in the plaza in front of Acworth City Hall on Thursday, May 6 at 10:00 a.m. Representatives from the business community, local churches, and the city will be sharing comments at the event. The event will also be livestreamed on the Acworth National Day of Prayer Facebook page.

