

FREEDOM FROM RELIGION *foundation*

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

June 10, 2020

SENT VIA EMAIL ONLY: mayor@prattvilleal.gov

The Honorable Bill Gillespie, Jr.
Mayor, City of Prattville
101 West Main Street
Prattville, AL 36067

Re: Unconstitutional City-Sponsored Prayer Event

Dear Mayor Gillespie:

I am writing on behalf of the Freedom From Religion Foundation (FFRF) regarding a constitutional violation that recently occurred in the City of Prattville. FFRF is a national nonprofit organization with more than 33,000 members across the country, including members in Alabama. 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 Prattville resident reported that on June 5, 2020, the City of Prattville organized and hosted a community prayer event. The event was promoted and advertised on the City of Prattville's official social media pages as well as the City's website. The event was held in front of city hall, but was also streamed online through the City's official Facebook and Instagram pages. In promoting the event you stated, "In light of our nation's current state, I believe this community prayer event is an encouraging way to bring our city together as one. We are blessed in the City of Prattville, but unity must always be at the forefront of each of our minds through love, communication, and prayer." Please see the enclosed screenshots.

While we agree that it is important to unify people during this difficult time, the City's decision to host a religious prayer event divided rather than unified people. This event excluded the many citizens who do not believe in a deity, much less one who answers prayer.

The City's organization and promotion of this event poses serious constitutional concerns. The Establishment Clause of the First Amendment to the United States Constitution prohibits the government from endorsing, advancing or promoting religion. Therefore, it is illegal and inappropriate for the City to be hosting, organizing, supporting, or otherwise promoting a patently religious event, such as a community prayer event. The Supreme Court has said time and again, "The touchstone for our analysis is the principle that the 'First Amendment mandates governmental neutrality between religion and religion, and between religion and nonreligion.'" *McCreary Cty. v. ACLU of Ky.*, 545 U.S. 844, 860 (2005) (quoting *Epperson v. Arkansas*, 393 U.S. 97, 104 (1968); *Everson v. Bd. of Educ. of Ewing*, 330 U.S. 1, 15-16 (1947); *Wallace v. Jaffree*, 472 U.S. 38, 53 (1985)).

This event alienated nonreligious citizens in Prattville by turning them into political outsiders in their own community. Non-religious Americans make up the fastest growing segment of the U.S. population by religious identification—35 percent of Americans are non-Christians,¹ and this includes the more than one in four Americans who now identify as religiously unaffiliated.²

In 2018, the City of Ocala, Florida lost a lawsuit for organizing a similar prayer event. The prayer event was sponsored and promoted by the City and included preaching, proselytization, and prayers. In ruling against the city, the federal court explained, “If individuals or religious groups organize a prayer vigil and gather in the Downtown Square in the City of Ocala to pray for an end to violent crime, the First Amendment to the United States Constitution will protect the ‘free exercise’ of their religion. But what if the government organizes and sponsors the prayer vigil? That is a problem because under the Establishment Clause of the First Amendment, the government cannot conduct such religious activity.” *Rojas v. City of Ocala*, 315 F. Supp. 3d 1256, 1263 (M.D. Fla. 2018).

The City of Prattville must refrain from further organization and promotion of religious events. Please inform us in writing of the steps you are taking to ensure this constitutional violation does not recur.


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

¹ *In U.S., Decline of Christianity Continues at Rapid Pace*, PEW RESEARCH CENTER (Oct. 17, 2019), available at <https://www.pewforum.org/2019/10/17/in-u-s-decline-of-christianity-continues-at-rapid-pace/>.

² *Id.*

 **City of Prattville, Alabama Government** June 3 at 2:54 PM · 🌐

"In light of our nation's current state, I believe this community prayer event is an encouraging way to bring our city together as one. We are blessed in the City of Prattville, but unity must always be at the forefront of each of our minds through love, communication, and prayer," said Mayor **Bill Gillespie, Jr.**
#PrattvilleStrong #OnePrattville



The poster features a sunset sky with birds flying. At the top center is the Prattville logo. The text reads: PRATTVILLE Community Prayer EVENT. At the bottom, it says: FRIDAY, JUNE 5, 2020 AT 9:00 AM IN FRONT OF CITY HALL.

 **City of Prattville, Alabama Government** was live. June 5 at 8:09 AM · 🌐

Prattville Community Prayer Event



The video shows Mayor Bill Gillespie, Jr. speaking at a red podium in front of City Hall. The building has a sign that says "CITY HALL 1999". There are flower baskets hanging from poles in front of the building. The video player interface at the bottom shows a progress bar at 0:03 / 57:26, along with settings, share, and volume icons.