

FREEDOM FROM RELIGION *foundation*

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

May 3, 2023

SENT VIA EMAIL AND U.S. MAIL:

mwalsh@easthartfordct.gov

The Honorable Michael P. Walsh
Mayor, Town of East Hartford
740 Main Street
East Hartford, CT 06108

Re: Unconstitutional Religious Promotion on Social Media

Dear Mayor Walsh:

I am writing on behalf of the Freedom From Religion Foundation (FFRF) regarding a constitutional violation that occurred on the Town of East Hartford, CT- Government Facebook page. FFRF is a national nonprofit organization with more than 40,000 members across the country, including over 460 members in Connecticut. 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 East Hartford resident contacted us to report that on March 8, 2023, the City announced a recent police chaplain swearing in ceremony with a post that read:

How do you remake a town into a community?

Well, you start by carefully adding four reverends and one pastor as East Hartford Police Department Chaplains, bringing the face of God to the community through prayer and religious devotion.

God and acceptance is universal, so we support all religions.
Please join me in congratulating the newest volunteer members of the EHPD!
Goodness knows we need their prayers!

The pictures include the printed program, their swearing in, and the EHPD Honor Guard as they entered the room!¹

It is inappropriate and unconstitutional for a town's official social media pages to be used to post religious messages. The Supreme Court has long held that the Establishment Clause requires "government neutrality between religion and religion, and between religion and nonreligion." *McCreary Cty., Ky. v. ACLU of Ky.*, 545 U.S. 844, 860 (2005); *Wallace v. Jaffree*, 472 U.S. 38, 53 (1985); *Epperson v. Ark.*, 393

¹ See attached.

U.S. 97, 104 (1968); *Everson v. Bd. of Educ. of Ewing*, 330 U.S. 1, 15–16 (1947). By displaying Christian messages on its official Facebook page, the Town of East Hartford conveys a message to all non-Christian residents that they are disfavored members of the community. While it is laudable that the Town wishes to instill a sense of community via its law enforcement programs, it should seek to do so in ways that are inclusive and do not needlessly imply that being non-Christians and non religious residents are antithetical to the concept of community building. A simple disclaimer that the town “supports all religions” is meaningless when the chaplains are all Christian, and the rest of the post and event are explicitly Christian in nature, with a claim that God is “universal” being made out to be fact.

As you are aware, citizens interact with and rely on law enforcement officers during some of the most urgent and vulnerable times of their lives. As Mayor, you serve a diverse population that consists of not only Christians, but also minority religious and nonreligious citizens. We hope you will agree that the police department must be even-handed and avoid any appearance of bias toward some citizens or hostility toward others. Promoting Christianity through the Town’s official social media suggests that both the government and local law enforcement prefers Christianity over all other religions and nonreligion. This alienates East Hartford residents who are part of the 35 percent of Americans who are non-Christians, and creates feelings of mistrust and apprehension towards law enforcement.²

The Supreme Court has described the power of social media sites as “the principal sources for knowing current events, checking ads for employment, speaking and listening in the modern public square, and otherwise exploring the vast realms of human thought and knowledge.” *Packingham v. North Carolina*, 137 S. Ct. 1730, 1737 (2017) (internal citations omitted). Government entities must be particularly diligent not to entangle religious messages with official government pronouncements made in this “modern public square.”

We ask the City of East Hartford to respect the diversity of its citizens. We request that you remove all divisive religious posts from official social media pages and avoid making similar posts in the future. Please respond in writing with the steps your department is taking to remedy this matter so that we may inform our complainant.

Sincerely,



Kat D. Grant

Equal Justice Works Fellow (sponsored by the Wm. Collins Kohler Foundation)
Freedom From Religion Foundation

Enclosure

² *The 2020 Census of American Religion*, Public Religion Research Institute (July 8, 2021), available at <https://www.prri.org/research/2020-census-of-american-religion>.



Town of East Hartford, CT – Government

March 8 · 🌐

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