

# FREEDOM FROM RELIGION *foundation*

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November 29, 2023

**SENT VIA EMAIL & U.S. MAIL: [bill.lee@tn.gov](mailto:bill.lee@tn.gov)**

The Honorable Bill Lee  
Governor's Office, State Capitol,  
1st Floor 600 Dr. Martin L. King, Jr. Blvd.  
Nashville, TN 37243

Re: Divisive religious promotion via official email

Dear Governor Lee:

I am writing on behalf of the Freedom From Religion Foundation (FFRF) regarding the divisive and concerning promotion of religion via an official email from your office. FFRF is a national nonprofit organization with over 40,000 members across the country, including more than 400 members and a chapter in Tennessee. Our purposes are to protect the constitutional principle of separation between state and church, and to educate the public on matters relating to nontheism.

One of your constituents reported that on November 2, 2023, your office sent an official email promoting the Christian story of the birth of Jesus. It is our understanding that the following email was sent to all State of Tennessee employees:

Dear State employees,

Governor and First Lady Lee invite you to celebrate the holiday season with one of the state's greatest traditions—Christmas at the Tennessee Residence.

The theme for the Christmas décor at the Tennessee Residence this year, “Heaven and Nature Sing,” will portray the larger-than-life magic we experience in the delight and merriment of the holiday season, the beauty of Tennessee’s natural landscapes, **and the joy of the coming of Christ and the salvation of the world.**

The Tennessee Residence will be open to the public for tours Friday, December 1 through Sunday, December 3, and Thursday, December 7 through Sunday, December 10.

Families, individuals, and groups are welcome to register for a tour of Tennessee's home that is sure to bring joy and holiday cheer this Christmas.

This message went far beyond the mere acknowledgment of Christmas or other end-of-the-year holidays or festivities. Couched as an invitation to view decorations, it inserted an unnecessarily divisive and sectarian message. Speaking of the “coming of Christ and the salvation of the world” is something that should be reserved for the pulpit and is totally inappropriate as an invitation sent to diverse citizens coming from Tennessee’s highest executive office-holder. To non-Christians and nonbelievers, in fact this

reference feels like a slap in the face, with its implicit message that unless you become the right kind of Christian, undergoing the right kind of rituals, you will be eternally damned or otherwise denied “salvation.” Governor, you are of course free to subscribe to that belief in your personal life, but you must separate your personal religious beliefs from your official duties, including your gubernatorial hospitality functions.

We request that in the future you refrain from using your elected position as governor to promote your personal religious beliefs. You are free to practice your religion in your personal capacity, but you cannot abuse your position as a government official to promote religion to your constituents and state employees in your official capacity, utilizing government email.

As governor of Tennessee, you are tasked with upholding the Constitution of the United States—including the First Amendment’s Establishment Clause. By promoting Christianity in your official capacity as governor, you do the opposite. You serve a religiously diverse state that consists not only of Christians, but also Jewish, Muslim, atheist and other non-Christian constituents. When you promote Christianity through official actions, you needlessly alienate your constituents, such as our complainant, who are part of the 37 percent of Americans who are non-Christian, including the nearly one-in-three Americans who now identify as religiously unaffiliated.<sup>1</sup> You send the message that you and your office not only prefer those citizens who are religious, but that you prefer those who subscribe to Christianity over all other religions.

Elected officials can worship, pray, and practice their religion however they wish when acting in their personal capacities. But they are not permitted to provide prestige to their personal religion through the machinery of a government office. The governor’s office belongs to “We the people,” not the office’s temporary occupant. As governor, you are charged with great responsibility and have been given significant trust by citizens in your community, including those citizens who do not share your religious viewpoint.

We ask you to honor the Constitution you were elected to uphold and respect your Establishment Clause obligations to lead the religiously diverse citizens of Tennessee, not to promote your own religion. Thank you for your time and attention to this matter.

Sincerely,



Annie Laurie Gaylor & Dan Barker  
Co-Presidents

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<sup>1</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/).