

FREEDOM FROM RELIGION *foundation*

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

March 23, 2020

SENT VIA EMAIL:

governor@govreeves.ms.gov

The Honorable Tate Reeves
Office of the Governor
P.O. Box 139
Jackson MS 39205

Re: Misusing secular gubernatorial office to promote prayer

Dear Governor Reeves:

I am writing on behalf of the Freedom From Religion Foundation (FFRF) regarding recent constitutional violations by your office. FFRF is a national nonprofit organization with more than 31,000 members across the country, including many members in Mississippi. FFRF's purposes are to protect the constitutional principle of separation between state and church and to educate the public on matters relating to nontheism.

Several concerned Mississippi residents contacted us to report that you, in your official capacity as governor, posted a message on Facebook¹ and recorded a Facebook Live video² asking Mississippians to pray, and then led them in prayer. The Facebook post included eight separate prayer requests. The Facebook Live video featured you, in front of the American and the Mississippian flags leading two prayers and conducting three readings from the Bible. As the video concludes, you admonish your constituents to “[p]lease continue to pray . . .”

These actions that amount to an endorsement of religion, specifically Christianity, in contravention of the Establishment Clause of the First Amendment.

The First Amendment wisely prohibits government sponsorship of religious messages. The Supreme Court has said time and again that the “First Amendment mandates government neutrality between religion and religion, and between religion and nonreligion.” *McCreary Cnty., Ky. v. Am. Civil Liberties Union of Ky.*, 545 U.S. 844, 860 (2005); *see also Wallace v. Jaffree*, 472 U.S. 38, 53 (1985); *Epperson v. Ark.*, 393 U.S. 97, 104 (1968); *Everson v. Board of Educ. of Ewing*, 330 U.S. 1, 15-16 (1947). Urging, in your official capacity, the citizens of Mississippi to pray sends the message that you, as governor, and the State of Mississippi prefer and endorse religion, specifically the Christian faith. This violates the Establishment Clause of the First Amendment.

We write to remind you that, as governor, you represent a diverse population that consists not only of religious individuals, but of atheists and agnostics who do not believe in a deity, much less the power of prayer. The decision to suggest that citizens pray and then engage in a live-broadcasted prayer reading sends an unfortunate official message of endorsement of religion over non-religion by the

¹ See Enclosure, <https://www.facebook.com/tatereeves/posts/3369164946434275>.

² <https://bit.ly/2y3bSfr>.

highest executive office in the state—a message that inevitably excludes many of your constituents and has a proselytizing intent. These actions send an official message of endorsement of Christianity over other religions, thereby excluding followers of minority religions. A message to encourage safety and show governmental concern in a time of hardship could have been effectively conveyed without prayer and the unnecessary entanglement of government and religion. Therefore, we once again urge you in the future to refrain from promoting religion in your official capacity as governor of Mississippi.

Non-religious Americans make up the fastest growing segment of the U.S. population by religious identification – 35 percent of Americans are non-Christians,³ and this includes the more than one in four Americans who now identify as religiously unaffiliated.⁴ Broadcasting a live prayer reading signals to this sizeable minority “that they are outsiders, not full members of the political community, and an accompanying message to adherents that they are insiders, favored members of the political community.” *Lynch v. Donnelly*, 465 U.S. at 668, 688 (1984) (O’Connor, J., concurring). Furthermore, your request to “[p]lease pray for a spirit of unity in this country” is particularly ironic, given that prayer—including whether to pray, what to pray for, and to whom to direct prayers—remains one of the most divisive topics in our nation.

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus condemned public prayers as hypocrisy: “when you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the street corners to be seen by others.” Matthew 6:5.

In conclusion, we ask that you, as governor of Mississippi, remain cognizant that you have taken an oath to uphold and defend the U.S. Constitution—an entirely godless and secular document, and are charged with great responsibility over citizens, including those citizens who may not share your personal religious viewpoints. Leaving religion as a private matter for private citizens is the wisest public policy. Observing a strict separation of state and church offends no one and honors the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution.

We appreciate the courtesy of your attention to this matter and encourage you to stand up for the precious constitutional principle of the Establishment Clause, which unites and protects all citizens, believers and non-believers alike.

Very truly,



Annie Laurie Gaylor & Dan Barker
Co-Presidents

³ *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/>.

⁴ *Id.*



Tate Reeves ✓

March 21 at 11:48 AM · 🌐

We are taking unprecedented action to stop the spread of COVID-19, shutting down major sectors of our state and putting public health first. I never could have imagined ordering the things that we have so far, and we know there are more tough decisions to come. We will do everything in our power to protect the people of Mississippi from this virus and the fallout from it. We also know that there is power in prayer, so I want to share a few prayer requests if you are willing to join me in them.

Please pray for the health and safety of your fellow Mississippians, Americans, and people around the world.

Please pray for our health care workers—who are saving lives with their courageous service.

Please pray for those who cannot stay home because they are providing essential services: child care, food, medicine, and other products we all need for society to function.

Please pray for wisdom for all of our leaders—in this state and around the country—who are trying to protect health without hurting more people.

Please pray for those whose jobs and finances are affected by the response to this pandemic.

Please pray for calm to come over those who are living in fear.

Please pray for a spirit of unity in this country as we all work together to help our neighbors.

Please pray for God's protective hand over all of us.

Tomorrow morning at 9:30—as we avoid the large gathering of traditional in-person church—I plan to be back on Facebook Live for a moment of prayer with all of you. If you'd like to join us, I'll be here praying.

   3.5K

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