

FREEDOM FROM RELIGION *foundation*

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**SENT VIA EMAIL & U.S. MAIL: mnorthrup@hudsonville.org, dbolhuis@hudsonville.org,
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Mark Northrup
Mayor
City of Hudsonville
3275 Central Blvd.
Hudsonville, MI 49426

Re: Unconstitutional Religious Endorsement

Dear Mayor Northrup and Hudsonville City Commissioners:

I am writing on behalf of the Freedom From Religion Foundation (FFRF) to object to the City of Hudsonville's official endorsement of religion. FFRF is a national nonprofit organization with more than 35,000 members across the country, including more than 800 members in Michigan. 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 area resident has reported that the City of Hudsonville has endorsed religion through its official mission statement:

The City Commission and Administration of the City of Hudsonville **strive to serve God** through the strengthening of family and community life and are committed to excellence in providing quality municipal services.

While the City of Hudsonville should work to strengthen family and community life, and should be committed to excellence in providing quality municipal services, it is inappropriate and unconstitutional for the City Commission and administration of the City of Hudsonville to officially "strive to serve God," and to proclaim this misuse of public office on the City's official website. This mission statement should be changed immediately.

The Supreme Court has said time and again that the First Amendment "mandates governmental neutrality between religion and religion, and between religion and nonreligion." *McCreary County, 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. Arkansas*, 393 U.S. 97, 104 (1968); *Everson v. Bd. of Educ. of Ewing*, 330 U.S. 1, 15-16 (1947). The government must remain neutral toward religion because "the preservation and transmission of religious beliefs and worship is a responsibility and a choice committed to the private sphere." *Santa Fe Indep. Sch. Dist. v. Doe*, 530 U.S. 290, 310 (2000).

This overt promotion of religion on the City of Hudsonville's official website gives the clear indication that the City supports and endorses particular religious beliefs. The government is sending the message

“to nonadherents that they are outsiders, not full members of the political community, and an accompanying message to adherents that they are insiders, favored members...” *Santa Fe Indep. Sch. Dist. v. Doe*, 530 U.S. 290, 309–10 (2000) (quoting *Lynch v. Donnelly*, 465 U.S. 668, 688 (1984) (O’Connor, J., concurring)). “This presents a problem... because the Establishment Clause prohibits the government from ‘promot[ing] or affiliat[ing] itself with any religious doctrine or organization.’” *Milwaukee Deputy Sheriffs’ Ass’n v. Clarke*, 588 F.3d 523, 528 (7th Cir. 2009), (cite to Sup. Ct. omitted).

You represent a diverse population that consists of not only people who believe in God, but also nonreligious citizens. Religious endorsements made in your official capacity send a message that excludes the 26 percent of Americans that identify as nonreligious.¹ Official religious endorsements coming from the City Commission needlessly alienate the nonreligious citizens you represent, turning them into political outsiders in their own community.

Government officials can worship, pray, or “strive to serve God” when acting in their personal capacities. But they are not permitted to provide prestige to their personal religion by lending a government office and government title to religious ideology. Their offices and titles belong to “We the people,” not the offices’ temporary occupants. As elected officials, you are charged with great responsibility and have been given significant trust by citizens in Hudsonville, including those citizens who do not share your religious viewpoint.

We hope you will agree that the the City of Hudsonville should strive to be equally welcoming of all residents, regardless of whether they believe in a god. In your personal capacity, you can freely exercise your religion as you see fit. In your official capacity as government officials, you are bound by the Establishment Clause and cannot abuse that office to endorse your personal religious views. We request written assurances that the mission statement has been changed and that the City Commission will cease endorsing religion in order to respect the rights of conscience of all Hudsonville residents, regardless of their religious or nonreligious beliefs.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Chris Line". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

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/>.