

FREEDOM FROM RELIGION *foundation*

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

June 9, 2020

**SENT VIA FAX ONLY:
618-244-9209**

The Honorable Jeff Bullard Sr.
Jefferson County Sheriff
911 E. Casey Ave.
Mount Vernon, IL 62864

Re: Promotion of religion on social media

Dear Sheriff Bullard:

I am writing on behalf of the Freedom From Religion Foundation (FFRF). FFRF is a nationwide nonprofit organization with more than 33,000 members throughout the country, including more than 1000 members and a local chapter in Illinois. Our purposes are to protect the constitutional separation between state and church and to educate the public on matters related to nontheism.

Multiple concerned Jefferson County residents contacted FFRF to report that on April 24, 2020, your office posted a video to its official Facebook page in which you state that you believe all truth is found “In God’s word alone” and quoted Biblical scripture including Romans 13:1, which instructs people to obey their governing authorities because those authorities exist with God’s backing. In the video you also refer to the Federal and Illinois State Constitution as being only the secondary legal authorities, below the word of God.

We write to ask that in the future you refrain from using your position as sheriff as a platform to promote your personal religion. Our Constitution’s Establishment Clause—which protects Americans’ religious freedom by ensuring the continued separation between religion and government—dictates that the government cannot in any way endorse religion. As the Supreme Court has put it, “the First Amendment mandates governmental neutrality between religion and religion, and between religion and nonreligion.” *McCreary Cty. v. ACLU*, 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). When a sheriff or other government official associates their office with an exclusively religious, exclusively Christian message, they violate this essential constitutional principle.

The Supreme Court recently 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.”

Your constitutional obligations as an elected official prohibit you from promoting your personal religious beliefs while acting in your official capacity. Moreover, such statements are needlessly divisive. You are, of course, free to follow the dictates of your religious beliefs however you wish as a private citizen. But your official public addresses given in your capacity as sheriff are not appropriate mediums to deliver religious messages. We ask that you refrain from using your position to promote your personal religion in the future out of respect for the rights of conscience of *all* of your constituents, including those with minority religious or nonreligious beliefs.

Sincerely,



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Patrick O'Reiley Legal Fellow

Freedom From Religion Foundation