

FREEDOM FROM RELIGION *foundation*

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

November 19, 2020.

SENT VIA U.S. MAIL AND EMAIL
mayor@lc-tn.com

The Honorable Bill Newman
Mayor
Lincoln County
112 Main Avenue South, Rm. 101
Fayetteville, TN 37334

Re: Inappropriate statements on religion in government decision-making

Dear Mayor Newman:

We are writing on behalf of the Freedom From Religion Foundation (FFRF) to object to comments you reportedly made suggesting that your personal religious beliefs are dictating public health policy. FFRF is a national nonprofit organization with more than 33,000 members and several chapters across the country, including hundreds of members and a state chapter in Tennessee. FFRF protects the constitutional separation between state and church and educates about nontheism.

According to local reporting, you recognized that requiring county residents to wear masks in public places would save lives, but declined to issue such a mandate in part because you have not received instruction from the “Holy Spirit” to do so.¹ You reportedly “take[] big decisions to God for guidance,” and said, “When I pray for guidance, I may not know the answer immediately.”²

You took an oath of office to uphold the U.S. Constitution, a wholly secular document that specifically excludes religion from the government. You betray this oath when you condition decisions of your secular office on your personal religious beliefs or what you perceive to be the will of your deity.

You were elected to make decisions for *all* the residents of Lincoln County, not just those who share your religious beliefs. It is unacceptable and un-American to perform only those parts of your job that you believe have the rubber stamp of your deity, as is

¹ Lee Roop, *Tennessee Mayor won't require COVID masks until Holy Spirit says so*, AL.com (Nov. 18, 2020).

² *Id.*

requiring permission from the “Holy Spirit.” Government decisions — especially decisions that will save citizens’ lives or risk condemning them to a breathless, wheezing death — should be based on science, reason and data. If you are unable to meet these basic standards, you appear to be unfit to serve as an executive public official in our secular democracy.

Imagine the fury of Christians in Lincoln County were an elected official to refuse to take any major action until convinced that it was the will of Allah. You would no doubt be sounding the alarm and asserting that a secular government should not rely on the tenets of Islam. And rightly so.

Nonreligious Americans are the fastest growing segment of the U.S. population by religious identification — 35 percent of Americans are non-Christians, and this includes the more than one in four Americans who now identify as religiously unaffiliated.³ Younger Americans are not just religiously unaffiliated, they are largely atheist or agnostic. A recent survey found that 21 percent of Americans born after 1999 identify as atheist or agnostic.⁴

Government officials can worship, pray or quote any religious text they wish when acting in their personal capacities. But they are not permitted to give official credence to their personal religion by withholding actions simply because they conflict with an official’s personal religious beliefs. Their offices and titles belong to “We the People,” not the offices’ temporary occupants. As an elected official, you are charged with great responsibility and have been given significant trust by residents of your County, including those residents who do not share your religious viewpoint. We ask that in the future you leave all religious considerations out of your deliberations on the actions of your secular office, and base your actions on reason.

Our message to pious politicians is: Get off your knees and get to work.

Very truly,



Annie Laurie Gaylor & Dan Barker
Co-presidents
ALG/DB:rdj

³ Pew Research Center, “In U.S., Decline of Christianity Continues at Rapid Pace,” (Oct. 17, 2019) at <https://pewrsr.ch/2VPiFS7>.

⁴ *Atheism Doubles Among Generation Z*, The Barna Group (Jan. 24, 2018), <https://www.barna.com/research/atheism-doubles-among-generation-z/>.