

FREEDOM FROM RELIGION *foundation*

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July 22, 2021

**SENT VIA U.S. MAIL & FAX
(570) 326-1074**

Stephen D. Keener
President and Chief Executive Officer
Little League Baseball and Softball
P.O. Box 3485
Williamsport, PA 17701-0485

Re: Religion in the Little League Pledge

Dear Mr. Keener:

I am writing on behalf of the Freedom From Religion Foundation (FFRF) regarding religious language in the official Little League Pledge that our members have brought to our attention. FFRF is a national nonprofit organization with nearly 36,000 members across the United States. One of our primary purposes is to educate the public on matters relating to nontheism.

Parents have contacted FFRF about the Little League Pledge many times and in various contexts over the years. Most recently, several concerned parents in California contacted us to report that their Little League teams had been requiring their nonreligious children to recite the Pledge. Little League has always been at the top of the list of youth baseball organizations that parents consider when Americans look to enroll their child in baseball. The phrase “little league” is so ubiquitous that soccer, basketball, and football leagues for children are often referred to with that term, despite Little League not having any official connection to children’s soccer, basketball, or football leagues. With an influence of this magnitude, it is imperative that Little League consider how people within its organization use the Little League Pledge to promote or denigrate one set of beliefs over another.

As you’re no doubt aware, Little League President Peter J. McGovern wrote the pledge in 1954 during the height of the McCarthy Era. The first line of the Little League Pledge, “I trust in God,” reflects that historical period and has nothing to do with baseball. Historians have associated phrases of this nature with anti-communist sentiments, including for example, the

1956 adoption of “In God We Trust” as the national motto;¹ historians do not associate these kinds of phrases with an attempt to be inclusive of all god beliefs. These phrases are widely recognized as blatant attempts at the time to ostracize nontheists.

Even during the McCarthy Era, the Little League Pledge was unrepresentative of the religious landscape of the United States,² and the current religious landscape is even less represented by the phrase “I trust in God.” Overall, 26 percent of Americans identify as nonreligious.³ That 10 point increase since 2007⁴ and 17 point jump since 1990⁵ makes the “nones” the fastest growing identification in America. Nationally, 38 percent of younger Americans—i.e., your players—are nonreligious.⁶

Many of the nonreligious parents and children in Little League feel excluded by the language “I trust in God.” Even if local chapters can choose whether or not to say the Pledge at the beginning of games or practices, Little League is placing social pressure on the children to conform to a god belief simply by having the language as part of the official Little League pledge. The Pledge says to the children, “You’re not really a part of the Little League community unless you believe in our god and trust in him. We don’t want you in Little League if you don’t believe in a god.” It does not matter whether Little League officially states that local leagues can choose to recite all, some, or none of the Pledge; having the phrase in an official pledge ostracizes a significant percentage of your target demographic. The fact that “I trust in God” is part of the official Pledge means that non-believing children and parents are—at best—second-class members of Little League. This should also be a concern to the board of Little League in its international affiliations because some parts of the world are much less religious than the United States,⁷ and “I believe in God” does not make sense to some religious faiths.

The parents who contacted FFRF were surprised and disturbed to learn that the coaches had been requiring their children to recite the Pledge before games; the children had never complained

¹ Scott Merriman, *Religion and the Law in America: An Encyclopedia of Personal Belief and Public Policy, Volume 1*, 281 (2007).

² *U.S. Religious Landscape Survey: Religious Affiliation: Diverse and Dynamic*, THE PEW FORUM ON RELIGION & PUBLIC LIFE (Feb. 2008), available at <https://assets.pewresearch.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/11/2013/05/report-religious-landscape-study-full.pdf> (noting that 22% of immigrants entering the US from 1910-1959 were non-Christian)

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 *Nones on the Rise: One-in-Five Adults Have No Religious Affiliation*, THE PEW FORUM ON RELIGION & PUBLIC LIFE (October 9, 2012), available at <http://www.pewforum.org/Unaffiliated/nones-on-the-rise.aspx>.

⁵ Barry Kosmin, *National Religious Identification Survey 1989-1990*.

⁶ Robert P. Jones & Daniel Cox, *America’s Changing Religious Identity*, PUBLIC RELIGION RESEARCH INSTITUTE (Sept. 6, 2017), available at www.prrri.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/PRRI-Religion-Report.pdf.

⁷ Jonathan Evans, *U.S. Adults are More Religious than Western Europeans*, PEW RESEARCH CENTER (Sept. 5, 2018), available at

<https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2018/09/05/u-s-adults-are-more-religious-than-western-europeans/>;
Religious Composition by Country, 2010-2050, PEW RESEARCH CENTER (Apr. 2, 2015), available at <https://www.pewforum.org/2015/04/02/religious-projection-table/>

about this because the children did not know they had a choice. Children on the ballfield are not, obviously, in a position to read the official Little League website where it says, “[The Little League Pledge] is not, and has never been, required to be recited by any person involved with Little League Baseball or Softball.” Even had coaches given the children a choice, the social pressure from an official Little League coach crosses the line into coercion because young and impressionable children, eager to please their coaches, are unlikely to stand up to an adult who is an official representative of Little League and who is telling them that they must recite “I trust in God” as an official part of the Little League Pledge. Claiming that something isn’t required does not take away from its coercive nature when social pressures are in operation, especially when those pressures come from an adult in a position of authority over a game they want to play.

The Pledge gives a veneer of official Little League sanction to religion and an excuse for leaders to impose that religious language on children. Little League gives proselytizing coaches and staff a “get out of jail free” card by enshrining the phrase “I trust in God” in the official Little League Pledge. By retaining the phrase “I trust in God” in the official version of the Pledge, Little League gives carte blanche to proselytizing coaches and staff to exploit the social nature of the sport to evangelize to a captive audience of children, sending a message of exclusion to nonbelievers.

Religion has nothing to do with playing baseball. Inserting religion into a baseball pledge is unnecessary, coercive and divisive. We ask, in consideration of fair sportsmanship and of the significant and growing numbers of nonreligious American children and their parents, that you remove “I trust in God” from the official Little League Pledge. Thank you for your kind attention to this request. We look forward to hearing from you.

Very truly,

The image shows two handwritten signatures in blue ink. On the left is "Annie Laurie Gaylor" and on the right is "Dan Barker". The signatures are written in a cursive, flowing style.

Annie Laurie Gaylor & Dan Barker
Co-Presidents

ALG/DB:mss