

FREEDOM FROM RELIGION *foundation*

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March 23, 2020

SENT VIA FAX ONLY:

(803) 734-5167

The Honorable Henry McMaster
The Office of the Governor
1100 Gervais Street
Columbia, South Carolina 29201

Dear Governor McMaster:

I am writing on behalf of the Freedom From Religion Foundation (FFRF) to inform you of our objections to your decision to organize prayer before two news conferences this month. As was the case with our previous letter, we were contacted by South Carolina residents concerned by their government's apparent entanglement with religion.

At the news conference about the government's response to and status the COVID-19 pandemic on March 15, 2020, you invited Chaplain Greg Brown to begin the press conference with a Christian prayer. Again, on March 19, 2020, you invited Chaplain John Denny to give another Christian prayer to begin a press conference regarding COVID-19.

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 deliver a prayer at an official state news conference sends an unfortunate official message of endorsement of religion over non-religion by the highest executive office in the state — a message that inevitably excludes many of your constituents and has a proselytizing intent. Asking these Christian chaplains to preside over the prayer also signals 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 South Carolina.

Non-religious Americans make up the fastest growing segment of the U.S. population by religious identification – 35 percent of Americans are non-Christians,¹ and this includes the more than one in four Americans who now identify as religiously unaffiliated.² Beginning a televised gubernatorial news conference with a prayer signals to this sizeable minority “that they are

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/>.

² *Id.*

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).

Further, governmental chaplains were intended to lighten any governmental-imposed “burden” on religious exercise. Government chaplains may only exist as an accommodation of a public employee’s religious beliefs when the government makes it difficult or impossible to seek out private ministries. This prayer did not lighten a government-government imposed burden on religion, rather it *imposed* a governmental religion on every citizen.

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 South Carolina, 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 church and state 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