

# FREEDOM FROM RELIGION *foundation*

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May 10, 2021

**SENT VIA EMAIL & U.S. MAIL: michael.watson@sos.ms.gov**

Michael Watson  
Secretary of State  
New Capitol  
Room 105  
Jackson, Mississippi 39201

Re: Participation in National Day of Prayer event

Dear Secretary Watson:

I am writing on behalf of the Freedom From Religion Foundation (FFRF) to object to your continued participation in National Day of Prayer events in your official capacity as Mississippi Secretary of State. FFRF is a national nonprofit organization with more than 35,000 members across the country, including members in Mississippi. FFRF's purposes are to protect the constitutional principle of separation between state and church, and to educate the public on matters relating to nontheism.

It is our understanding you participated in a National Day of Prayer event on May 6, 2021 at the Mississippi Coliseum. We understand that at this over-the-top, sectarian event you claimed we are living in the end times:<sup>1</sup>

I believe we need Christian men and women in office today more than ever before. And if you're a believer, if you're a member of the church, you understand the signs of the times right now... In the last few years, no more than ever before in the history of the church, we see the end times.

You look around you, see what's happening in this country, in this world, you can't deny what's going on. So at this point in time, it is so very important that we have men and women of Christian character in office.

Another speaker at the event, Patti Herrington, the Mississippi Day of Prayer's capitol coordinator, called on God to convert the Jewish people to Christianity:<sup>2</sup>

We pray for a spiritual, supernatural awakening over Israel, oh God. Lord, remove the veil over the eyes of your people, oh God, in Israel, that they would recognize the Messiah, oh God, that they would recognize Jesus, their king, that they would know him, they would see him, and you would reveal yourself to them

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<sup>1</sup><https://www.mississippifreepress.org/11852/the-end-times-are-here-mississippi-elections-chief-says-calling-for-christian-leaders-to-heed-the-signs/>

<sup>2</sup> *Id.*

Mississippi Commissioner of Agriculture and Commerce Andy Gipson reportedly clapped and nodded in agreement with Herrington's prayer.<sup>3</sup> He also led his own prayer:

We're not asking it in our name or our sake, we're asking it for your Glory in the name above every name, the name before which one day every knee will bow and every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, for the glory of God the father.

As you may be aware, the National Day of Prayer is a sectarian event. It originated with the Reverend Billy Graham during his evangelical crusade in Washington, D.C. in 1952. He expressed an openly Christian purpose, seeking an annual prayer proclamation by the President because he wanted "the Lord Jesus Christ" to be recognized across the land. Subsequently, the National Day of Prayer Task Force was created to "communicate with every individual the need for personal repentance and prayer, mobilizing the Christian community to intercede for America and its leadership." The task force issues annual National Day of Prayer proclamations and submits them to the President, choosing a theme with supporting scripture from the bible. This year's theme is "Lord Pour Out Your Love, Life, and Liberty" based upon the New Testament verse 2 Corinthians 3:17.

In its announcement of the theme for 2021, the task force reveals that its idea of "love, life, and liberty" amounts to religious assimilation through proselytization. It writes<sup>4</sup>:

Everyone needs to know that they were created by God and that He loved them so much He put His image in them and authored their value and purpose that no person can take away from them. As followers of Jesus we must come together in obedient unity and love that spreads God's glory across the earth. We must share this message of love and life, so that our neighbors, co-workers, classmates – so that all the world would come to repentance, that NONE may perish and know the LIBERTY, the freedom from the stain and shame of sin. Everyone can have freedom ring in their hearts, liberty that pronounces you, "NOT GUILTY" from the One true Judge. God alone knows your heart, knows everything about you; everything you have thought, done and had done against you. God alone is our judge and in Christ alone, we experience authentic, eternal LIBERTY.

The task force has a Statement of Faith that is exclusive to Christians, including that "The Holy Bible is the inspired, only, infallible, authoritative Word of The Living God" and a belief in "the spiritual unity of believers in our Lord Jesus Christ."<sup>5</sup>

As Secretary of State, you represent a diverse population that consists of not only Christians, but also atheists and agnostics who do not believe in prayer. Your active participation in a National Day of Prayer event in your official capacity unabashedly promotes a religious event, sending an official message of endorsement of religion over non-religion and of exclusion to the 24% of Americans, including 38% of

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<sup>3</sup> *Id*

<sup>4</sup> [https://www.nationaldayofprayer.org/introducing\\_the\\_national\\_day\\_of\\_prayer\\_2021\\_theme](https://www.nationaldayofprayer.org/introducing_the_national_day_of_prayer_2021_theme).

<sup>5</sup> *Statement of Faith*, NATIONAL DAY OF PRAYER TASK FORCE (last visited Apr. 16, 2021), [www.nationaldayofprayer.org/statement\\_of\\_faith](http://www.nationaldayofprayer.org/statement_of_faith).

young Americans, who are not religious.<sup>6</sup> It alienates non-Christians and nonbelievers in Mississippi by turning them into political outsiders in their own community.

The Establishment Clause in the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution prohibits government sponsorship of religious messages. The Supreme Court has said time and again that the “First Amendment mandates government neutrality between religion and religion, and between religion and nonreligion.” *McCreary Cty., 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. Ark.*, 393 U.S. 97, 104 (1968); *Everson v. Bd. of Educ. of Ewing*, 330 U.S. 1, 15-16 (1947). By participating in a National Day of Prayer event, you abridge your duty to remain neutral. Whether to pray, and whether to believe in a god who answers prayer, is an intensely personal decision protected under our First Amendment as a matter of conscience.

Your comments are especially concerning as you are Mississippi’s top election official. The separation between state and church is among one of the most fundamental principles of our system of government. The Supreme Court has specifically stated, “If there is any fixed star in our constitutional constellation, it is that **no official, high or petty, can prescribe what shall be orthodox in politics, nationalism, religion, or other matters of opinion or force citizens to confess by word or act their faith therein.**” *West Virginia Board of Education v. Barnette*, 319 U.S. 624, 642 (1943) (emphasis added).

Government officials can worship, pray, and participate in religious events in their personal capacities. But they are not permitted to provide credibility or prestige to their religion by lending a government office and government title to religious events. Their office and title belong to “We the people,” not the office’s temporary occupant. As Secretary of State, you have taken an oath of office to uphold the secular U.S. Constitution, and must scrupulously avoid using your public office to promote or advance your personal religious beliefs.

As a matter of policy, government sponsorship of a National Day of Prayer event is inappropriate and unnecessary. Promotion of prayer by elected officials raises the distasteful appearance of political pandering to appeal to or appease a vocal Christian evangelical constituency, and even when other faiths are included in prayer events, the nonbelievers are still excluded. If you truly wish to participate in an event dedicated to unity, you could do far better than the National Day of Prayer.

We appreciate the courtesy of your attention to this matter, and encourage you to stand up for the constitutional principle of the separation between church and state, which unites and protects all citizens, believers and non-believers alike.

Sincerely,



Christopher Line  
Staff Attorney

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<sup>6</sup> 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](http://www.prrri.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/PRRI-Religion-Report.pdf).