

FREEDOM FROM RELIGION *foundation*

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June 16, 2022

SENT VIA EMAIL & U.S. MAIL: shane.hilliard@yanceycountync.gov

Sheriff Shane Hilliard
Yancey County Sheriff's Office
4 East Main Street
P.O. Box 6
Burnsville, NC 28714

Re: Unconstitutional Partnership and Endorsement of Christian Addiction Treatment

Dear Sheriff Hilliard:

I am writing on behalf of the Freedom From Religion Foundation (FFRF) to object to the Yancey County Sheriff's Office partnership with and endorsement of religious treatment programs, specifically Celebrate Recovery. FFRF is a national nonprofit organization with more than 37,000 members across the country, including more than 800 members and a local chapter in North Carolina. Our purposes are to protect the constitutional principle of separation between state and church, and to educate the public on matters relating to nontheism.

A concerned Yancey County resident has reported that the Yancey County Sheriff's Office has explicitly partnered with Celebrate Recovery, "a Christ-centered, 12 step recovery program."¹ In the Sheriff's Office's announcement of this partnership on its official Facebook page, you are quoted: "I Thank God for the partnership opportunity with Celebrate Recovery, to give an inmate the support to break the chains of addiction." The announcement also included details of an orientation meeting for the program led by religious leaders invited by the Sheriff's Office to speak at the Yancey County Detention Center. One of the religious leaders stated:

I'm honored and humbled to be invited and welcomed here at the Yancey County Detention Center to share the message of hope in Jesus Christ with the women here in our county...

We write to ask that the Yancey County Sheriff's Office terminate their current partnership with Celebrate Recovery and refrain from partnering with or supporting any religious-based addiction programs in the future.

The central components and philosophy of 12 step programs are religious/spiritual in nature. The program requires recognition of a "greater power" and requires participants to turn their lives over to God while referencing biblical passages as the source of the various steps. The 12 steps of Celebrate Recovery are:²

1. We admitted we were powerless over our addictions and compulsive behaviors, that our lives had become unmanageable.

- Referencing Romans 7:18 NIV

2. **We came to believe that a power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity.**

¹ <https://www.celebraterecovery.com/>

² <https://www.celebraterecovery.com/resources/cr-tools/12steps>

- Referencing Philippians 2:13 NIV
3. **We made a decision to turn our lives and our wills over to the care of God.**
 - Referencing Romans 12:1 NIV
 4. We made a searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves.
 - Referencing Lamentations 3:40 NIV
 5. **We admitted to God, to ourselves, and to another human being the exact nature of our wrongs.**
 - Referencing James 5:16a NIV
 6. **We were entirely ready to have God remove all these defects of character.**
 - Referencing James 4:10 NIV
 7. **We humbly asked Him to remove all our shortcomings.**
 - Referencing 1 John 1:9 NIV
 8. We made a list of all persons we had harmed and became willing to make amends to them all.
 - Referencing Luke 6:31 NIV
 9. We made direct amends to such people wherever possible, except when to do so would injure them or others.
 - Referencing Matthew 5:23-24 NIV
 10. We continue to take personal inventory and when we were wrong, promptly admitted it.
 - Referencing 1 Corinthians 10:12
 11. **We sought through prayer and meditation to improve our conscious contact with God, praying only for knowledge of His will for us, and power to carry that out.**
 - Referencing Colossians 3:16a NIV
 12. **Having had a spiritual awakening as the result of these steps, we try to carry this message to others and practice these principles in all our affairs.**
 - Referencing Galatians 6:1 NIV

However, Celebrate Recovery actually goes even further than typical 12 step programs by specifying eight recovery principles based on the Beatitudes, sayings attributed to Jesus. These principles, the 12 steps, the bible, and any Celebrate Recovery curriculum materials derived from them are the sole resources allowed to be used by groups using the Celebrate Recovery name and program.³ The eight recovery principles are:⁴

1. **Realize I'm not God; I admit that I am powerless to control my tendency to do the wrong thing and that my life is unmanageable (Step 1)**
 - Referencing Matthew 5:3a TEV
2. **Earnestly believe that God exists, that I matter to Him and that He has the power to help me recover. (Step 2)**
 - Referencing Matthew 5:4 TEV, NIV

³ <https://www.celebraterecovery.com/resources/cr-tools/dna>

⁴ <https://www.celebraterecovery.com/resources/cr-tools/8principles>

3. **Consciously choose to commit all my life and will to Christ's care and control. (Step 3)**
 - Referencing Matthew 5:5a TEV
4. **Openly examine and confess my faults, to God, and to someone I trust. (Steps 4 and 5)**
 - Referencing Matthew 5:8a TEV
5. **Voluntarily submit to any and all changes God wants to make in my life and humbly ask Him to remove my character defects. (Steps 6 and 7)**
 - Referencing Matthew 5:6a TEV
6. Evaluate all my relationships. Offer forgiveness to those who have hurt me and make amends for harm I've done to others when possible, except when to do so would harm them or others. (Steps 8 and 9)
 - Referencing Matthew 5:7a TEV; Matthew 5:6a TEV
7. **Reserve a daily time with God for self-examination, bible reading, and prayer in order to know God and His will for my life and to gain the power to follow his will. (Steps 10 and 11)**
8. **Yield myself to God and to be used to bring this Good News to others, both by my example and my words. (Step 12)**
 - Referencing Matthew 5:10 TEV

Celebrate Recovery also requires "each group to be accountable to Christ, the local church, and the model of Celebrate Recovery established at Saddleback Church," and the most important aspect of the program is that "Jesus Christ is the one and only Higher Power."⁵ While most AA groups claim anyone, including atheists, agnostics, and members of minority religions can participate in their program, Celebrate Recovery's program explicitly requires adherence to and belief in Christianity. It explicitly excludes all non-Christians.

Our organization receives a substantial number of complaints about 12 step programs, but none of them are as focused on Christian religious indoctrination as Celebrate Recovery. Our complainants often express concern that they are being subjected to religion and pressure to conform to the religious practices of such treatment groups rather than receiving neutral, evidence-based assistance with addiction or substance abuse, and that will certainly be the case with Celebrate Recovery's "Christ-centered" program.

Furthermore, required attendance in religious-based substance abuse treatment by a county sheriff's office, like the Yancey County Sheriff's Office, violates the First Amendment as the Establishment Clause guarantees that the "government may not coerce anyone to support or participate in religion or its exercise." *Lee v. Weisman*, 505 U.S. 577, 587 (1992) (quoting *Lynch v. Donnelly*, 465 U.S. 668, 678 (1984)). While that may or may not be the case in your county, the Supreme Court has also said that the "government may not promote or affiliate itself with any religious doctrine or organization, may not discriminate against persons on the basis of their religious beliefs and practices, may not delegate a governmental power to a religious institution, and may not involve itself too deeply in such an institution's affairs." *Cty. of Allegheny v. ACLU Greater Pittsburgh Chapter*, 492 U.S. 573, 590-91 (1989).

There is a substantial body of case law finding that 12 step programs such as AA or Celebrate Recovery are religious programs for purposes of First Amendment analysis. In *Inouye v. Kemna*, the Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals held that "the AA/NA program involved here has such substantial religious components that governmentally compelled participation in it violated the Establishment Clause." 504 F.3d 705, 714 n.9 (9th

⁵ *Id.*

Cir. 2007). The Second Circuit Court of Appeals found an Establishment Clause violation when the state required a probationer to attend AA meetings. *Warner v. Orange County Dept. of Probation*, 115 F.3d 1068 (2d Cir. 1996). The Court described the AA meetings as “intensely religious events.” *Id* at 1075. Likewise, the Seventh Circuit Court of Appeals found an Establishment Clause violation and said, “A straightforward reading of the twelve steps shows clearly that the steps are based on the monotheistic idea of a single God or Supreme Being.” *Kerr v. Ferrey*, 95 F.3d 472, 480 (7th Cir. 1996). These cases are in alignment with cases throughout the country. *See Cox v. United States*, 296 F.3d 89, 108 n.11 (2nd Cir. 2002) (“We are not alone in concluding that A.A.'s activities must be treated as religious for purposes of such Establishment Clause analysis...[T]o the best of our knowledge, no court presented with an Establishment Clause claim implicating A.A. or a comparable therapy program incorporating religious concepts has reached a contrary [conclusion]”). With Celebrate Recovery, unlike other 12 step programs, the overtly sectarian religious nature is beyond debate.

The Yancey County Sheriff’s Office’s partnership with and endorsement of Celebrate Recovery’s “Christ based” recovery program violates the Establishment Clause. The Sheriff’s Office must immediately cease its partnership with Celebrate Recovery, and offer secular, rather than exclusively religious means of support for those who have addiction problems. Please respond in writing with the actions the sheriff’s office will take to resolve this constitutional violation.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Chris Line". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style with a long horizontal stroke extending to the right.

Christopher Line
Staff Attorney
Freedom From Religion Foundation

CAL:cf

Enclosure



Yancey County Sheriff's Office

March 25 · 🌐



Yancey County Sheriff's Office Partnering with Celebrate Recovery

Sheriff Shane Hilliard is pleased to announce the Yancey County Sheriff's Office is partnering with Celebrate Recovery to help our inmates who may struggle with addiction. Celebrate Recovery is a Christ-centered, 12 step recovery program for anyone struggling with hurt, pain, or addiction of any kind.

Celebrate Recovery is a safe place to find community and freedom from the issues that are controlling their life.

"I Thank God for the partnership opportunity with Celebrate Recovery, to give an inmate the support to break the chains of addiction," says Shane Hilliard.

The orientation meeting was held on March 23rd, 2022 at the Yancey County Detention Center, hosted by Josh Wise, Worship Leader Facilitator, and Cassie Burleson, from the Bear Creek Baptist Church Ministry.

"We just want to help those who desire a better life, move forward toward the life they desire." Said Josh Wise "The most tragic thing in life isn't falling down; it's not getting back up. Failure does not have to be final."

"There is hope in Jesus Christ no matter what our struggles are today." Says Cassie Burleson "I'm honored and humbled to be invited and welcomed here at the Yancey County Detention Center to share the message of hope in Jesus Christ with the women here in our county, our mothers, daughters, sisters, aunts...our loved ones."

