



FREEDOM FROM RELIGION FOUNDATION

P.O. Box 750 • Madison WI 53701 • (608) 256-8900 • www.ffrf.org

April 8, 2010

**SENT VIA FAX & U.S. MAIL
(863) 834-8402**

The Honorable Gow Fields and City Commissioners
City of Lakeland Commission
Lakeland City Hall
228 South Massachusetts Ave
Lakeland FL 33801

Re: City Commission Invocations

Dear Mayor Fields and City Commissioners:

I am writing on behalf of concerned residents and taxpayers of Lakeland, and other Florida members of the Freedom From Religion Foundation ("FFRF") who strenuously object to the practice of including prayer as part of the City Commission's meetings. FFRF is a national nonprofit organization, which works to protect the constitutional principle of separation between state and church. We represent over 14,600 members across the country, including over 750 members in Florida.

It is our information and understanding that the City of Lakeland Commission ("Commission") begins each meeting with prayer. Our complainant informs us that local members of the clergy are called upon by the Commission to deliver an invocation. We understand that members of the public regularly attend Commission meetings and have necessary business before the Commission.

Government prayer is unnecessary, inappropriate, and divisive. Calling upon City Commissioners and citizens to rise and pray (even silently) is coercive, embarrassing and beyond the scope of secular city government. City Commissioners are free to pray privately or to worship on their own time in their own way. They do not need to worship on taxpayers' time. The city ought not to lend its power and prestige to religion, amounting to a governmental endorsement that excludes the 15% of your population that is nonreligious (Religious Identification Survey 2008). The Commission compounds the violation when a majority of prayers are to Jesus or a majority of the officiants are Christian or Christian clergy (which inevitably happens). Such prayer creates acrimony, makes minorities feel like political outsiders in their own community, and shows unconstitutional governmental preference not just for religion over nonreligion, but Christianity over other faiths.

Citizens of all religions or no religion are compelled to come before you on civic, secular matters: variances, sewers, building permits, restaurant licenses, sidewalk repair, etc. They should not be subjected to a religious show or test, or be expected to demonstrate religious obeisance at a city function. We fail to see why divine guidance is needed over such earthly matters anyway.

Christians who know their bible are familiar with the biblical injunction of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount, condemning as hypocrisy public prayer. "Enter into thy closet and when thou hast shut the door, pray to thy Father which is in secret." (Matthew 6:5-13). Observing a strict separation of church and state offends nobody, and honors not only the First Amendment, but also the very tenets being professed during Commission prayers.

On behalf of our Lakeland membership and our secular constitution, we urge the City Commission to concentrate on city matters. The tone that should be set is one that respects and reveres the secular and entirely godless U.S. constitution, which City officials take an oath to uphold, and whose only references to religion are exclusionary.

Yours very truly,



Annie Laurie Gaylor
Co-President, FFRF, Inc.