

FREEDOM FROM RELIGION *foundation*

P.O. BOX 750 › MADISON, WI 53701 › (608) 256-8900 › WWW.FFRF.ORG

January 25, 2024

SENT VIA EMAIL & U.S. MAIL: elections@blounttn.org

Susan Knopf
Administrator of Elections
Blount County Election Commission
383 Court Street
Maryville, TN 37804

Re: Unconstitutional promotion of religion

Dear Ms. Knopf:

I am writing on behalf of the Freedom From Religion Foundation (FFRF) regarding a constitutional concern occurring in the Blount County Election Commission. FFRF is a national nonprofit organization with more than 40,000 members across the country, including more than 400 members and a local chapter in Tennessee. 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 Blount County resident has reported that the Blount County Election Commission has been promoting Christianity using its official communication channels. Our complainant reports that the Commission sent an email to all its poll workers “celebrating the birth of Jesus Christ.” The email states that

The Blount County Election Commissioners and staff wish you and your families an enjoyable and restful Merry Christmas filled with love and joy that comes with celebrating the birth of Jesus Christ.

It included a picture depicting the nativity scene with the words, “Joy to the World The Lord has Come!” Please see the attached screenshot.

We write to request that you cease using your elected position as Administrator of Elections to promote your personal religious beliefs by sending a Christian message in your official capacity as part of the election commission. You are free to practice your religion in your personal capacity, but you cannot abuse your position as a government official to spread a religious holiday message.

The Blount County Election Commission’s apparent promotion and favoritism of religion poses serious constitutional concerns. As the Supreme Court has put it, the Establishment Clause of the First Amendment “mandates government neutrality between religion and religion, and between

religion and nonreligion.” *McCreary Cty., Ky. v. ACLU 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 distributing an official communication promoting Christianity, the election commission signals a clear preference for religion over nonreligion and Christianity over other faiths.

While the election commission can acknowledge and celebrate the Christmas season, official communications emphasizing the religious aspects of a holiday are prohibited. As the Supreme Court has stated, “[t]he government may acknowledge Christmas as a cultural phenomenon, but under the First Amendment it may not observe it as a Christian holy day by suggesting people praise God for the birth of Jesus.” *Cty. of Allegheny v. ACLU Greater Pittsburgh Chapter*, 492 U.S. 573, 593–94 (1989).

Minority religious and nonreligious citizens should not be made to feel like outsiders in their own community because their election commission promotes Christianity. The election commission’s official Christmas message needlessly alienates Blount County citizens who belong to the thirty-seven percent of Americans who are non-Christians, including the nearly one in three Americans who now identify as religiously unaffiliated.¹

The Blount County Election Commission serves all citizens regardless of belief or nonbelief. We urge your office to respect and honor your community’s diversity by sticking to secular messages that are welcoming and inclusive of all citizens. Please respond in writing with the steps the election commission is taking to address this matter so that we may inform our complainant. Thank you for your time and attention to this matter.

Sincerely,

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

Christopher Line
Staff Attorney
Freedom From Religion Foundation

Enclosure

¹ Gregory A. Smith, *About Three-in-Ten U.S. Adults Are Now Religiously Unaffiliated*, PEW RESEARCH CENTER (Dec. 14, 2021), available at www.pewforum.org/2021/12/14/about-three-in-ten-u-s-adults-are-now-religiously-unaffiliated/.

The Blount County Election Commissioners and staff wish you and your families an enjoyable and restful Merry Christmas filled with love and joy that comes with celebrating the birth of Jesus Christ.

We hope your 2024 is filled with hope, peace, and good health!

