

FREEDOM FROM RELIGION *foundation*

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December 9, 2024

SENT VIA EMAIL & U.S. MAIL: mayor@vicksburg.org; northward@vicksburg.org

Mayor George Flaggs Junior
City of Vicksburg, Mississippi
1401 Walnut Street
Vicksburg, MS 39180

Alderman Thomas “TJ” Mayfield
City of Vicksburg, Mississippi
1401 Walnut Street
Vicksburg, MS 39180

Re: Unconstitutional city-sponsored prayer event

Dear Mayor Flaggs & Alderman Mayfield:

I am writing on behalf of the Freedom From Religion Foundation (FFRF) to object to Vicksburg’s prayer event on behalf of our Mississippi members. FFRF is a national educational nonprofit with more than 40,000 members across the country, including in Mississippi. FFRF protects the constitutional separation between state and church and educates about nontheism.

A concerned community member informs us that the City is sponsoring a prayer event on New Years’ Day 2025. Local media confirms this.¹ The official prayer event is being coordinated by pastor Robert Andrews of Elevate Church. In his official statement about the city-wide prayer resolution, Alderman Mayfield starts by saying “Dear Christian Friends.” Mayfield then says:

Regardless of our race, creed, gender, **denomination**, or political affiliation, this is a time for unity and mutual support. Vicksburg is a remarkable community, yet we have failed to support one another as a unified **Christian body** for too long. With over **300 active churches** in our area, it is imperative that we put aside what divides us and focus on what unites us. We must put aside concerns about who gets the credit or whose name appears in the spotlight, and look to seeing [sic] the **gospel spread** to those in our community. **As Christians**, our primary goal should be **saving souls**.

An official poster describes the event as a “gathering of Christian believers to cover our city in prayer and worship.” This poster has the City’s seal in the bottom right corner. Please see the enclosed image.

¹ *Alderman TJ Mayfield Announces City-Wide Prayer and New Year’s United Day January 1*, Vicksburg Daily News, Dec. 4, 2024, <https://vicksburgnews.com/alderman-tj-mayfield-announces-city-wide-prayer-and-new-years-united-day-january-1/>.

City-sponsored religious worship events, particularly those promoting one religion above all others, are unnecessarily divisive and violate the constitutional rights of residents. Out of respect for the First Amendment and Vicksburg's residents, we write to request that the City end its official sponsorship of this event and refrain from promoting religious events going forward.

The Supreme Court has long recognized that the First Amendment's Establishment Clause "mandates governmental neutrality between religion and religion, and between religion and nonreligion." *McCreary Cnty. v. Am. Civil Liberties Union of Ky.*, 545 U.S. 844, 860 (2005); *Wallace v. Jaffree*, 472 U.S. 38, 53 (1985); *Epperson v. Arkansas*, 393 U.S. 97, 104 (1968); *Everson v. Bd. of Educ. of Ewing*, 330 U.S. 1, 15–16 (1947). Mississippi's Constitution similarly prohibits preference for religion, or for a mode of worship. *See* Miss. Const. Art. III § 18.

Alderman Mayfield's official statement makes clear that this city-wide prayer event is meant to advance his Christian religious beliefs. He only addresses Christians, and uses the word "denomination" instead of "religion," reflecting that other religions are not welcome and sending an exclusionary message to non-Christians. Speaking on behalf of the city, Alderman Mayfield advocates for spreading the "gospel [] to those in the community," and describes the "primary goal" of this city-sponsored event as "saving souls."

If City officials are unwilling to honor the constitutional provisions they took an oath to uphold, then perhaps they would at least honor the Sermon on the Mount: "And 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. . . . when you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you." (Matthew 6:5–6). Yet, here the City is openly worshiping and asking residents to do the same. By ignoring Christ's word, the City denigrates the bible's text as mere ink on paper rather than the holy command Christians take it be. That cheapens Christianity.

An official city-sponsored event promoting Christian prayer that is "a gathering of Christian believers" unnecessarily excludes the religiously unaffiliated (atheists, agnostics and "nothing in particulars"), who are the fastest-growing segment of the U.S. population by religious identification, now making up three-in-ten Americans.² We also note that Vicksburg is home to the Islamic Center of Vicksburg, one of the few mosques in Mississippi, whose members are also excluded by this event.³ This Christian-only event "sends the ancillary message to . . . nonadherents 'that they are outsiders, not full members of the political community, and an accompanying message to adherents that they are insiders, favored members of the political community.'" *Santa Fe Indep. Sch. Dist. v. Doe*, 530 U.S. 290, 309–10 (2000) (quoting *Lynch v. Donnelly*, 465 U.S. at 668 (O'Connor, J., concurring)).

² Gregory A. Smith, *Religious 'Nones' in America: Who They Are and What They Believe*, Pew Research Center, Jan. 24, 2024, <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2024/01/24/religious-nones-in-america-who-they-are-and-what-they-believe/>.

³ <https://prayersconnect.com/mosques/84082439-islamic-center-of-vicksburg-vicksburg-mississippi-united-states>.

A city government cannot host a Christian event to “save souls.” In order to respect both the First Amendment and the community’s religious and nonreligious diversity, we ask that the city end its sponsorship and promotion of this Christian event and refrain from promoting religious events going forward. Please respond in writing with the steps the city is taking to address this matter so that we may inform our complainant. Thank you for your time and attention.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Hirsh M Joshi".

Hirsh M. Joshi
Patrick O'Reiley Legal Fellow
Freedom From Religion Foundation

Enclosure

CC: Alderman Alex J. Monsour via email at southward@vicksburg.org

JAN 1, 2025 | DOWNTOWN VICKSBURG

A CITY UNITED

WHEN: JANUARY 1, 2025 | 6 - 7:30PM

WHERE: WASHINGTON ST. PARK

**WHAT: A GATHERING OF CHRISTIAN
BELIEVERS TO COVER OUR CITY IN
PRAYER AND WORSHIP**

SPONSORED BY:

