

FREEDOM FROM RELIGION *foundation*

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June 10, 2026

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Darrell Frye
Chair
Randolph County Board of Commissioners
725 McDowell Road
Asheboro, NC 27205

Re: Religious Entanglement in Randolph County

Dear Chairman Frye and Randolph County Board of Commissioners:

I am writing on behalf of the Freedom From Religion Foundation (FFRF) regarding a constitutional violation occurring in Randolph County. As you may recall, FFRF is a national nonprofit organization with over 41,000 members across the country, including nearly 1,000 members and a 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 community member informed us that on December 8, 2025, the Board of Commissioners voted to dissolve the entire Library Board of Trustees in response to their decision to keep the book “Call Me Max” in the children’s section.

In a video documenting the December 8th Board meeting, Commissioner Kidd stated that, “What is important to me is the souls of our children.”¹ We understand that the Board intends to create new Library Board of Trustees policies that would better “represent the values of Randolph County” by excluding books like “Call Me Max.”

The community member also informed us that the Board opens every meeting with a Christian prayer. The most recent meeting on June 1, 2026 began with a Christian prayer led by Chaplain Kevin Walton:

“Heavenly Father, thank you for this day. Lord, I pray that you bless and watch over this meeting and I do pray that the truth will be done. Lord, and I ask all of these things in the mighty name of Jesus Christ, Amen.”²

It is our understanding that the Randolph County Board of Commissioners meetings routinely begin with a Christian prayer where attendees are asked to “please stand and remove your hats.”³ During the August 4, 2025, Board meeting, Chaplain Bill Hatfield led the audience in prayer and said:

“Thank you for our country. The Lord is always here when I say the pledge of allegiance, and I encourage us to do this as well. Not only to make it a pledge, but make it a prayer...Oh we pray for our country and

¹ *Commissioners debate dissolving the Randolph County Library Board of Trustees 12/8/2025*, at 11:01-22:34 (YouTube, Dec. 9, 2025), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BdqMMZSjh8Y>.

² *Randolph County Board of Commissioners - June 1, 2026*, at 01:25 (YouTube, June 1, 2026) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YMKRNZrdyhs>.

³ *Id.* at 01:36.

pray for our county. We love you Lord, we thank you, we give you praise again. Jesus Christ our lord. Amen.”⁴

Our complainant expressed their concerns that Christianity has become entangled with the local government in Randolph County and feels that non-Christians are denied equal access by the city leaders.

It is a violation of the Establishment Clause for the Board to entangle one specific religion with the government. We ask the Board to refrain from opening Board meetings with solely Christian prayer and cease all other government sponsored religious activities to ensure that the Randolph County community is free from religious proselytization. We also ask the Board to ensure its new Library Board policies reflect a neutral, secular viewpoint.

The First Amendment’s Establishment Clause requires government neutrality between religions, and between religion and nonreligion. *See McCreary v. ACLU 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). By using blatantly religious language to justify the dissolution of the Library Board of Trustees and the Board’s continued inclusion of solely Christian prayer in meetings, the Board displays unconstitutional favoritism towards Christianity over all other faiths, and religion over non religion.

Routine Christian prayer during board meetings is unconstitutional

Prayer at government meetings is unnecessary, inappropriate, and divisive. The best solution is to discontinue invocations altogether. All Board members and meeting attendees are of course free to pray privately or to worship on their own time in their own way. However, Board members do not need to worship on taxpayers’ time. The Board ought not to lend its power and prestige to religion, especially a single religion, by scheduling, hosting or conducting governmental prayers. Citizens, including Randolph County’s nonreligious citizens, are compelled to come before the Board and its committees on important civic matters, to seek licenses and permits and to participate in important decisions affecting their livelihoods, property, children, and quality of life.

Exclusively Christian opening prayer excludes those community members who belong to the thirty-eight percent of Americans who are non-Christians, including the nearly one in three Americans who are now religiously unaffiliated.⁵ It is coercive, embarrassing and intimidating for nonreligious citizens to be required to make a public showing of their nonbelief (by not rising or praying) or else to display deference or obeisance toward a religious sentiment in which they do not believe, but which their County Commissioners clearly do. Government-sponsored prayer “has the improper effect of coercing those present to participate in an act of religious worship.” *Santa Fe Indep. Sch. Dist. v. Doe*, 530 U.S. 290, 312 (2000). Beginning with Christian prayers shows clear favoritism for Christianity over all other religious and nonreligious backgrounds.

As you may be aware, the Supreme Court addressed government prayer in *Town of Greece, N.Y. v. Galloway*. 134 S. Ct. 1811 (2014). While the Court in *Town of Greece* approved opening a neutral forum for invocations, it also expressed concerns about Council members asking meeting attendees to rise, participate in, or otherwise show deference to the invocations. The Court specified in *Town of Greece* that its “analysis would be different if town board members directed the public to participate in the prayers . . . Although board members themselves stood, bowed their heads, or made the sign of the cross during the prayer, they at no point solicited similar gestures by the public.” *Town of Greece*, 134 S. Ct. at 1826. Here, the Board begins each meeting by asking the attendees to stand up and remove their hats, thereby soliciting public participation in the prayer. This requirement causes unnecessary religious pressure and discomfort for non-Christian participants, thus violating the Establishment clause.

FFRF won a suit in the Fourth Circuit against the City of Parkersburg, West Virginia over the city council’s practice of opening each meeting with a recitation of the Lord’s Prayer. *Cobranchi v. City of Parkersburg*, Civil Action 2:18-cv-01198 (S.D.W. Va. May. 17, 2022). The Court permanently enjoined the city council from opening its

⁴ *Randolph County Board of Commissioners - August 4, 2025*, at 02:10 (YouTube, August 4, 2025) https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UV1yd2_NNFA.

⁵ Gregory A. Smith, *Religious ‘Nones’ in America: Who They Are and What They Believe*, Pew Research Center, Jan. 24, 2024.

meetings with the Lord's Prayer, declaring the practice unconstitutional. *Id.* The Court found that the city council ran afoul of the Establishment Clause when it "wrapped itself in a single faith." *Id.* at ¶ 28. The Court noted several key factors that led to its conclusion that the prayer practice was unconstitutional, including "unduly heightened risk of coercion by the state by virtue of the government identity of the prayer-givers acting in unison, the invariable nature of the sectarian prayer" and "the implicit and sometimes express invitation to the public in attendance to join in, all in the relative intimacy of a local government setting." *Id.* Here, the Board's practice of including solely Christian prayer also "wraps" Randolph County Board of Commissioners "in a single faith."

Observing a strict separation of church and state offends nobody, includes everybody, and honors the First Amendment. Christians who know their bible are familiar with the biblical injunction of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount, condemning public prayer as hypocrisy: "And when thou prayest, thou shalt not be as the hypocrites are: for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and in the corners of the streets, that they may be seen of men. Verily I say unto you, They have their reward. But thou, when thou prayest, enter into thy closet, and when thou hast shut the door, pray to thy Father which is in secret; and thy Father which seeth in secret shall reward thee openly." Matthew 6:5-6.

Religion should not be the underlying reason for Library Board policies

FFRF advocates, above all, for freedom of thought. We oppose the concept of banning books from libraries. We believe that there is no true freedom of thought, conscience or even religion, unless our government and its public schools are free from religion and its control over thought. We are deeply familiar with the haunting history of censorship—from the Catholic Church's Index Librorum Prohibitorum, to the Comstock laws, to the Nazi book burnings, the attacks on authors such as Charles Darwin and Salman Rushdie, and the murders of Bangladeshi bloggers such as Avijit Roy. Heinrich Heine famously observed, "Where they burn books, they will end in burning human beings." History never looks kindly on book censors and burners.

The best solution is to leave a diversity of viewpoints in libraries, and trust that families will explore complex topics in the ways their beliefs dictate. As the Board must know, parents, not the government, have the constitutional right to guide their children's religious or nonreligious upbringing.

In order to demonstrate your respect for the diverse range of religious and nonreligious residents living in Randolph County, we urge you to concentrate on civil matters and leave religion to the private conscience of each individual by ending the practice of hosting prayers at meetings and ensuring Library Board policies are secular. Please inform us in writing of the steps you are taking to resolve this matter so that we may inform the community member who contacted us. Thank you for your time and attention.

Sincerely,



Charlotte R. Gude
Patrick O'Reiley Legal Fellow
Freedom From Religion Foundation

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