

FREEDOM FROM RELIGION *foundation*

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July 20, 2026

SENT VIA EMAIL & U.S. MAIL: sheriffadkinson@waltonso.org

Sheriff Michael A. Adkinson, Jr.
Walton County Sheriff's Office
10 Sheriff Cir.
DeFuniak Springs, FL 32433

Re: Unconstitutional promotion of religion

Dear Sheriff Adkinson:

I am writing on behalf of the Freedom From Religion Foundation (FFRF) regarding a constitutional violation involving the Walton County Sheriff's Office. FFRF is a national nonprofit organization with over 41,000 members across the country, including nearly 2,000 members in Florida and a chapter, the Central Florida Freethought Community. Our purposes are to protect the constitutional principle of separation between state and church, and to educate the public on matters relating to nontheism.

[An article](#) published by the Christian Broadcasting Network reported that the Walton County Sheriff's Office partnered with First Apostolic Church of DeFuniak Springs and New Life Church of Santa Rosa Beach with the apparent purpose of encouraging inmates at Walton County Jail to convert to Christianity and baptizing them. According to the July 15, 2026 article, at Walton County Jail 69 inmates were baptized in the coordinated "mass baptisms" organized by the Sheriff's Office and the two churches.¹ According to the article, these churches have partnered to give mass baptisms at other jails before, indicating that the Sheriff's Office was aware of the intentions of the churches. The baptisms appear to have taken place on jail property. Inmates can be seen being baptized by Walton County Sheriff's Office employees. Please see the enclosed screenshots.

Per the article, the Sheriff's Office's Public Information Officer, Corey Dobridnia, told reporters that part of the Office's "mantra" is "trying to make men and women who are incarcerated in our jail better people, **and introducing them to the Lord. And then being baptized is sort of a rebirth for them.**"

In order to comply with the First Amendment, we ask that the Sheriff's Office and Walton County Jail cease unconstitutionally promoting religion and encouraging or coercing inmates to participate in religious exercise or convert. While the Sheriff's Office may reasonably accommodate inmates' religious practices, it may not favor religion over nonreligion.

The First Amendment's Establishment Clause prohibits the government from taking action that promotes, favors, or coerces individuals to participate in religion. The First Amendment mandates government neutrality between religions, and between religion and nonreligion. *McCreary Cnty., Ky. v. ACLU of Ky.*, 545 U.S. 844, 860 (2005). It is commendable for the Sheriff's Office to facilitate inmates freely exercising their chosen religious beliefs, but it is coercive for the Sheriff's Office to participate in, or promote religion and religious exercises, such as baptisms, in ways that make it appear the government sponsors the religious exercise and is encouraging inmates to convert to Christianity. By organizing and hosting

¹ Bri Aunna Nance, "We've Seen Incredible Revival": Nearly 70 Inmates Transformed by the Power of God (July 15, 2026), <https://cbn.com/news/us/weve-seen-incredible-revival-nearly-70-inmates-transformed-power-god>.

inmate baptisms the Sheriff's Office is unconstitutionally favoring religion over nonreligion, and Christianity over all other faiths.

Further, a correctional facility is an inherently coercive environment and inmates and detainees are literally a captive audience. When the Sheriff's Office entangles itself with religion and makes it clear that it's encouraging inmates to convert to Christianity, inmates will no doubt feel pressured to convert and participate in religious activities in order to be seen as cooperative and well behaved. Inmates and detainees who are aware of the Sheriff's Office's promotion of Christianity will not genuinely feel free to refuse to participate in its religious activities. This is constitutionally impermissible.

We hope you agree that law enforcement must be even-handed and avoid any appearance of bias toward some citizens, and hostility toward others. The Sheriff's Office's employees can practice their personal religion any way they wish when acting in their personal capacities. However, they are not permitted to use the machinery of the government, and taxpayer money, to promote their personal religion to inmates or the wider community. The Sheriff's Office's promotion of religion and conversion to Christianity needlessly marginalizes those who are among the 38 percent of Americans who are non-Christians, including the nearly one in three adult Americans who are religiously unaffiliated.²

In order to comply with the First Amendment and to protect the rights of all inmates held in Walton County Jail, we ask that the Walton County Sheriff's Office immediately cease encouraging or coercing inmates to convert to Christianity and cease promoting religion within the detention facility. Please inform us in writing of the steps being taken to address this matter.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Samantha F. Lawrence". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Samantha" being more prominent and the last name "Lawrence" following in a similar style.

Samantha F. Lawrence
Staff Attorney
Freedom From Religion Foundation

SFL:trm

Enclosures

² Pew Research Center (2024), <http://bit.ly/3W6Cl3m>.



