

FREEDOM FROM RELIGION *foundation*

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

August 31, 2026

SENT VIA U.S. MAIL & EMAIL: mtvmayor@mountvernonohio.org

The Honorable Matthew T. Starr
Mayor of Mount Vernon
40 Public Square
Mount Vernon, OH 43050-3241

Re: Mayor's Prayer Breakfast

Dear Mayor Starr:

I am writing on behalf of the Freedom From Religion Foundation (FFRF) regarding a constitutional concern about the Mayor's Prayer Breakfast. FFRF is a national nonprofit organization with over 41,000 members nationwide, including more than 1,000 members and multiple chapters in Ohio. 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 Mount Vernon resident reports that you are once again participating in a Mayor's Prayer breakfast hosted by the Mount Vernon Association of Police Chaplains. Please see the enclosed screenshot of a digital flyer advertising the event. It's our understanding that you've been participating in this annual Mayor's Prayer Breakfast since at least 2022.

While you are free to participate in religious events and promote your personal religious beliefs in your personal capacity, we ask that you cease using your position as mayor to promote religion.

The First Amendment requires "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). Your participation in your official capacity sends the message that you, as mayor, prefer those citizens who are religious and engage in prayer over those who do not.

As you are aware, you represent a diverse population that consists of religious as well as nonreligious community members. A "prayer breakfast," no matter how well intentioned, does not truly welcome or represent community members who do not believe in prayer as well as religious community members who do not support public prayer or government entanglement with religion. Events like the Mayor's Prayer Breakfast needlessly marginalize community

members who are among the 38 percent of Americans who are non-Christians, including the nearly one in three adult Americans who are religiously unaffiliated.¹

Out of respect for the First Amendment and the Mount Vernon community's religious diversity, we ask that you cease participating in the Mayor's Prayer Breakfast and any other religious events going forward. Please respond in writing with the steps being taken to address this matter so that we may inform the community member who contacted us.

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

Enclosure

¹ Pew Research Center (2024), <http://bit.ly/3W6Cl3m>.

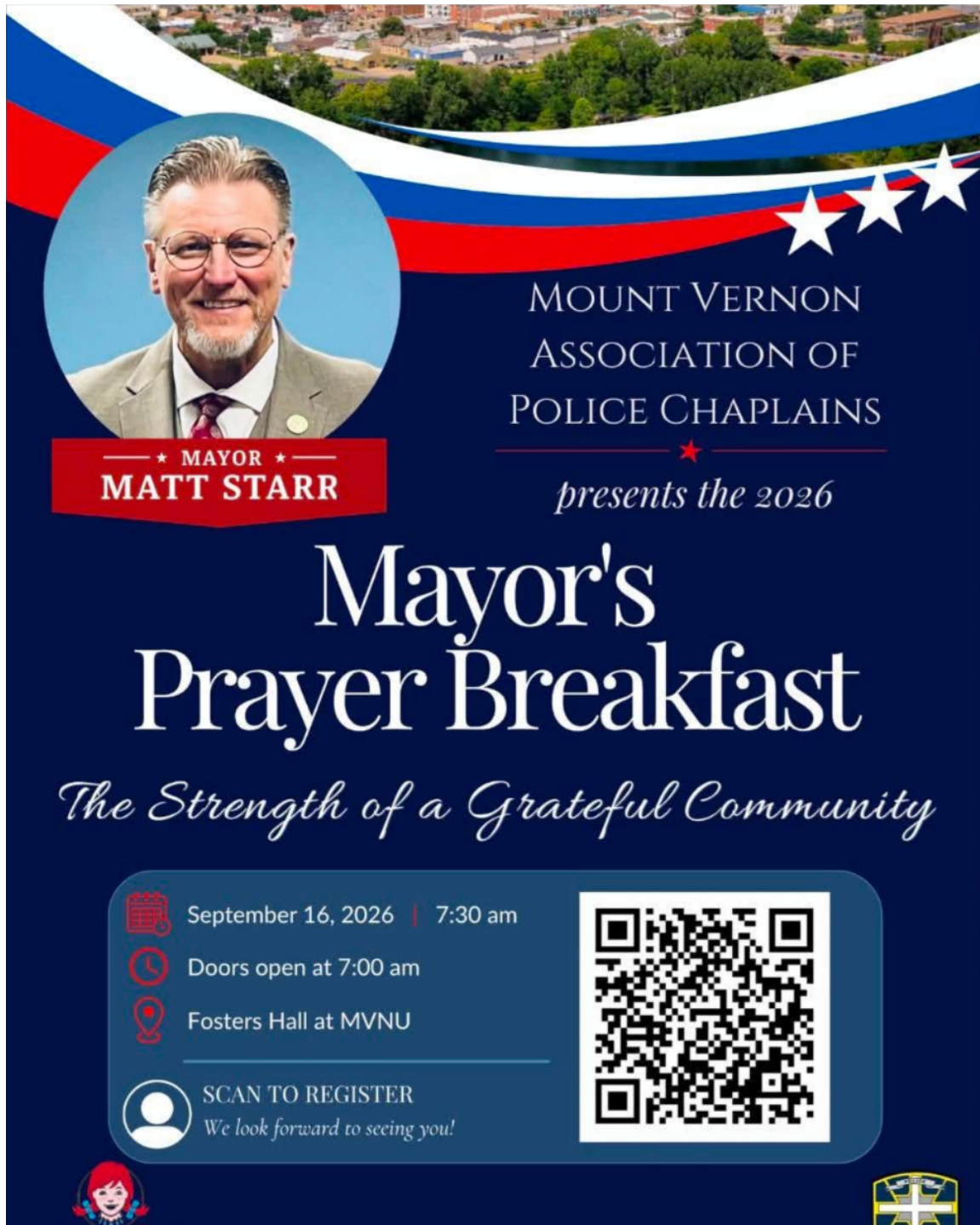


Mount Vernon Association of Poli...

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It's almost here. What a great event!





— ★ MAYOR ★ —
MATT STARR

MOUNT VERNON
ASSOCIATION OF
POLICE CHAPLAINS

presents the 2026

Mayor's Prayer Breakfast

The Strength of a Grateful Community

September 16, 2026 | 7:30 am

Doors open at 7:00 am

Fosters Hall at MVNU

SCAN TO REGISTER

We look forward to seeing you!