

FREEDOM FROM RELIGION *foundation*

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

October 9, 2026

**SENT VIA EMAIL & U.S. MAIL: mayor@ottumwa.us, hoffmanb@ottumwa.us,
gallowayc@ottumwa.us, reidd@ottumwa.us, dupreyj@ottumwa.us, cavinessk@ottumwa.us**

The Honorable Benjamin Foote
Mayor
Ottumwa City Council
105 E. Third St.
Ottumwa, IA 52501

Re: Discriminatory treatment of Satanic invocation and request to discontinue invocations

Dear Mayor Foote and City Council members:

I am writing on behalf of the Freedom From Religion Foundation (FFRF) to raise serious concerns regarding the Council's discriminatory response to a non-Christian invocation at its October 6, 2026, meeting and to urge the Council to discontinue its divisive practice of opening meetings with religious invocations. FFRF is a national nonprofit organization with more than 40,000 members across the country, including members in Iowa. Our purposes are to protect the constitutional principle of separation between state and church and to educate the public on matters relating to nontheism.

We understand that on October 6, former City Council member Matt Dalbey, a member of the Satanic Temple of Iowa, delivered an invocation pursuant to the Council's invocation policy, adopted in January 2026.¹ Dalbey's invocation encouraged those present to embrace knowledge, reason, truth, individual autonomy, and freedom from arbitrary authority. He called upon the Council to judge individuals by their actions rather than their adherence to religious or social conventions. His invocation included references to the "Luciferian impulse" and concluded with "Hail Satan."

Despite the invocation being delivered in accordance with the Council's established policy, New Life Center Pastor Rick Bick subsequently approached the microphone without being recognized and demanded that the Council "reverse the curse" he claimed Dalbey had placed upon the city. Bick insisted that Dalbey's invocation was unwelcome and called for an immediate religious response.

Council member Cara Galloway appropriately attempted to maintain order, explaining that Bick could express his concerns during the public comment portion of the meeting. Unfortunately, Mayor Foote overruled her and instead interrupted the Council's proceedings to accommodate Bick's objection, initially calling for a 30-second "time of prayer" before changing the request to a "moment of silence."

This response was inappropriate and raises serious constitutional concerns. By interrupting official proceedings to accommodate a Christian pastor's demand to counteract a disfavored religious invocation, the Council sent the unmistakable message that Dalbey's beliefs were less deserving of respect than those of Christian residents. Government officials cannot invite citizens of diverse religious and nonreligious

¹ <https://bit.ly/3TJPORi>.

perspectives to deliver invocations and then permit one religious group to effectively veto or “correct” an invocation simply because it does not conform to their preferred theology.

The Council compounded these concerns when Mayor Foote subsequently told Fox News Digital:²

This is not a reflection of our community. As the mayor of my hometown in Iowa, I know the people of Ottumwa, and the invocation read at the start of Tuesday’s meeting does not represent the faith or the values of families who call this city home.

This statement is deeply troubling. Dalbey is a member of the Ottumwa community and a former elected representative of its residents. His beliefs, like those of every other resident, are entitled to equal respect from his government. The mayor does not speak for the religious beliefs of every Ottumwa resident, nor does he have the authority to declare that minority religious or nonreligious perspectives fall outside the community’s values.

The First Amendment does not permit the government to define its community according to the beliefs of its religious majority or to treat minority beliefs as unwelcome simply because they are unpopular.

We recognize that the City subsequently issued a statement acknowledging that it cannot discriminate among invocation speakers and that the City does not necessarily endorse the religious messages delivered at its meetings.³ We appreciate this acknowledgement. However, the Council’s actual conduct on October 6, particularly its accommodation of a demand to counteract Dalbey’s invocation, undermines that stated commitment to religious neutrality.

If the Board insists on continuing to host prayers at public meetings, it must not discriminate against any person delivering an invocation on the basis of religion. Satanic invocations must be treated the same as Christian prayers. The Supreme Court addressed the issue of legislative prayer in *Town of Greece v. Galloway*, 134 S. Ct. 1811 (2014). The Court identified several important elements in the town’s invocation practice that, taken together, ensured that the practice did not impermissibly advance one religion over others or promote religion over nonreligion. Over time, the town of Greece “compiled a list of willing ‘board chaplains’ who had accepted invitations and agreed to return in the future.” *Id.* at 1816. Additionally, the town of Greece “at no point excluded or denied an opportunity to a would-be prayer giver.” *Id.*

The Court made clear that legislative prayer does not give government officials license to advance one faith at the expense of others. Rather, the constitutional permissibility of such practices depends in significant part on their administration without discrimination. The fact that Greece “represented that it would welcome a prayer by any minister or layman who wished to give one” was a critical factor in the Court’s conclusion that the practice in *Galloway* did not violate the Constitution. *Id.* at 1824. The Court clearly stated that the purpose of legislative invocations must be inclusive: “These ceremonial prayers strive for the idea that people of many faiths may be united in a community of tolerance and devotion.” *Id.* at 1823. The Supreme Court’s decision would have been different had the town used the prayer opportunity to discriminate against minority religions. The Court made clear that governmental bodies must “maintain[] a policy of nondiscrimination” with respect to invocation speakers and must not act with “aversion or bias . . . against minority faiths.” *Id.* at 1824.

² <https://bit.ly/4hVd32J>.

³ <https://www.facebook.com/share/p/1CbBAArgCZ7>.

The Council's response to Dalbey's invocation runs directly contrary to these principles. While a moment of silence is not inherently unconstitutional, its context and purpose matter. Here, the mayor called for the moment of silence immediately after a Christian pastor demanded that the Council reverse a supposedly Satanic curse. Indeed, the mayor initially described the accommodation as a "time of prayer." Under these circumstances, the Council's action reasonably conveyed that the government was accommodating a Christian objection to an otherwise permissible minority religious invocation.

We seriously doubt that the Council would have similarly interrupted its proceedings to accommodate a Satanist, atheist, or other non-Christian who demanded an opportunity to counteract a Christian invocation. The Constitution does not permit government officials to administer a religious invocation practice in a manner that favors Christianity or treats minority beliefs as requiring correction.

This incident illustrates precisely why FFRF has long urged government bodies to discontinue invocations altogether. Prayer at government meetings is unnecessary, inappropriate, and divisive. Council members are free to pray privately or worship on their own time, in their own way. They do not need to conduct religious exercises on taxpayers' time.

Citizens attend Council meetings to participate in decisions affecting their livelihoods, property, families, and community. They should not have to confront government-sponsored religious exercises or feel like outsiders in their own city because they do not share the religious beliefs of elected officials or other residents.

The Council's invocation policy itself raises concerns. Resolution No. 18-2026 describes invocations as an opportunity to "include our Creator into our decision making."⁴ This language presumes a shared belief in a creator and suggests that the Council's official decision-making process should incorporate religious belief. Such language is particularly inappropriate for a government body that purports to welcome religious and nonreligious participants equally.

Council member Galloway correctly recognized these concerns when the invocation policy was initially considered. As she explained following the October 6 incident:⁵

Opening with an invocation means allowing viewpoints that may not reflect our own. And responding to someone's invocation is a slippery slope to putting a financial liability on the taxpayers and allowing for others to object or respond.

The best solution is simple: End the invocation practice entirely. The Council can begin its meetings with a secular moment of reflection, a statement celebrating shared civic responsibilities, or simply proceed directly to the business of governing. None of these alternatives would privilege religion over nonreligion or invite the kind of divisive confrontation that occurred on October 6.

If the Council nevertheless insists on continuing its invocation practice, it must ensure that all invocation speakers are treated equally, regardless of their religious beliefs or lack thereof. The Council must not permit individuals to disrupt proceedings or provide special opportunities for corrective religious

⁴ <https://bit.ly/3TOX8eo>.

⁵ <https://www.fox10phoenix.com/news/iowa-city-council-opens-meeting-hail-satan-satanic-prayer>.

exercises in response to invocations they find objectionable. It must also refrain from official statements suggesting that minority religious perspectives do not represent the values of the community.

We also urge the Council to recognize that the controversy surrounding Dalbey's invocation was not caused by his participation. It was the predictable consequence of introducing religious exercises into a governmental setting and then failing to treat an unpopular religious viewpoint with the same respect afforded to more familiar beliefs.

Please inform us in writing of the steps the Council intends to take to address these concerns and prevent similar incidents in the future. Thank you for your time and attention to this matter.

Sincerely,

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

Christopher Line
Legal Counsel
Freedom From Religion Foundation