FREEDOM FROM RELIGION *foundation*

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November 5, 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: Second disruption of Satanic invocation demonstrates need to discontinue invocations

Dear Mayor Foote and City Council members:

I am writing on behalf of the Freedom From Religion Foundation (FFRF) to follow up on our October 9, 2026, letter regarding the Council's discriminatory response to a Satanic invocation and our request that the Council discontinue its divisive practice of opening meetings with religious invocations. Unfortunately, the events at the Council's November 3 meeting have only reinforced our concerns and demonstrated precisely why this practice should end.

For the second consecutive month, former Council member Matt Dalbey, a member of the Satanic Temple of Iowa, attempted to deliver an invocation pursuant to the Council's established policy.[1] And for the second consecutive month, a Christian objector disrupted the proceedings because he could not tolerate hearing a religious perspective different from his own.

Dalbey's November 3 invocation emphasized religious liberty, freedom of expression, individual dignity, and respect for differing beliefs.[2] He urged those assembled to recognize that all individuals must remain free to develop and express their convictions without coercion, declaring that no one should claim the authority to constrain another person's freedom of thought.

Yet when Dalbey concluded his invocation with "Hail Satan," Jeremy Herrell began loudly reciting the Lord's Prayer in an apparent attempt to drown him out. Herrell continued his disruption as Council members and city staff looked on, until he was ultimately escorted from the chambers by police.

It is our understanding that this incident occurred despite the Council having ample warning that Dalbey's return might provoke further controversy. We understand that protesters gathered outside City Hall, additional security personnel were present, and the City reportedly prepared for potential disturbances. Nevertheless, Dalbey was again subjected to an interruption of his lawful participation in the Council's invocation practice.

We appreciate that Herrell was ultimately removed from the chambers. However, the Council should have promptly intervened to stop the disruption and made clear that Dalbey was entitled to deliver his

[1] https://bit.ly/3V8BjXK.
[2] https://www.friendlyatheist.com/p/once-again-christian-zealot-interrupts.

invocation without interference. The Council's failure to immediately address the interruption is particularly concerning given the events of October 6, when Mayor Foote accommodated a Christian pastor's demand to counteract Dalbey's invocation by calling for a moment of silence.

The pattern is now unmistakable: when a Christian prayer is delivered, the Council proceeds with its business. When a Satanic invocation is delivered, Christian objectors interrupt the proceedings, demand religious accommodation, and attempt to prevent the speaker from being heard, while the Council allows the interruption. The Council cannot continue inviting religious expression into its official meetings while failing to ensure that minority religious perspectives receive the same protection and respect afforded to Christianity.

As we explained in our October 9 letter, the Supreme Court's decision in *Town of Greece v. Galloway*, 134 S. Ct. 1811 (2014), makes clear that legislative invocation practices must be administered without discrimination. The Court emphasized that government bodies must maintain a policy of nondiscrimination and must not demonstrate "aversion or bias" against minority faiths. *Id.* at 1824.

The Council's obligation to administer its policy neutrally does not end when an invocation speaker approaches the podium. If the City chooses to provide a forum for religious invocations, it must administer that forum fairly and protect speakers from disruptions intended to suppress disfavored religious viewpoints. Religious objectors have every right to disagree with Dalbey's beliefs, decline to participate in his invocation, or express their opposition during an appropriate public comment period. They do not have a right to commandeer the Council's proceedings to silence him.

We are also concerned by reports that some residents and religious leaders have urged the Council to disqualify Dalbey from future invocations based on the content of his remarks. Such demands underscore the constitutional difficulties inherent in the Council's policy. Government officials must not interpret ostensibly neutral invocation rules in a manner that disfavors minority religious viewpoints merely because their language or symbolism offends members of the religious majority.

If the Council wishes to continue hosting invocations, it must accept that speakers may express beliefs that some elected officials or residents find objectionable. That is the unavoidable consequence of opening an official government forum to religious expression.

The better solution is to stop hosting religious invocations altogether.

The Council has now experienced two consecutive meetings overshadowed by religious controversy. What should have been routine proceedings devoted to the business of governing instead became confrontations over religious beliefs. The City has devoted additional security resources, attracted protests, and repeatedly been forced to address disputes that would not exist but for its decision to incorporate religious exercises into official meetings. None of this serves the residents of Ottumwa.

Citizens attend Council meetings because they care about their community and the decisions their elected representatives make. They should not have to navigate religious disputes, endure disruptions, or wonder whether their own beliefs will be treated as unwelcome by their government.

Council members are free to pray privately, attend religious services, and practice their faith however they choose. But they were elected to conduct the business of the City, not to provide a government platform for competing religious exercises.

We were encouraged to learn that Council member Cara Galloway again urged her colleagues to replace invocations with a moment of silence. Her proposal offers a straightforward, inclusive alternative that would respect every resident's freedom of conscience while allowing the Council to focus on its responsibilities.

We renew our request that the Council discontinue the practice of opening meetings with religious invocations.

If the Council nevertheless insists on retaining its invocation policy, it must, at minimum, take meaningful steps to ensure that speakers of all religious and nonreligious perspectives are treated equally, that disruptions are promptly addressed, and that no speaker is excluded or penalized because of hostility toward their beliefs.

The residents of Ottumwa deserve a government focused on serving their community, not refereeing religious disputes. The simplest way to accomplish that is to leave prayer to individuals and religious institutions and leave governing to the City Council.

Thank you for your time and attention to this matter.

Sincerely,



Christopher Line
Legal Counsel
Freedom From Religion Foundation