



CONGRESSIONAL PRAYER CAUCUS FOUNDATION

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SENT VIA EMAIL & U.S. MAIL

August 15, 2018

The Honorable Jose A. Alvarez
City Hall
101 Church Street
Kissimmee, FL 34741
jaalvarez@kissimmee.org

Re: Mayoral Prayer Proclamation

Dear Mayor Alvarez:

I have the honor of serving as the Executive Director of the Congressional Prayer Caucus Foundation. The Foundation serves nearly 100 members of Congress who are part of the Congressional Prayer Caucus (the names of those members of Congress who serve on the Congressional Prayer Advisory Team are listed on the left).

In addition, the Foundation serves a network of Legislative Prayer Caucuses in over 30 states (including Florida), which have over 1,000 state senators and state representatives as members. These leaders are working together to preserve the integrity of our founding principles and to protect First Amendment rights for all.

We recently learned from news reports that the co-presidents of the Freedom from Religion Foundation ("FFRF") wrote you a letter objecting to a recent proclamation you signed and the scheduling of a prayer service for August 21. In their letter, the FFRF co-presidents did not quote your proclamation, which we think important to fully understand it and therefore present it here:

"WHEREAS, members of the City of Kissimmee are celebrating this hope for the City with 40 days of prayer for peace, justice, love and solidarity between men and women of all faiths, and invite all residents to join them in this celebration by praying, doing acts of kindness, watching over the safety of neighbors and fellow citizens, volunteering and uniting to help those in need to make our City the best place to live. "

To paraphrase, the City Commission members and you, the Mayor of Kissimmee, made a commitment to pray for 40 days for peace, justice, love and solidarity between all people, of whatever gender or faith. In the proclamation, you asked the residents of Kissimmee to join you in this effort by praying, doing acts of kindness, showing love by watching out for the safety of others, and volunteering to help those in need. All of your requests are laudable. I have difficulty understanding how any reasonable person with a heart for community could object to the City's proclamation.

FFRF would be correct that the City's proclamation was unconstitutional if the City fined or arrested all those who refused to pray, or if the proclamation announced a new tax on all citizens to support the Christian churches in Kissimmee. Those actions would violate the Establishment Clause. Government officials inviting people to pray for their community is a time-honored tradition.

On the National Day of Prayer, many official government proclamations, prepared by paid government staff, cascade out of government offices -- from the White House all the way down to local city halls. They frequently are placed on public websites. From the earliest beginnings of this nation, we have honored the role of prayer and depended upon it in good times and bad.

President George Washington proclaimed a day of Thanksgiving so that all Americans would be called to honor God. Acting officially as the President, he issued a presidential proclamation asking all Americans to devote themselves "to the service of that great and glorious Being who is the beneficent author of all the good that was, that is, or that will be," to "unite in rendering unto Him our sincere and humble thanks for His kind care and protection of the people of this country previous to their becoming a nation," and "to pardon our national and other transgressions" This proclamation was printed by government printing presses and distributed by government employees, as were similar proclamations of other presidents, including John Adams and Abraham Lincoln. During the depths of the greatest crisis our nation experienced, Lincoln implored American citizens to confess their sins and seek God's mercy through prayer:

[I]t is the duty of nations as well as of men to own their dependence upon the overruling power of God, to confess their sins and transgressions in humble sorrow, yet with assured hope that genuine repentance will lead to mercy and pardon, and to recognize the sublime truth, announced in the Holy Scriptures and proven by all history, that those nations only are blessed whose God is the Lord. . . .

[Presidential Proclamations for Thanksgiving and Prayer can be found at <http://www.whatsoproudlywehail.org/curriculum/the-american-calendar/thanksgiving-day-proclamations-1789-present>]

Even Thomas Jefferson, whom the FFRF co-presidents claimed was against prayer proclamations (he was as President on federalism grounds), issued the following prayer proclamation as Governor of Virginia on November 11, 1779:

I do therefore by authority from the General Assembly issue this my proclamation, hereby appointing Thursday the 9th day of December next, a day of publick and solemn thanksgiving and prayer to Almighty God, earnestly recommending to all the good people of this commonwealth, to set apart the said day for those purposes, and to the several Ministers of religion to meet their respective societies thereon, to assist them in their prayers, edify them with their discourses, and generally to perform the sacred duties of their function, proper for the occasion.

Given under my hand and the seal of the commonwealth, at Williamsburg, this 11th day of November, in the year of our Lord, 1779, and in the fourth of the commonwealth.

THOMAS JEFFERSON

Just as publicizing these calls for prayer in government publications and using government offices has never been unconstitutional, using physical facilities for such purposes is not either, assuming they are open to others evenhandedly. Early on, Congress approved the use of the Capitol building for Christian worship services. Under President Thomas Jefferson, the Marine Band performed the music in them. Jefferson also approved Christian services on Sunday in his own Executive Branch buildings, at the Treasury Building, and at the War Office. By 1867, the First Congregational Church meeting in the Capitol had become America's largest Protestant church.

If we can be of any further service to you on this issue, feel free to contact us. We have First Amendment lawyers on staff who will work with you, without charge, if you need their services. We are encouraged that you know your rights under the U.S. Constitution and that you will not allow threats of this nature to rob your community of your rights and heritage. To protect our freedom, we must exercise that freedom.

May God bless you and your community.

Sincerely,



Lea Carawan
Executive Director
Congressional Prayer Caucus Foundation