



CONGRESSIONAL PRAYER CAUCUS FOUNDATION

September 3, 2019

Via email and U.S. mail – cantrell@house.ga.gov

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The Hon. Wes Cantrell
Georgia House of Representatives
401-H Coverdale Legislative Office Bldg.
18 Capitol Square SW
Atlanta, GA 30334

Re: Use of Public FB Page to Announce Religious Activities

Dear Representative Cantrell:

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 nearly 40 states, 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 an out-of-state organization, Freedom from Religion Foundation (FFRF), claimed that your posts on Facebook inviting people to a worship service on August 11 to pray over students and educators were unconstitutionally promoting religion. We are writing to thank you for using your First Amendment freedom in positive ways that encourage the citizens of Georgia.

Public officials in their official capacity speak about religion, quote Bible verses for various purposes, and offer prayers almost every day throughout our nation. Weekly when Congress is in session, the Congressional Prayer Caucus meets in Room 219 of the U.S. Capitol and prays. Before the U.S. House and Senate start their session, a publicly paid chaplain prays in the publicly supported Capitol asking for God's blessing. The same practice, though not normally with a publicly paid chaplain, occurs in most state capitols, as well as many cities, villages, and counties throughout our country.

Early on, Congress approved the use of the Capitol building for Christian worship services (without concern that it would violate the Establishment Clause because there was no coercion for anyone to attend). Under President Thomas Jefferson, the Marine Band performed the music in these services. 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.

On the National Day of Prayer, many official government proclamations, prepared by paid government staff, cascade out of government offices (including yours) -- 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.

On national holidays, inauguration days, and on other momentous occasions, presidents and governors have often presented the nation with a message from Scripture or have called upon the nation to seek God's favor, protection, and mercy. Nationally, it began with President George Washington, but such religious messages from public officials had long been part of American history since colonial times.

President Washington, as an example, proclaimed a day of Thanksgiving and urged all Americans 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 to our present day.

During the depths of the greatest crisis our nation experienced, President 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>]

Consider, too, the fact that Scripture is shared on some of our nation's most famous buildings. *Laus Deo*, meaning Praise be to God, is engraved upon the aluminum capstone of The Washington Monument, and that inside the monument, there are a number of memorial stones with scriptural engravings from the Old and New Testaments. Similarly, the walls of the Library of Congress have inscribed upon them Psalm 19:1 ("The heavens declare the glory of God, and the firmament showest His handiwork."); John 1:5 ("The light shineth in the darkness, and the darkness comprehendeth it not.");

and Micah 6:8 ("What does the Lord require of thee, but to do justly and love mercy and walk humbly with thy God?").

As *Zorach v. Clauson*, 343 U.S. 306, 313-314 (1952) stated, "We find no constitutional requirement which makes it necessary for government to be hostile to religion and to throw its weight against efforts to widen the effective scope of religious influence."

When such practices have long been part of our nation's history, and none have conflicted with the Establishment Clause, public officials who share religious messages through social media, whether associated with their official roles or not, surely have the same constitutional protections that have been provided to former government officials who have also shared religious messages in their official capacities. Nothing in the history of this nation has ever required elected public officials to separate their religious viewpoint from their public persona and official communications.

We recognize that groups such as the Freedom from Religion Foundation are constantly seeking to challenge all forms of religious expression in the public square and social media is a new frontier for them to explore. We urge you to resist the Foundation's attempt to silence you.

If we can be of any 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. To protect our freedom, we must exercise that freedom, and it is encouraging to see your leadership in our First Amendment freedoms.

May God bless you and the great State of Georgia,



Lea Carawan
Executive Director
Congressional Prayer Caucus Foundation
National Strategic Center

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