



Written by [Dave Bohon](#) on August 20, 2012

Atheist Group Attacks Schools in Tennessee, Mississippi Over Prayer at Athletic Events

The Freedom From Religion Foundation (FFRF), which has gained its reputation (and a tidy living for its employees) by suing school districts and municipalities over public prayer, has chosen schools in Mississippi and Tennessee as its latest targets. According to the [Mississippi Press](#) website, the Wisconsin-based atheist group has threatened all 151 Mississippi school superintendents with lawsuits if they allow prayer over public address systems during school football games. Last September the FFRF targeted Mississippi's Jackson County school district over its inclusion of prayer at athletic and other school events, prompting the district to redouble its efforts to protect the free-speech guarantees of its students.



The *Mississippi Press* reported that in its letter to the superintendents, the FFRF "cited a 2000 U.S. Supreme Court case involving Santa Fe schools in which judges ruled that a policy permitting student-led and student-initiated prayer at public high school football games and other public school-sponsored events violates the establishment clause of the First Amendment." The report noted that in an effort to address the continued FFRF assault on students in the state, the Mississippi House of Representatives passed the "Schoolchildren's Religious Liberties Act," which stipulates that each school district must treat a student's voluntary expression of a religious viewpoint in the same manner that it treats his or her expression of a secular opinion. In addition, students must have the freedom to organize prayer groups, Bible studies, faith-based clubs, and other religious gatherings, and each school must establish policies for public forums that allow student speakers to express religious viewpoints at school events. J.D Simpson, executive director of [First Priority](#), a Christian ministry that reaches out to students in public and private schools, said that the issue boils down to First Amendment freedoms. "You can take away the microphone," he said, "but you can't take away our mouth. We still have the freedom of speech."

According to one [local television station](#) reporting on the issue, a number of Mississippi school districts have substituted a moment of silence for official school-sponsored prayer at football games in the coming weeks. But some local pastors have taken the initiative to organize grassroots prayers at games. One of those pastors, Jim Burnett of Willow Pointe Church in Oak Grove, Mississippi, has organized with several other local pastors to have their congregations show up at games and recite the Lord's Prayer aloud. "It's very unsettling for society to make such threats and push God out of what He created," Burnett said. "We are running a spiritual fever. We are sick. We are just morally getting farther and farther away from where we started."

Meanwhile, in Tennessee the FFRF has targeted the University of Tennessee-Chattanooga (UTC), demanding that it put a halt to prayers before its home football games. According to the [Associated](#)



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[Press](#), the atheist group sent a letter May 15 to the university's chancellor, Roger Brown, warning the university that it must halt what FFRF spokesperson Annie Laurie Gaylor described as "unlawful university sponsorship of Christian prayer."

The [Chattanooga Times-Free Press](#) reported that following receipt of the letter, UTC officials decided to allow the prayers to continue, prompting a follow-up letter from Gaylor. "Gaylor's letter said a UTC football game attendee reported that the Fellowship of Christian Athletes delivered invocations at football games from the 2010 season until now," reported the Chattanooga paper. The FFRF's chief atheist informed the school: "It is our information and understanding that these prayers conclude with a reference to praying in the name of Jesus Christ."

After dutifully citing the supposed legal precedents for demanding that the school cease its reverence for God, Gaylor pulled out her own copy of Scripture, challenging the UTC officials that "those who are not impressed by constitutional dictates might perhaps open their Bibles and peruse the Sermon on the Mount." She then quoted Christ's words from Matthew 6:5-6, to try to build a case that praying in public equals the sin of hypocrisy.

The FFRF also recruited some home-grown UTC atheists in an attempt to browbeat the university officials into obeying the group's demands. "This is definitely an issue where religious minorities feel excluded because of the explicitly and only Christian nature of these prayers," insisted UTC student Bryan Barkley of the university's Secular Student Alliance, reading from the FFRF's own talking points for the case. "We encourage anyone to call and just let [the UTC officials] know how they feel."

A spokesman for UTC's Fellowship of Christian Athletes (FCA) insisted that it has provided the prayers for the school's football games at the invitation of the school. "We've never pushed that or to do that," said Jay Fowler, FCA's director at the university. "We're very thankful that we've had that opportunity. If the university continues to ask us to do [the prayers], we will be happy to."

According to the *Chattanooga Times-Free Press*, UTC officials are deciding how to respond to the FFRF's threats.



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