



Atheists Attack Prayer in Pennsylvania, Lose One in Tennessee

Atheists around Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, don't like it that officials with the Greencastle-Antrim School Board open their meetings in prayer, and they told them so at a school board meeting in mid-August, threatening to sue if it didn't stop. On August 16, following the recitation of the Lord's Prayer by board members and other meeting participants — a tradition that stretches back to at least the mid-1980s — members of Pennsylvania Non-Believers and American Atheists stepped forward to insist that the practice is somehow unconstitutional and must be halted immediately.



One of the complainers, Carl Silverman of the Non-Believers group, said that “he had been monitoring the meetings in person and on the school district website, and wanted the board to cease the prayer, listed on the agenda after the Call to Order,” reported the local [Record-Herald](#) newspaper. Silverman added that he had enlisted the help of the folks at the Freedom From Religion Foundation (FFRF), whom he said would be following up with their customary letter of threat.

“It is a clear constitutional violation and if they don't [stop] they're going to face legal action,” Silverman told the local [ABC news affiliate](#). “And they're going to lose because it's not a gray area anymore.”

The atheists based their demands on a decision by the Third Circuit of the U.S. Court of Appeals, which ruled in 2011 that prayers offered by southern Delaware's Indian River School District were unconstitutional — a ruling the U.S. Supreme Court let stand.

Ernest Perce, a spokesman for Harrisburg, Pennsylvania's American Atheists club, told the Greencastle board that its prayer tradition was “absolutely a violation of church and state. It is endorsing Christianity as the favored religion. I am ready to challenge this school to the furthest, on your prayers to a fictitious god.”

Silverman claimed he and his God-denying cohorts “were targeting four school districts in the region, which fell under the purview of the Third Circuit,” reported the *Record-Herald*. Silverman, who said that several Greencastle residents were “bothered” by the prayers, insisted that “people are afraid” to voice their displeasure over the practice. “They don't dare speak up.”

The paper noted that Silverman had been quite busy over the past several years in his efforts to sanitize the local public arena of Christian expression, taking credit “for blocking the Gideons from distributing Bibles to Waynesboro Area School District students, for making the Hagerstown Suns [semi-pro baseball team] stop giving discounts to fans who brought in a church bulletin, for getting crosses removed from Michaux State Forest, and for the removal of the Nativity scene in Chambersburg Memorial Square in 2009.”

As for the prayers by the Greencastle-Antrim school board, local officials said it is curious the



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secularists should suddenly raise a complaint after two decades of silence on the issue. “I’ve been attending board meetings for 25 years.” recalled the district’s superintendent, Greg Hoover, “and it has always been a practice of the school board to start the meeting with the Lord’s Prayer. No one has ever said a word.”

Perce informed the district officials that his group “respectfully requests a written notice indicating what steps the School Board will be taking to assure compliance with the Third Circuit Court and the Constitution of the United States of America.”

While the board members made no official response to the threat, others at the meeting did. According to the *Record-Herald*, Fred Young III, chairman of the Antrim Township Board of Supervisors, “stated at the school board meeting that Antrim also opened with prayer, and would continue to do so. People in the audience applauded. Perce responded that he would be watching the township, too. Young invited him to the meetings.”

Pearce took Young up on his offer, attending a Board of Supervisors meeting on August 28, where he warned the township officials to stop their prayers as well. Perce recalled that before joining the atheist faith, he was a Charismatic Christian minister, during which time he was careful never to violate the First Amendment’s so-called separation of church and state. “I never stepped into city chambers, city halls, and violated separation of church and state, because I cared about the other people that were in our community who were not followers of Jesus Christ,” he told the meeting. “Today as an atheist, I care more about separation of church and state than I ever have in my entire life.”

He implored the government officials to follow his example. “Honor the citizens that are in this township that are atheist, agnostics, or people who don’t worship Jesus Christ or God or Christianity,” he cried. “Do what’s right. It’s an act of absolute defiance against the citizens and the Constitution.” Others at the meeting, most of them local residents, disagreed. The local [Herald-Mail](#) newspaper quoted Greencastle resident Duane Kinzeras as declaring that “we are a God-fearing township and community,” with Greencastle business owner John Helfrick following up with the observation that “we need to pray to our God mightily in these days.” Similarly, local resident Carolyn Snyder testified that “there is one God and He is the God that we should be serving,” and local resident Ray Martin counseled that “we need to look for His wisdom and guidance in making decisions.”

Township Chairman Fred Young, after opening the meeting with a prayer he said was originally offered at the First Continental Congress in 1774, assured Perce and the others that he would continue with the tradition. “The courts have ruled that we are allowed to pray at our meeting,” he observed. “As long as I am chairman, I have no intention of stopping.”

Meanwhile, atheists have temporarily lost a bid to stop prayers by officials in a Tennessee community. A federal district judge ruled August 25 that officials in Hamilton County, Tennessee, can continue opening their meetings with public prayers as a lawsuit to have them stopped moves forward. The plaintiffs in the case, Tommy Coleman and Brandon Jones, filed their suit in June, claiming that prayers by the Hamilton County Commission promote the Christian faith and, thus, violate the First Amendment.

But U.S. District Judge Sandy Mattice ruled against a preliminary injunction to stop the prayers, saying that they were only unconstitutional if they seek to advance one faith over another.

Attorney Brett Harvey of the conservative legal advocacy group Alliance Defending Freedom applauded the ruling, noting that “since this nation’s founding, public meetings have been opened with prayer. There is no legal reason why Hamilton County’s citizens should be denied this freedom under the county’s policy.”

Harvey emphasized that prayer “has always been lawful in America, and the district court rightly



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declined to stop the county from including prayer at its meetings. Secularist groups might not be happy with this, but an invocation offered according to the dictates of the giver's conscience as part of a policy like Hamilton County's is not an establishment of religion."

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