

FREEDOM FROM RELIGION *foundation*

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April 30, 2021

SENT VIA EMAIL & U.S. MAIL: firstselectman@lebanontownhall.org

Kevin Cwikla
First Selectman
Board of Selectmen
Lebanon Town Hall
579 Exeter Road
Lebanon, CT 06249

Re: Sponsorship of National Day of Prayer event

Dear Selectman Cwikla and Board of Selectmen members:

I am writing on behalf of the Freedom From Religion Foundation (FFRF) regarding a constitutional concern with the Town of Lebanon's official sponsorship of a National Day of Prayer event. FFRF is a national nonprofit organization with more than 35,000 members across the country, including more than 300 members in Connecticut. Our purposes are to protect the constitutional principle of separation between state and church, and to educate the public on matters relating to nontheism.

A concerned Lebanon resident has reported that the Town is holding a National Day of Prayer event on May 6, 2021. Please see the enclosed screenshot, which shows the event is being held at Town Hall and that there is a Town email address listed as a contact for the event. The event is also listed on the Town's official calendar on its website.

As you may be aware, the National Day of Prayer is a sectarian event. It originated with the Reverend Billy Graham during his evangelical crusade in Washington, D.C. in 1952. He expressed an openly Christian purpose, seeking an annual prayer proclamation by the President because he wanted "the Lord Jesus Christ" to be recognized across the land. Subsequently, the National Day of Prayer Task Force was created to "communicate with every individual the need for personal repentance and prayer, mobilizing the Christian community to intercede for America and its leadership." The task force issues annual National Day of Prayer proclamations and submits them to the President, choosing a theme with supporting scripture from the bible. This year's theme is "Lord Pour Out Your Love, Life, and Liberty" based upon the New Testament verse 2 Corinthians 3:17.

In its announcement of the theme for 2021, the task force reveals that its idea of "love, life, and liberty" amounts to religious assimilation through proselytization. It writes:¹

¹ https://www.nationaldayofprayer.org/introducing_the_national_day_of_prayer_2021_theme.

Everyone needs to know that they were created by God and that He loved them so much He put His image in them and authored their value and purpose that no person can take away from them. As followers of Jesus we must come together in obedient unity and love that spreads God's glory across the earth. We must share this message of love and life, so that our neighbors, co-workers, classmates – so that all the world would come to repentance, that NONE may perish and know the LIBERTY, the freedom from the stain and shame of sin. Everyone can have freedom ring in their hearts, liberty that pronounces you, "NOT GUILTY" from the One true Judge. God alone knows your heart, knows everything about you; everything you have thought, done and had done against you. God alone is our judge and in Christ alone, we experience authentic, eternal LIBERTY.

The task force has a Statement of Faith that is exclusive to Christians, including that "The Holy Bible is the inspired, only, infallible, authoritative Word of The Living God" and a belief in "the spiritual unity of believers in our Lord Jesus Christ."²

We ask that the Town of Lebanon drop its support for this divisive, evangelistic vision for America and cease participating in or sponsoring National Day of Prayer events.

The Town of Lebanon's sponsorship of National Day of Prayer events poses constitutional concerns. The Establishment Clause of the First Amendment prohibits the government from organizing or endorsing a religious event. As the Supreme Court has put it, the Establishment Clause "mandates government neutrality between religion and religion, and between religion and nonreligion." *McCreary Cty., Ky. v. Am. Civil Liberties Union of Ky.*, 545 U.S. 844, 860 (2005); *Wallace v. Jaffree*, 472 U.S. 38, 53 (1985); *Epperson v. Ark.*, 393 U.S. 97, 104 (1968); *Everson v. Bd. of Educ. of Ewing*, 330 U.S. 1, 15-16 (1947). The Town's official sponsorship and promotion of this National Day of Prayer event creates the appearance of favoritism toward Christians.

In 2002, a federal court enjoined a city and mayor from organizing, advertising, promoting or endorsing a prayer breakfast. *Newman v. City of East Point*, 181 F. Supp. 2d 1374 (N.D. Ga. 2002). In that case, the court restricted the use of city funds, employees, resources and supplies in facilitating the Mayor's Prayer Breakfast. *See id.* As a result of the city's activities (making and sending invitations, issuing press releases, advertising the event, etc.), the court stated, "an objective observer would most certainly conclude that the City of East Point has endorsed religion, specifically Christianity, by its actions." *Id.* at 1381.

Legal arguments aside, participating in and promoting National Day of Prayer events is unnecessarily divisive. The events send the message that the Town not only prefers religion over non-religion, but also Christianity over all other faiths. It alienates non-Christians in Lebanon by turning them into political outsiders in their own community. The National Day of Prayer is

² *Statement of Faith*, NATIONAL DAY OF PRAYER TASK FORCE (last visited Apr. 16, 2021), www.nationaldayofprayer.org/statement_of_faith.

explicitly designed to exclude the 24% of Americans who are nonreligious and, more broadly, the 30% of Americans who are non-Christian.³

We hope you'll agree that the Town of Lebanon should strive to appear equally welcoming of all residents, regardless of whether they are Christian, practice a minority religion, or are nonreligious. The Town must refrain from further organization, participation in, and promotion of religious events. Please inform us in writing of the steps taken to respect the right of conscience of all Lebanon residents and to send a message that is inclusive of the minority religious and nonreligious among you.

Sincerely,



Christopher Line
Staff Attorney
Freedom From Religion Foundation

Enclosure

³ Robert P. Jones & Daniel Cox, *America's Changing Religious Identity*, PUBLIC RELIGION RESEARCH INSTITUTE (Sept. 6, 2017), available at www.prrri.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/PRRI-Religion-Report.pdf.

National Day of Prayer

Event Date: Thursday, May 6, 2021 - 12:15pm to 1:00pm

Address

Town Hall Monument
579 Exeter Road
Lebanon, CT 06249
United States
See map: [Google Maps](#)

A time of community prayer for our nation. All are welcome to attend.

Per federal law, *"the President shall issue each year a proclamation designating the first Thursday in May as a National Day of Prayer on which the people of the United States may turn to God in prayer and meditation at churches, in groups, and as individuals."* 36 U.S. Code § 119 National Day of Prayer

Event Contact - Name: Maureen McCall
Event Contact - Email: maureen.mccall@lebanonct.org
Event Contact - Phone: 860-642-7150