

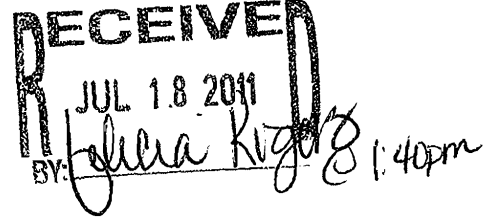
# FREEDOM FROM RELIGION *foundation*

P.O. BOX 750 • MADISON, WI 53701 • (608) 256-8900 • WWW.FFRF.ORG

July 13, 2011

**SENT VIA ELECTRONIC AND U.S. MAIL**  
**mayor@cityofconway-ar.gov**

The Honorable Tab Townsell  
Mayor, City of Conway  
1201 Oak Street  
Conway, AR 72032



Re: Opening City Council Meetings with Prayer

Dear Mayor Townsell:

I am writing on behalf of members of the Freedom From Religion Foundation (FFRF) to urge you to discontinue the practice of opening City Council meetings with prayers. FFRF is a national nonprofit organization representing over 16,600 members across the country, including members in Arkansas. Our purpose is to protect the constitutional principle of separation between state and church.

We were contacted individually by several local residents and taxpayers who strenuously oppose prayer before government meetings. It is our information and understanding that the Conway City Council ("Council") includes prayers as part of its meetings, presumably offering the opening prayer prior to the start of recording the meeting for public access. On behalf of our Conway membership, we ask that you discontinue the practice of conducting prayers during Council meetings.

Government prayer is unnecessary, inappropriate, and divisive. Calling upon Council members and citizens in attendance to pray (even silently) is coercive, embarrassing, and beyond the scope of secular city government. Council members are free to pray privately or to worship on their own time in their own way. They do not need to worship on taxpayers' time. The city ought not to lend its power and prestige to religion, amounting to a governmental endorsement that excludes the 15% or more of your population that is nonreligious (Religious Identification Survey 2008). Such prayer creates acrimony, makes minorities feel like political outsiders in their own community, and shows unconstitutional governmental preference not just for religion over nonreligion, but Christianity over other faiths.

Citizens of all religions or no religion are compelled to come before you on civic, secular matters: variances, sewers, building permits, restaurant licenses, sidewalk repair, etc.. They should not be subjected to a religious show or test or be expected to demonstrate

religious obeisance at a city function. We fail to see why divine guidance is needed over such earthly matters anyway.

Moreover, these types of government prayers not only conflict with the Constitution, but also with biblical teachings. Christians who know their bible are familiar with the biblical injunction of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount, condemning as hypocrisy public prayer. "Enter into thy closet and when thou hast shut the door, pray to thy Father which is in secret." (Matthew 6:5-13).

The founders of this country wisely sought to protect government from religion but also protect religion from government. The founders did not find it necessary to pray when then adopted our entirely secular Constitution. In fact, James Madison came to oppose congressional chaplaincies, criticizing the idea that "religious truth is to be tested by numbers or that the major sects have a right to govern the minor." (Detached Memoranda, 1817).

The Council respects all citizens by not having prayers a part of official government business. Council members and citizens may freely engage in prayer and religious practices outside of government business, which ensures that elected officials run no risk of violating the Constitution.

Please respect the freedom of conscience of all Conway citizens. On behalf of our Conway membership and our secular Constitution, we urge the City Council to concentrate on city matters. The tone that should be set is one that respects and reveres the secular and entirely godless U.S. Constitution, which City officials take an oath to uphold, and whose only references to religion are exclusionary. By ensuring that government does not take sides on a matter that must be left to the individual conscience, the Council strikes a blow *for*, not *against*, religious liberty.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Rebecca S. Markert / sas".

Rebecca S. Markert  
Staff Attorney