

FREEDOM FROM RELIGION *foundation*

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

September 12, 2022

SENT VIA EMAIL & U.S. MAIL: mayorsph@cmvny.com

The Honorable Shawyn Patterson-Howard
Mayor
City of Mount Vernon
1 Roosevelt Square N
Mount Vernon, NY 10550

Re: Divisive Religious Promotion on Social Media

Dear Mayor Patterson-Howard:

I am again writing on behalf of the Freedom From Religion Foundation (FFRF), this time to alert you to citizen concerns over a religious message posted to your official Facebook page. Unfortunately, we have yet to receive a response to our August 23, 2022 letter. As you recall, FFRF is a national nonprofit organization with more than 38,000 members across the country, including over 2,000 members in New York. 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 Mount Vernon resident and taxpayer reported that you recently posted a religious message to your official Facebook page:

PRAYER FOR THE SCHOOL YEAR

Our Lord and Our God, we pray [that] you would continually cover, keep, strengthen and inspire our Superintendent, Administrators, Teachers, Support Staff, Scholars, Families and Community Partners for the New School Year.

May God's hand of protection keep and cover them in their homes, schools and community.

Minister to the mind, spirit, emotional and social wellness of our young people to keep them encouraged and focused daily.

Keep their focus on education, positive youth activities and the incredible opportunities that lay ahead of them. May [they] realize their unlimited potential.

We bind and come against distraction, violence, bullying and anything that would discourage our babies.

We speak life, love, unparalleled success, academic rigor, peace, confidence, resilience and restoration into the lives of our scholars and staff DAILY from school to school and from home to home.

We thank you God that the District, City Government, Faith Community, Civic Organizations, PTSA, Business Community and Stakeholders are UNITED in our commitment to success of our SCHOLARS.

We claim victory in your name, Amen, Ameen and Ase’

Please see the enclosed screenshots.

We write to request that you cease using your elected position as mayor to promote religion and prayer on your official social media. If you wish to post prayers on Facebook, you must do so on your personal Facebook page.

As a government official, you are tasked with upholding the Constitution of the United States—including the Establishment Clause. By posting a prayer to your official Facebook page, you do the opposite. You serve a religiously diverse community that consists not only of Christians but also Jews, Muslims, atheists and other non-Christians. While you may view your message as being inclusive, it is anything but. When you post overtly religious messages praying to a god to your official social media, you needlessly alienate your constituents who are part of the thirty-seven percent of Americans who are non-Christian, including the nearly one in three Americans who now identify as religiously unaffiliated.¹ You send the message that you and your office prefer those citizens who are religious over those who are nonreligious.

Government employees can worship, pray, and post religious messages anytime they wish when acting in their personal capacities. But they are not permitted to provide prestige to religion through the machinery of a government office. Your elected office belongs to “We the people,” not the office’s temporary occupant. As mayor, you are charged with great responsibility and have been given significant trust by citizens in your community, including those citizens who do not share your religious viewpoint.

We ask you to honor the Constitution you were elected to uphold and respect your Establishment Clause obligations. Thank you for your time and attention to this matter.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Samantha F. Lawrence". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name being the most prominent.

Samantha F. Lawrence
Anne Nicol Gaylor Legal Fellow
Freedom From Religion Foundation

Enclosures

¹ Gregory A. Smith, *About Three-in-Ten U.S. Adults Are Now Religiously Unaffiliated*, Pew Research Center (Dec. 14, 2021), available at www.pewforum.org/2021/12/14/about-three-in-ten-u-s-adults-are-now-religiously-unaffiliated/.



Mayor Shawyn Patterson-Howard

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