

California City Council OKs Prayers in Jesus' Name

✖ City officials in Lodi, Calif., voted unanimously Wednesday to allow prayers in Jesus' name before City Council meetings.

The 5- 0 vote reverses a policy instituted in May that required all prayers to be "non-sectarian and non-denominational."

The council is developing a new prayer policy allowing uncensored invocations that avoid favoring any religion. The policy also would encourage participation by representatives from diverse religious and nonreligious groups, the *Lodi News-Sentinel* reported.

(Photo: Former Navy Chaplain Gordon James Klingenschmitt, founder of the Pray In Jesus Name Project)

The case stems from a letter the Freedom From Religion Foundation sent the council in May complaining about its practice of opening meetings with prayers that invoked the name of Jesus. The atheist organization said the prayers "lead a reasonable observer to believe that the Council is endorsing not only religion over nonreligion but also Christianity over other faiths."

The council instituted a ban on sectarian prayer, which resulted in protests, rallies and an online petition arguing that ban on prayer in Jesus' name was unconstitutional. The petition, organized by the Pray In Jesus Name Project, generated thousands of signatures.

On Wednesday, more than 700 Lodi residents packed the auditorium for a public hearing on the issue. Some advocated a moment of silence. Others called for a total ban on prayers, while others supported prayers in Jesus' name.

During the hearing, former Navy Chaplain Gordon James Klingenschmitt, founder of the Pray In Jesus Name Project, advocated for allowing not only Christian prayers but also atheist, Muslim, Jewish and Buddhist invocations.

He called the vote a victory for free speech. "This victory should inspire legislators across America that 85 percent of polled voters want you to allow public prayers in Jesus' name, even in public venues," Klingenschmitt said in a statement. "Don't cave-in to empty threats of lawsuits by atheist complainers. Christian voters will rally to support you, and Jesus is not an illegal word."

The Lodi City Council decision follows votes in three other California cities – Tehachapi, Tracy, and Turlock – to allow uncensored prayers. All three cities received letters from the Freedom From Religion Foundation.

Despite the revised policy in Lodi, Freedom From Religion Foundation co-founder Annie Gaylor said her group will likely sue Lodi or one of the other three California cities over their prayer policies.

"We'll see how it pans out and probably will have to sue because there is widespread disrespect for the law in the state of California," Gaylor told the *Lodi News-Sentinel*.

She said before filing her group will watch the invocations under the new Lodi policy. It will also monitor the other cities to see which would make the best test case.