

Christians Rally to Defend Prayers in Jesus' Name

✖ A former military chaplain who battled the U.S. Navy over the right to pray in Jesus' name is waging a similar fight in Lodi, Calif., where the City Council in May temporarily banned sectarian prayers before meetings.

Chaplain Gordon James Klingenschmitt expects several hundred people-some from out of state-to join him tonight at 6 p.m. for a "Stand Up for Jesus" prayer rally protesting a city policy requiring all prayers to be "non-sectarian and non-denominational."

"Jesus is not an illegal word, the Bible is not a banned book, and evangelistic speech is not a crime," Klingenschmitt wrote in an online petition that collected more than 5,000 signatures, half of them from Californians. The charismatic chaplain plans to present the petition at tonight's rally.

Although based in Colorado, Klingenschmitt has led similar rallies in Virginia and Pennsylvania through his national Pray in Jesus Name Project. He founded the organization after he was court-martialed in 2006 for appearing in uniform at an event outside the White House to protest a Navy prohibition against publicly praying in Jesus' name. Congress later overturned that regulation, and in 2007 he was honorably discharged.

Klingenschmitt said the situation in Lodi is bigger than one city. "This is a national issue because what happens in Lodi will happen across California, and what happens in California will happen across the U.S.," he told *Charisma*.

For years the Lodi City Council opened its meetings with prayer that invoked the name of Jesus. But in May, representatives from the Freedom From Religion Foundation sent

the council a letter complaining about the practice, saying 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 and Lodi Mayor Larry Hansen now are considering discontinuing the prayers, limiting them or offering a moment of silence, the *Sacramento Bee* reported.

Although the Madison, Freedom From Religion Foundation has not filed suit, Klingenschmitt has pledged to raise \$10,000 to help the City Council defend itself against any legal action. He said the Alliance Defense Fund is willing to represent the council pro bono, but the money would be available to pay for damages if the foundation prevailed in a lawsuit.

Klingenschmitt argues that praying in Jesus' name is constitutional, and he supports allowing Muslims, Buddhists and people of other faiths to also pray sectarian prayers at City Council meetings.

"We advocate for 100 percent inclusion," Klingenschmitt said. "Let the Muslims pray to Allah. Let the Buddhists pray to a false God."

Klingenschmitt's petition calls on the Lodi City Council to adopt a policy that declares the pre-meeting prayers to be private and not government speech, or allows them to be said during optionally attended time.

"Please do not cave-in to atheist intimidation by the enemies of religious liberty, including Americans United and the Freedom From Religion Foundation, who are threatening to sue to silence all prayers," the petition states. "Please conform your decision to First Amendment precedent which allows Jesus prayers among other rotating diverse prayers."

Klingenschmitt has led similar campaigns in Ohio, Oklahoma, Oregon and Pennsylvania, where last week the state House agreed to no longer review the content of prayers given before

legislative sessions. Previously, Klingenschmitt led 1,000 people to rally outside the Virginia Governor's Mansion, to protest a state policy barring police chaplains from praying in Jesus' name.

"Many cities are threatened with lawsuits, but they're empty threats and they lose in court," Klingenschmitt said. "We encourage pastors to publicize these threats because when the name of Jesus is stamped out in one place, He spreads like wildfire everywhere else. And this causes revival among the people. The governments will vote the right way if people speak out."

A group of atheists will be hosting a counter-demonstration tonight beginning at 5:15 p.m. Lodi resident David Diskin, who is organized the opposing demonstration, told *The Record* newspaper he believes invocations "should be omitted from the agenda, or there should be a moment of silence, allowing everybody to pray to their own personal god or to no god at all."

The prayer policy is not scheduled to be discussed at tonight's council meeting, but Klingenschmitt hopes to address the subject when the council opens the floor to public comments.