

School Officials Face Jail for Luncheon Prayer

✖ Two Florida school officials are facing criminal charges because of a prayer they said during a school luncheon.

Pace High School Principal Frank Lay and athletic director Robert Freeman face criminal contempt charges for allegedly violating a consent decree that prohibits all district school officials from endorsing religion or sponsoring prayers during school events.

In addition to facing fines and up to six months in jail, the officials could lose their retirement benefits.

“It is a sad day in America when school officials are criminally prosecuted for a prayer over a meal,” said Liberty Counsel founder Mathew D. Staver, who is representing Lay and Freeman. “It is outrageous and an offense to the First Amendment to punish a school official for a simple prayer.”

The consent decree order stems from a lawsuit the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) filed last year on behalf of two unnamed students who claimed school officials violated church-state separation by promoting their religious beliefs in school.

In January U.S. District Judge Casey Rodgers issued a temporary injunction prohibiting school officials from “promoting, advancing, endorsing, participating in or causing prayers during or in conjunction with school events,” the ACLU said, according to CNN.

Later that month, Lay asked Freeman to say a “prayer of blessing” at a luncheon held at the school. Liberty Counsel said the luncheon involved former booster club members and other adults who donated money for a new field house.

Staver said there were no students and only “consenting adults” at the event. Lay said in a letter to the district superintendent that culinary students prepared the meal, CNN reported.

The ACLU later filed a complaint about the luncheon prayer, prompting Rodgers last month to initiate criminal contempt proceedings against Lay and Freeman for “willfully violating” the temporary injunction.

Liberty Counsel filed a motion to intervene on behalf of Christian Educators Association International to challenge the consent decree, which it says “unconstitutionally infringes on the rights of teachers, administrators and students.”

Glenn Katon, director of the Religious Freedom Project for the ACLU, told CNN his organization did not suggest that the men go to jail.

“This is about the students’ right to be free from teachers and school administrators thrusting upon the students their religious beliefs,” Katon said. “They keep talking about the religious rights of the administrators, but the administrators and the principals don’t have any right to trumpet their religious beliefs in a school setting.”

Lay and Freeman are scheduled to go to trial on Sept. 17.