

School Officials Found Not Guilty of Violating Prayer Ban

✖ A federal judge found two Florida school officials not guilty of criminal contempt charges stemming from a prayer at a school luncheon.

Judge M. Case Rodgers ruled Thursday that Pace High School Principal Frank Lay and Athletic Director Robert Freeman did not violate an order prohibiting Santa Rosa County school officials from promoting, endorsing, participating in or causing prayers during or in conjunction with school events.

He said the prayer at a field house dedication was spontaneous, and there seemed to be no intent to violate the order, the Associated Press reported.

The men faced up to \$5,000 in fines, six months in jail and loss of their retirement benefits.

“It is ridiculous that these men even had to think twice about blessing a meal,” said attorney Mathew Staver, who represented the men through his Liberty Counsel law firm. “To criminalize the prayer conflicts with our nation’s founding and guiding principles and goes directly against our constitutionally protected rights.”

Staver said he plans to challenge the constitutionality of the order, which stemmed from a lawsuit the American Civil Liberties Union filed on behalf of two students who claimed several school officials violated church-state separation by

promoting their religious beliefs in school.

The case drew national attention to the small community near Pensacola, Fla. Sixty members of Congress, most affiliated with the bipartisan Congressional Prayer Caucus, rallied behind the school leaders, sending them a letter of support Monday that lamented the future of religious liberty if the men were found guilty.

"The tradition of offering prayer in America has become so interwoven into our nation's spiritual heritage, that to charge someone criminally for engaging in such an innocent practice would astonish the men who founded this country on religious freedom," the letter read.

Republican Rep. Randy Forbes of Virginia, who is chair of the prayer caucus, addressed the House floor Tuesday night, saying the case represented an attempt to criminalize prayer.

"Make no mistake, there will come a day when the speaker of this house will be hauled into federal court and threatened with jail because she dares to stand at that podium where you stand tonight and ask the chaplain to start our day with the prayer," he said.

Supporters also packed the courthouse Thursday and rallied outside it. Some 400 Pace High School students attended the hearing, holding signs and wearing T-shirts showing their support for Freeman and Lay, according to the *Pensacola News-Journal*.

Prayer networks also targeted the case, with the Florida Alliance for Reformation saying it could be a key in restoring prayer in Jesus' name to public schools. In an e-mail to supporters Thursday, Cindy Jacobs, co-founder of Texas-based

Generals International, encouraged her Reformation Prayer Network to continue interceding that prayer would return to public schools.