

Atheist Group Attacks Mississippi Prayer Meeting

Nothing happens without prayer—and Pascagoula High School staff and faculty members know that all too well. That's why they gather to pray together.

It comes as no surprise prayer would meet with resistance. This time, the resistance is coming through the Freedom From Religion Foundation.

The group is demanding Pascagoula School District in Mississippi stop school staff from organizing or participating in private prayer gatherings with other members of the community.

Here's the back story: On July 31, a group of community members, parents and students, including Pascagoula High School staff and faculty members, met outside of the main building's entrance to pray for the 2011-2012 school year. Principal Al Sparkman was there to pray, and spoke to the community about the difficulties students face today.

"This situation would be no different from Principal Sparkman teaching a Sunday school class at a church that rented school facilities for its Sunday services," says Alliance Defense Fund Legal Counsel Jeremy Tedesco. "In both situations, Principal Sparkman is acting in his personal capacity as a citizen and has the same right to express his religious beliefs as any other citizen."

Less than two weeks after the prayer event, the Freedom From Religion Foundation issued a letter demanding that the school district take steps to prevent prayer meetings. According to the ADF, the letter misleadingly confuses such private events with school-sponsored events in an attempt to stop people from praying for the school.

“Public school principals, teachers and staff members should not be threatened for exercising their constitutionally protected right to organize and participate in private, religious events in their personal capacities,” says ADF Senior Counsel David Cortman. “Contrary to what the Freedom From Religion Foundation is arguing, this is not a government establishment of religion by any stretch of the imagination, except theirs.

The ADF sent a letter to Pascagoula School District officials urging them to disregard threats from the FFRF. The letter assures the Pascagoula School District superintendent that school administrators and teachers have the constitutionally protected right to participate in religious activity when done so in their private capacities as parents and/or citizens.

“The Supreme Court has recognized that ‘there is a crucial difference between government speech endorsing religion, which the Establishment Clause forbids, and private speech endorsing religion, which the Free Speech and Free Exercise Clauses protect,’” the ADF letter to school officials explains. “Applying this principle, courts have repeatedly held that a school’s faculty and staff have the constitutional right to participate in community-sponsored religious activities before and after their contracted work times because their participation is constitutionally protected private speech.”