

Atheist Group's Attempt to Cancel Chaplain Program Fails Miserably

Last month an atheist group wrote city officials saying police chaplains are “unconstitutional.” This group, the Freedom from Religion Foundation (FFRF), urged the police chief to end his department’s chaplain program. But after a host of clergymen petitioned the city administration in response, the call to end the chaplain program fell on deaf ears.

In a written response to Frontlines Ohio, City Law Director John Spon wrote, “It is our opinion that our (city of Mansfield’s) voluntary use of an available designated chaplain is lawful and therefore it is our intent to continue with voluntary use of our designated chaplain. At the present time we see no need to respond to Freedom from Religion Foundation’s spurious and unfounded allegation.”

The threatening FFRF letter stemmed from a local newspaper story on Pastor Chad Hayes’ recent appointment as police chaplain of the Mansfield Police Department. Seventy-six clergymen defended the longstanding program with a correspondence to the Mansfield mayor, police chief and city law director.

In the letter to the city administration, the clergy wrote, “While the FFRF likes to think of itself as a legal authority on the First Amendment, one can observe this is often not the case in a court of law with its frivolous lawsuits against government institutions. We question the motives of this organization which regularly exhibits hostility towards communities when religious institutions are making great strides in their local community like in Mansfield, Ohio.”

One pastor and co-signer of the letter who also serves as the

mayor of nearby Shelby believes the Freedom from Religion Foundation has its thumb on the scale.

"The FFRF is very outspoken about issues surrounding the separation of church and state. However, their silence is deafening when it comes to the Biden Administration allocating hundreds of thousands of taxpayer dollars for the advocacy of atheism in Africa and Asia."

Like other communities, the city of Mansfield is not taking any notice of the FFRF threats. The clergy in their letter cited six different communities in recent years that received similar FFRF letters who have still continued their chaplain programs.

Pastor Rich Hurles also signed the clergy letter; he serves as a police chaplain, and is village councilman in Plymouth. He believes FFRF is targeting understaffed police departments that remain vulnerable in hostile conditions.

"I, like many of the area chaplains I know, serve our police departments on a voluntary basis. The public scrutiny and demands placed upon police officers with ongoing threats of violence leads to extremely high levels of stress on a daily basis. Such stress can do more than affect an officer's job performance; it can also seep into and damage their personal life. Chaplains are lifelines to provide support and strength to the officer's and their families."

The Richland County clergy thanked the city administration for taking their words to heart. "Retaining our chaplain services for our safety services is vital for the success of our community," they wrote.

Mansfield City Councilman and clergyman, Reverend El Akuchie comments, "City officials always need encouragement and I think the clergy letter let the mayor and law director know the faith community stands behind their decision to preserve the chaplain program. It is common knowledge government

chaplaincies have existed even before the First Amendment was enacted. The city of Mansfield will not be bullied by an outside group like the FFRF.” {eo}

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