

Christian Coach Goes to War Over On-Field Prayer

A Washington state high school football coach suspended for praying on the 50-yard-line after games filed a federal employment discrimination complaint on Tuesday against the district in a case that has fueled the debate in the United States over freedom of – and from – religion in school sports.

Joe Kennedy, a coach in Bremerton, a city of 40,000 about 15 miles across the Puget Sound from Seattle, was suspended with pay from late October after his school district learned of his post-game ritual involved taking a knee and praying in a gesture that drew in student athletes.

The district's crackdown was the latest high-profile injunction against prayer at football games in the United States, where Christian observances continue unabated in many public school sports arenas, despite court rulings limiting school-sponsored religious ceremonies.

Kennedy wrote in his complaint that Bremerton School District "violated my rights to free exercise of religion and free speech by prohibiting my private religious expression and taking adverse employment action against me on the basis of my religion."

The discrimination charge was filed with the U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, under laws protecting employees against bias by their employers over a number of factors including religion.

A spokeswoman for the school district said it had not received an official notification of the complaint so had no immediate comment.

The district has said the law requires its employees to neither endorse nor discourage student-led prayer, and that a coach praying might impose “a degree of coercion” over students.

Kennedy has performed variations on his ritual regularly over the last eight years as a coach and says he is not coercing students or leading them in prayer, having told them at one point, “this is a free country, you can do what you want.”

“It’s my constitutional right to do this,” he told Reuters last month, invoking the freedom of speech afforded by the First Amendment. “It’s part of me, it’s who I am. I am not going to hide my faith.” His complaint, which can open a mediation process, is required by the commission before a person can file a job discrimination lawsuit against an employer.

Kennedy is still on administrative leave until his contract runs out at the end of the month, his lawyers said. {eoa}

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