

‘I Could No Longer Open the Bible, Talk About the Bible, Talk About God or Pray’

Troy Schmidt’s jaw dropped.

A few minutes before, he had been preparing to start his seventh year as chaplain for the Olympia High School football team in Florida. But now, those plans had been changed—radically changed.

“I received a call from the coach,” Schmidt told me. “He said Orange County Public Schools is no longer allowed to have chaplains as a part of the football program.”

Schmidt, who is a campus pastor of the First Baptist Church of Windermere, Florida, listened as the football coach explained the district’s decision to cleanse Christianity from its ranks.

“I could no longer open the Bible, talk about the Bible, talk about God or pray with the team in any capacity,” he told me. “It was heart-breaking.”

A spokesperson for Florida’s Orange County Public Schools confirmed that the district has ended the long-standing tradition of having local ministers serve as volunteer chaplains for football teams.

“They cannot have chaplains or ministers before or after games—leading prayer,” spokesperson Shari Bobinski told me. “Students are more than welcome to lead their own prayers, but our faculty and staff cannot be involved nor can we bring in an outside chaplain.”

The school district is also cracking down on other displays of Christianity—effective Aug. 19, according to a memorandum

prepared by the district's legal counsel.

Teachers and coaches "cannot participate in a visible way with the players during student-led prayers," the memorandum states.

Also, Bible verses and references to the Bible are banned on school property. Bible verses are also prohibited on clothing produced by the school. And songs with religious lyrics may not be used in school-related videos.

The school district's crackdown on Christianity is a result of a threat from the Freedom From Religion Foundation.

The Wisconsin-based organization detailed all sorts of allegations in a letter to the district. They were alarmed about religious activity at another high school, Apopka High, which is in the same district that is based in Orlando. They singled out the football team's chaplain.

"It is inappropriate and unconstitutional for the district to offer a Christian minister unique access to befriend and proselytize student athletes," FFRF attorney Andrew Seidel wrote to the district.

Instead of standing its ground and defending the volunteer chaplain at Apopka High, the school district decided to ban all chaplains.

"Having a team chaplain is not permitted as it is an unconstitutional endorsement of religion in the same manner as a school employee participating in prayer with students," the memorandum stated.

But the school district still wanted Pastor Schmidt to inspire the Olympia Titans—provided he remained strictly secular.

"They said I could still come and speak, but I wasn't going to be called a chaplain," he said. "They wanted to call me a 'Life Coach.'"

However, life coaches would still not be permitted to use any inspiration from the Bible.

Schmidt knew right away that he would not be able to accept such a position.

“That’s not me,” he said. “I don’t get any inspiration besides what I get in the Bible. My heroes come from the Bible, and I think there is a lot of inspiration in there that can motivate a football player to get out on the field and play their best and be their best.”

Schmidt, who also writes for the Game Show Network’s “The American Bible Challenge,” told me his role as a chaplain was not to proselytize.

“I would speak to the team before the game and give them wisdom, inspiration,” he said. “I’d be available if there’s any crisis.”

On occasion he would join the team in a huddle for a post-game prayer.

And his church would always prepare a massive pre-game feast for the young men and their coaches.

“Roast beef, meatloaf, brownies – these were pretty extravagant meals,” he said. “We wanted to make sure they got a great home-cooked meal.”

And even though ministers are no longer welcome on school property, Pastor Schmidt said his church will continue to serve the meals.

“We don’t want the kids to suffer,” he said.

The Christian cleansing of Orange County Public Schools did not make national headlines. Their decision to banish the chaplains garnered no attention. And that’s why Pastor Schmidt decided to speak up.

“We can’t stay silent any longer,” he told me. “We can’t allow them to move into these areas that traditionally have always been a part of the football program.”

But that’s exactly what FFRF is attempting to do—eradicate Christianity in the public marketplace of ideas.

“Faith, family, football—have always gone together,” he said. “Here’s an organization like this coming in and trying to tear that out.”

Pastor Schmidt said it’s time to do something. “We’re not going to give up,” he said. “We’re not going to give up on the team.”

I’m glad Pastor Schmidt hasn’t given up because the school district, in an incredible act of cowardice, did give up. All it took was a threatening letter from the Freedom From Religious Foundation, and the school leaders capitulated.

For the record, the chaplains were volunteers. Their prayers were voluntary. But thanks to Orange County Public Schools—the football players don’t have a prayer.

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