

Ohio Faith leaders Confront Wisconsin Atheist Group to Preserve Chaplain Program

An anti-religion group has an axe to grind with government agencies partnering with local religious institutions.

Saying "government and religion do not mix," the Freedom From Religion Foundation (FFRF) has a nationwide crusade compelling local governments to believe in their ideology or else face a costly lawsuit.

Meanwhile, a group of Ohio clergy happen to believe differently. They say their city is not guilty of any "white collar crime."

Ten days ago, the Wisconsin-based group sent an unsolicited letter to Mansfield Police Chief Keith Porch directing the police chaplaincy program be discontinued. The letter, written by Karen Heineman, also stated "Police chaplaincies are unconstitutional." FFRF is requesting the Mansfield Police Department to provide secular support services instead.

The threatening FFRF letter apparently stemmed from a local newspaper story on Pastor Chad Hayes' recent appointment as police chaplain of the Mansfield Police Department. Seventy-six local clergymen responded with a "correspondence of their own, sent to the Mansfield Mayor and Law Director.

"Just as we (clergy) would not tell the FFRF who to employ in their organization, they have no business telling who our city should hire and fire," says local clergyman Moe Hill, a co-signer of the letter.

In the letter the clergy wrote, "The FFRF asserts since Pastor Hayes is a clergyman, he is not qualified to serve law

enforcement officers and their families. It appears the FFRF wants a government employer to discriminate against a job applicant/employee in the workplace by firing him because of his religion, thus violating the Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. We believe this would be bad legal advice."

According to another clergy co-signer, "It is awfully judgmental on the Freedom from Religion Foundation's part to question the professionalism of Pastor Hayes based on several alleged comments in the newspaper," says Pastor James Spencer. "Furthermore, we are skeptical the FFRF is really concerned about the well-being of our nationally-accredited police force considering FFRF's offices are in Madison, Wisconsin, which voted to defund their police department in 2021."

Elder Moe Hill knows about the difficulties police officers often face. Hill served twenty-nine years in law enforcement before becoming a clergyman. "When bad things happen as a police officer, you need somebody to make sure you are okay. During my career as a highway patrol officer, the chaplain played a pivotal role in helping officers deal with job stress.

"With law enforcement morale at an all-time low nationally, and with depression, divorce and suicide plaguing the police profession, as clergymen from 76 diverse congregations across Richland County, we believe the City of Mansfield should retain its chaplaincy program in order to adequately support the social and emotional well-being of department personnel," says Elder Hill.

The clergy are convinced the police chaplain program is in the best interests of the city for retention and recruitment of police officers. They also believe preserving the police chaplain program is an open and shut case.

The clergy letter pointed out, "If what the Freedom from Religion Foundation (FFRF) purports is true, that chaplains

are unconstitutional, there would be no chaplains in the country. Truth be told, police chaplain programs abound throughout the country, even in cities where the FFRF has sent letters questioning their constitutionality. Police chaplain programs that continue even after receiving frivolous FFRF letters include: Albuquerque, New Mexico, La Crosse, Wisconsin, Montgomery, Alabama, Orlando, Florida, Rochester, New York and Shreveport, Louisiana, to name a few."

"There are literally thousands of chaplains in this country. The FFRF letter is not worth the paper it is written on," says Pastor Spencer. "I am reminded of King Hezekiah in the Bible when he received the threatening letter from King Sennacherib. Hezekiah laid the letter down before the LORD and prayed to GOD that Jerusalem would be delivered from the invading army. God defended Jerusalem and Sennacherib returned by the way he came.

"FFRF regularly exhibits hostility towards cities when religious institutions are making great strides in their local communities like in Mansfield, Ohio," says Spencer. "The FFRF letter should be a badge of honor confirming our faith community is advancing in our city. I think FFRF will go back the way they came." {eo}

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