

School District Bans Chaplain From Praying With Football Team

A Baptist pastor will no longer be permitted to serve as a chaplain for an Oklahoma high school football team after a notorious group of atheists filed a formal complaint.

The Freedom From Religion Foundation, a Wisconsin-based group of atheists, agnostics and free-thinkers, was triggered by reports that the Cherokee Baptist Church had been feeding and providing assistance to the Putnam City High School football team.

Mike Keahbone, the church's senior pastor, had been invited on occasion to deliver pre-game prayers in the team's locker room.

"Public school football teams cannot appoint or employ a chaplain, seek out a spiritual leader for the team or agree to have a volunteer team chaplain, because public schools may not advance or promote religion," Freedom From Religion Foundation attorney Christopher Line wrote in a letter to Putnam City Schools.

Keahbone told the "Todd Starnes Radio Show" that he was the team's honorary chaplain.

"I have never tried to proselytize on the campus," the pastor said. "My job has been to be a support and try and meet needs."

When Pastor Keahbone learned that a number of the parents could not be in the stands on game night (due to jobs and other conflicts), the church stepped in and filled the gap.

"One kid we discovered had not had a Christmas in three years.

We provided Christmas," the pastor said.

Some students were living in homes without electricity.

"We got the electricity back on," he said.

In other words, the Christians at Cherokee Hills Baptist Church were behaving as Christians normally behave.

That created great angst among the atheist and agnostic crowd—leading to a nasty letter.

"It is illegal for a public school or school-appointed volunteer to organize, sponsor or lead prayers at public high school events," the FFRF declared. "Putnam City Schools cannot allow a non-school adult access to the children in its charge, and it certainly cannot grant access to a religious speaker seeking to proselytize students."

First Liberty Institute, one of the nation's most prominent religious liberty law firms, is representing Pastor Mike.

"What's most important is these students have a right to freedom of religion and freedom of religious expression," attorney Michael Berry told the Todd Starnes Radio Show.

"And if they choose to want to meet with a chaplain or a pastor, they have the right to do that," Berry said. "Pastor Mike is simply there to meet that need if that's what the students choose."

Berry said the church's outreach program to the football team is a good program that should continue.

"There is no constitutional prohibition against people from the church meeting the needs of the community," he said.

That may be the case, but the school district appears to have capitulated to the out-of-town atheists.

"FFRF banishes prayer from OK City high school team," a press

release read.

The FFRF said they were assured by a school district attorney that “new procedures had been put into place and that the athletic staff has been instructed that the practice of allowing access to students and engaging in prayer before any game would cease immediately.”

“Religion is divisive and has no place in a football team locker room,” FFRF co-president Annie Laurie Gaylor said.

On senior night, one football player’s dad was unable to attend the game—so Pastor Mike offered to stand alongside the player on the football field.

He didn’t want the young man to stand alone.

“We’re not trying to cause any trouble,” Pastor Mike said. “Our heart is to love these guys.”

But the Freedom From Religion Foundation says people like Pastor Mike and the congregation of Cherokee Hills Baptist Church are not welcome to practice their faith in public.