

UPDATE: School Administration Reverses Decision for Valedictorian Speech Referencing Jesus, Faith

Editor's Note: Since the time of original posting this story has developed. Charisma News has been tracking this story and provides an update here.

After being told she could not include references to her faith in Jesus during her high school valedictorian speech, Michigan student Elizabeth Turner sought legal action to protect her first amendment rights.

The Hillsdale High School principal, Amy Goldsmith, reversed her decision to censor Turner's faith from her speech, per a First Liberty press release posted Thursday night.

"We are grateful to school officials for acting swiftly to ensure that religious students can freely exercise their right to express their faith in a graduation speech," said Keisha Russell, counsel for First Liberty Institute. "Elizabeth is thrilled that she'll be able to celebrate her graduation without being censored. We hope that future graduates will be free from religious censorship."

Turner also offered her gratitude and relief of being able to express her faith openly at the June 6 commencement. "I'm grateful I will be able to share my faith with my classmates," she wrote. "And I pray that God uses this situation to advance His kingdom."

Read the original story below:

A Michigan student is being told to remove a large portion of

her valedictorian speech because it contains references to her personal faith in Jesus Christ.

Elizabeth Turner, a senior at Hillsdale High School, submitted her speech for review ahead of the June 6 commencement. School administration commented on the shared google document, saying the sections in which she references her faith are “not appropriate.”

“We need to be mindful about the inclusion of religious aspects,” Hillsdale Principal Amy Goldsmith wrote. “These are your strong beliefs, but they are not appropriate for a speech in a school public setting. I know this will frustrate you, but we have to be mindful of it.”

Goldsmith highlighted Turner’s words in the following section:

For me, my future hope is found in my relationship with Christ. By trusting in him and choosing to live a life dedicated to bringing his kingdom glory, I can be confident that I am living a life with purpose and meaning. My identity is found by what God says and who I want to become is laid out in scripture.

Whether we want to admit it or not, not one of us can be certain of how our lives will unfold, but we do know that trials will come. The reality of this is that we face an unpredictable future, and while we are making all these plans to prepare, ultimately none of us are promised tomorrow, making it all the more important to make today count.

Religious freedom law firm First Liberty has taken Turner’s case, and sent a letter to Goldsmith, requesting she “allow Elizabeth Turner to express her private religious beliefs at the graduation ceremony.”

The letter details the email exchange between Goldsmith and Turner regarding the legality of including personal faith in a

public school address. Goldsmith argued that, as valedictorian, Turner's statements represent the school, and as such, could not make religious statements.

"While there is a degree of freedom to the content of your speech, there are also considerations of what the content and message should be at a commencement celebration and it's [sic] appropriateness for the audience," Goldsmith wrote to Turner.

First Liberty lawyers Mike Berry and Keisha Russell refute her argument, saying, "Student graduation speeches constitute private speech, not government speech, and private speech is not subject to the Establishment Clause. Contrary to your statements that religious sentiments are 'not appropriate for a speech in a school public setting,' Ms. Turner's statements do not transform into government speech simply because they are delivered in a public setting or to a public audience."

The argument is in reference to a January 2020 U.S. Department of Education guidance that states, "[s]tudent remarks are not attributable to the school simply because they are delivered in a public setting or to a public audience."

In refusing to stand "for such a blatant violation of students' constitutional rights," First Liberty counsel Keisha Russel said, "Graduation is a time for celebration not censorship. Students retain their constitutional rights to freedom of expression from elementary school all the way through the graduation ceremony. All public schools should protect the private religious expression of their students."
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