



Alabama Sheriff Defies Demand to Stop Promoting Prayer

The Freedom From Religion Foundation (FFRF) has once again found itself frustrated in its efforts to squelch the constitutionally guaranteed rights of individuals to freely express their religious sentiments. In the FFRF's latest failure, a sheriff in Alabama conspicuously disregarded a letter from the secularist group in late November expressing concern over his office's practice of using Facebook to call on "citizens to pray during times of tragedy."

In a pointed epistle to Walker County Sheriff Nick Smith, one of the group's attorneys, Sam Grover, claimed that

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a local Walker County resident had contacted the FFRF to complain about the practice. “For instance,” recalled Grover, “a November 23 [Facebook] post regarding the senseless death of the Lowndes County Sheriff invokes the idea of prayer, while the office’s August 4 post regarding a collision between a young boy and a deputy officer calls on citizens to ‘fall to our knees and pray fervently.’”

In the tragedy of Lowndes County Sheriff “Big John” Williams, Sheriff Smith posted that “our prayers are with the Lowndes County Sheriff’s Office family as they deal with this senseless tragedy.” And in the case of the fourteen-year-old boy accidentally hit by a sheriff’s deputy as the teen was riding his four wheeler, Smith posted: “It’s at this very trying time that we, as a county, should fall to our knees and pray fervently for mercy and peace. Now is not the time to place blame. Not on the deputy, not on the young boy, and most definitely not on his parents.”

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Smith added that “instead of wasting our breath condemning and judging, we all need to use it to cry out for God to place His hand on this young boy, and return him home to his family, and to bring peace and calm to a deputy who is absolutely broken. As your sheriff, I’m responsible for speaking for my department, and all I ask is that you pray. Pray hard, and pray from the deepest parts of your heart, because there are two good people that need it now more than ever.”

While calling the sheriff’s efforts to support those facing tragedy and loss as “laudable,” Grover accused Smith of disregarding the Constitution, which he claimed “prohibits government entities like the sheriff’s office from promoting religious activity.” The FFRF lawyer went on to chide Smith for rallying “community support in exclusively religious terms,” counseling the sheriff that by making the Facebook posts specifically religious “the Walker County Sheriff’s Office is excluding a significant portion of the community.”

For example, noted Grover, “invoking the practice of kneeling in prayer excludes some minority religions that do not observe that practice.” And “by calling on God to intervene, the sheriff’s office is sending a message to nonreligious citizens that they are outsiders within their own community and that their participation in the healing process is not valued.”

Appealing to the First Amendment clause supposedly enforcing a “separation between church and state,” Grover instructed Sheriff Smith that “as private individuals, you and the officers in your department are free to turn to any religious practice you wish, but as a government entity, the Walker County Sheriff’s Office cannot encourage others to do the same.”

In response to the letter T.J. Armstrong, community relations officer with the Walker County Sheriff’s Office, confirmed that Sheriff Smith and his department would not be following the FFRF’s directive, but would continue to encourage the residents of their county to have faith in God and to turn to prayer in times of need. “We consider it a great honor to have received a wonderful letter from the ‘Freedom From Religion’ organization,” wrote Armstrong on his personal Facebook page. “Proud to have a sheriff that won’t bow to political pressure or the devices of the enemy!”

In comments to a local television news source, Armstrong emphasized that encouraging people to pray does not mean the sheriff’s office is promoting a particular faith. “I believe that when we ask people to pray, people see our hearts and they see that compassion and they respond to that,” he said.