



N.C. County Stands up to ACLU's Attack on Public Prayer

A North Carolina county has thumbed its nose at the state's ACLU franchise, which has been warning county officials all over the state to stop opening government meetings with prayer. As reported by the Associated Press, a "Rowan County commissioner opened the board's [March 5] meeting with a Christian prayer, despite a warning from the state chapter of the American Civil Liberties Union that it would violate the law and potentially trigger a lawsuit. As has long been the elected board's practice, Commissioner Jon Barber (left) opened the public meeting with an invocation asking for a blessing in the name of Jesus."



The ACLU has been harassing counties all over the Tar Heel State since mid-January, when the U.S. Supreme Court declined to review a ruling by the 4th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals against the Forsyth County Board of Commissioners in its long-held tradition of opening meetings with predominantly Christian prayers. As reported by [The New American](#), two residents sued the county after a local pastor opened a December 2007 government meeting by thanking God for sending His Son "to forgive us for our sins," and closed the prayer "in the name of Jesus."

In its two-to-one majority opinion against the county, the court ruled that legislative prayer "must strive to be nondenominational so long as that is reasonably possible — it should send a signal of welcome rather than exclusion. It should not reject the tenets of other faiths in favor of just one."

Since then, reported the AP, at least 15 government entities in North Carolina have either dropped prayer entirely, or banned the petitioners from using specifically Christian language, which the ACLU has always found particularly distasteful.

According to North Carolina's [Salisbury Post](#), in response to the ACLU's demand that the Rowan County Commissioners stop opening their meetings with Christian prayers, Barber "not only prayed in Jesus' name and addressed 'our Heavenly father'" in his invocation on March 5, but also "referenced 'the salvation of Jesus Christ' and declared His name 'as the only way to eternal life.' "

The invocation, which was accompanied by hymns sung by prayer supporters gathered in the first-floor lobby of the county court house, was followed by a public comment period, during which a total of 31 local residents spoke out on the issue, most in favor of continuing the prayer tradition.

"The ACLU has attempted to intimidate the [commissioners] but they can not issue orders," Resident Larry Wright said, reflecting the opinion of the majority.

But a handful of residents opposed the prayers, including local resident Shakeisha Gray, who identified herself as a Unitarian Universalist, blasting Barber's actions as "not only unlawful and unjust but disrespectful and hurtful." She added that she was "saddened by your blatant disregard for our



Written by [Dave Bohon](#) on March 9, 2012

Constitution and by your intolerant attitudes.”

A few others suggested that a time of silence instead of a vocal prayer might be an acceptable compromise. “We all win by instituting a time of solemn silence at the beginning of each meeting that will afford you and others the opportunity to pray according to their own journey of faith,” one local resident told the commissioners.

Of the 25 counties the ACLU contacted with demands to stop prayers at government meetings, the Rowan County Board of Commissioners was the only government body to ignore the secular watchdog group.

The ACLU said that it will now contemplate a lawsuit against the county. “I hope the commissioners understand the potential consequences of this, especially the consequences this could have on taxpayers who they would bring into the situation potentially,” Mike Menlo of the ACLU of North Carolina told a [local television station](#). He insisted that “the law is very clear that government officials cannot use sectarian prayers to open public meetings. As long as the commissioners continue to violate the law, they risk subjecting the county and its taxpayers to an unnecessary and costly legal challenge that they would ultimately lose, whether it is brought by the ACLU or some other entity.”

The *Salisbury Post* noted that four out of five of the county commissioners “have said they plan to continue praying the way they always have and believe the Rowan case is different than Forsyth’s because individual commissioners pray, not local clergy.”

Some residents were angry at the commissioners’ disregard of the ACLU’s ultimatum. “I am appalled that you would consider wasting government money and taxpayer dollars on a losing battle over public prayer,” local resident Pete Prunkl told the commissioners during the public comments.

But local pastor Ricky Perry argued that it was right for the county to battle the ACLU’s blatant attack against faith and freedom. “People say they are for freedom and for Christianity, but [that] the commissioners should have to hide in the back room to pray,” Perry commented. “When somebody tells you how to pray, what could infringe on your rights more?”

The *Salisbury Post* noted that there was also an affirmation of the commissioners’ stand from a non-Christian resident. “China Grove resident William McCubbins, who identified himself as a Jewish man, said he isn’t offended by the prayers in Jesus’ name,” reported the *Post*. “I want you to know I do not feel excluded in any way, shape or form,” he said. “I come here often, and you guys are the most inclusive group of people I have ever met.”



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