



Written by [Dave Bohon](#) on October 25, 2011

Secular Group Demands Halt to School's Flagpole Prayer Meeting

A Florida elementary school principal has been targeted by the Freedom From Religion Foundation (FFR) for promoting a regular prayer gathering at his school. On October 11 the Wisconsin-based secular watchdog group sent a letter to Ben Wortham, superintendent of the Clay County school district near Jacksonville, to complain about the weekly "Prayer Around the Flagpole" meetings that principal Larry Davis was allowing at Clay Hill Elementary School. FFR was particularly alarmed that Davis had promoted the prayer meeting, which is led by local pastors, in a school newsletter to staff members.



"Our prayer around the school's flagpole event is to pray for the nation, for each other, and for the school," Davis explained in the newsletter. The principal referred to a Pastor Steven Andrew of [USA Christian Ministries](#), whom he said was "calling Christians nation-wide to bring back the Holy Bible and Christian prayer to schools."

In the memo, Davis quoted Andrew as saying that the First Amendment was meant "for Christianity, not other religions," and that America's Founding Fathers "fought for God's unalienable rights of Christian life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness." Declared Andrew in a September [press release](#), "Freedom comes from obeying God. Let's get active to bring back the Holy Bible and Christian prayer to schools."

As if to keep secular groups like FFR at bay, Davis emphasized in his newsletter memo that his school's flagpole gatherings "are permissible because they are community led and take place outside of class time."

In its letter, the FFR blasted Davis' reasoning, citing several federal court decisions to build its case that it is inappropriate and unconstitutional "for public school employees to participate" in the prayer gathering.

Counseled the FFR epistle: "Despite disclaimers that this is a 'community led' event and therefore is permissible, the unabashed promotion of the event in the school newsletter and the repeated use of the possessive 'our' would lead any reasonable observer to infer that the event is directly sponsored by Clay Hill Elementary and the School District of Clay County." The secular watchdog group called it "grossly inappropriate for principals, teachers, other public school employees, or outside adults to actively participate in or promote student-run religious organizations or activities."

Warning that the schools' involvement in the flagpole prayer meetings violated the First Amendment's Establishment Clause, FFR asked Wortham to "immediately cancel the Prayer Around the Flagpole events ... and investigate whether any other sectarian messages are being instilled in the children at Clay Hill Elementary."



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After receiving FFR's "request," Wortham, asked Davis and area pastors to temporarily stop the weekly gathering while he and district officials investigated the legal ramifications of the situation. While, Ron Baker, one of the local pastors who helped to organize the event, initially agreed to suspend the prayers temporarily, he later changed his mind and led a group of about 100 children and adults in prayer around the school's flagpole.

"We hear a lot about church and state, but around here we talk about God and country, and we don't see that they're separable," Baker told the [Florida Times-Union](#).

He explained that if he were to stop the prayer meeting, "it somehow sends the message that I think it must be wrong. Why wouldn't I want to pray for the safety and security of that school, pray for all those teachers and administration, pray for all those students."

The *Times-Union* noted that before Davis' newsletter promotion of the event focused media attention, "Clay Hill's prayer session drew less than a dozen people, but [on October 24] the school's parking lot overflowed with cars, and church vans transported congregants to participate in the prayer. It was the largest crowd the prayers have received."

The Rev. Baker insisted: "We're not out here to cause any problems. We're proud of these people and to pray for them seems like the normal, natural thing to be able to do for them."

Wortham said that the school district is in a no-win situation. "If we stop it you're going to have the community and this pastor upset," he said. "If we don't stop it we could end up with a lawsuit that could amount to a quarter of a million dollars. Either way it's a very touchy situation."



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