



FREEDOM FROM RELIGION FOUNDATION

P.O. Box 750 • Madison WI 53701 • (608) 256-8900 • www.ffrf.org

May 4, 2009

The Honorable Lore Christopher
Mayor
City of Keizer
930 Chemawa Rd NE
Keizer OR 97303

Re: Mayor's Prayer Breakfast- May 7, 2009

Dear Mayor Christopher:

I am writing on behalf of a concerned Keizer resident and taxpayer, and other Oregon members of the Freedom From Religion Foundation (FFRF), who object to the City of Keizer's participation and involvement in the Mayor's Prayer Breakfast. FFRF is a national nonprofit organization with nearly 14,000 members, including more than 400 members in Oregon. Our purpose is to protect the constitutional principle of separation between state and church.

It is our information and understanding that the City of Keizer (hereinafter City), along with the Keizer Chamber of Commerce (hereinafter Chamber), hosts an annual prayer breakfast to coincide with the National Day of Prayer. This year's breakfast is scheduled for May 7, 2009, from 7:30AM-9AM. This event will take place at Keizer Civic Center, which is within City Hall. Moreover, our complainant informs us that the City's official website advertises the breakfast and provides a link to a pdf invitation. Please find copies of the City's website pages and the invitation enclosed. The official invitation includes a picture of praying hands and a Christian cross. The invitation also has a quote on the importance of the National Day of Prayer from National Day of Prayer Task Force Chair Shirley Dobson. The National Day of Prayer Task Force, as you may know, represents only the Judeo-Christian expression of the National Day of Prayer observance. Furthermore, the invitation does not list the official sponsor of the prayer breakfast, and neither does the City's website.

Any reasonable Keizer resident or visitor would logically conclude that the City, and no other entity or private organization, is hosting the event. This also leads to the inevitable conclusion that the City, and you, as Mayor, favor religion over non-religion. Furthermore, given the invitation prominently displayed on the City website showing a Christian cross and quoting Shirley Dobson, the reasonable observer would also believe that the City prefers Christianity over all other faiths.

The Establishment Clause of the First Amendment to the United States Constitution prohibits the gov-

ernment from endorsing, advancing or promoting religion. Therefore, it is grossly illegal and inappropriate for the City to be hosting, organizing, supporting or otherwise promoting a patently religious event, such as a prayer breakfast. This practice certainly has the effect of government endorsement of religion thereby alienating non-believers and non-Christians in Keizer by turning them into political outsiders in their own community.

In order to comply with the law, you, as Mayor of Keizer, must discontinue the practice of expending any taxpayer dollars and public resources to promote the religious prayer breakfast.

The separation of church and state is among one of the most fundamental principles of our system of government. The United States Supreme Court has held that public officials may not seek to advance or promote religion. The Supreme Court has specifically stated, "If there is any fixed star in our constitutional constellation, it is that no official, high or petty, can prescribe what shall be orthodox in politics, nationalism, religion, or other matters of opinion or force citizens to confess by word or act their faith therein. If there are any circumstances which permit an exception, they do not now occur to us." (emphasis added) *West Virginia Board of Education v. Barnett*, 319 U.S. 624, 642 (1943).

As the City's highest elected official, you are charged with great responsibility and have been given significant trust by its citizens, including those citizens who may not share your religious viewpoints. Even if the prayer breakfast is sponsored by an outside religious organization or church, any insinuation that you attend these religious events in your official capacity as mayor raises grave Establishment Clause concerns. Therefore, we strongly urge you to consider your status as the highest elected official in Keizer and the importance of the constitutional principle of separation of church and state before you agree to attend any future religious functions in your community as Mayor of your city, much less lend your name as mayor to the event.

You and the City government cannot engage in any conduct that gives the appearance of endorsing religion. Therefore, the City must take immediate action to disassociate itself from this Christian event. Any promotional materials failing to indicate who the actual sponsor of the event is, or failing to provide an adequate disclaimer notifying the public that the City is not sponsoring, hosting or endorsing this particular religious event, must be taken down immediately to avoid further confusion.

Can your office assure our complainants that no public money is spent on this patently religious event or continue actions, which make it appear that the City is sponsoring the event? We ask that you inform us promptly, in writing, of the steps your office takes to remedy these serious Establishment Clause concerns.

Sincerely,

Rebecca S. Kratz
Staff Attorney

Enclosures