



# FREEDOM FROM RELIGION FOUNDATION

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## *E-MAILED AND MAILED TO CHAIRS*

September 9, 2009

Richard Schoch, Chair, & Members of Chippewa County Board  
Michael Murphy, Chair, & Buildings & Ground Committee Members  
c/o County of Chippewa Falls  
711 North Bridge St.  
Chippewa Falls WI 54729

Dear Chairs and County Board Members:

Our national organization, which works to protect the Constitutional principle of the separation between church and state, is concerned about the monument placed by the Zunker memorial group at the Chippewa County Courthouse. We write on behalf of our membership in Chippewa Falls, our 1,140 members throughout the state and our 14,000 members nationwide.

The Buildings and Grounds Committee originally made the correct decision when it voted to remove the religious language. According to news accounts, the religious language caught the committee by surprise. The religious language had not been pre-approved by the County. There is a strong appearance that the committee, with pressure from the “blogosphere” and orchestrated campaigns by the religious right, has been bullied into reversing its correct decision. The County needs now to stand up for the Constitution.

While a memorial honoring those who tragically die while serving the public can be appropriate for display on government property, there were concerns expressed by county officials from the start over the direction of this monument. The issue that specifically concerns the Foundation, of course, is the inclusion in this monument of the deeply personal, theological views on the bible and salvation of the deceased:

“I don’t feel I have gone too soon. I feel lucky everyday God keeps me here. When I die, I know where I’m going. Don’t be sad because the bible says it’s greater than anyone can even imagine when it’s your time to see it. You will. But never before it. Don’t do anything stupid! I want to make sure I see all of you again someday. You must ask Jesus into your heart, believe he died for you and believe he rose again. Live a good life. Ask for forgiveness and believe then I will see you all again. I love you all and thank God for the time I had with each and everyone of you. I love you all. I thank you all for a good life.”

A plaque bearing this quotation would be appropriate at a church, a private club or a family altar. However, it crosses the line for a County display to be saying: “You must ask Jesus into your heart, believe he died for you and believe he rose again.” It is a well-established principle in law that once a government body accepts a privately-paid-for monument, that government body becomes the publisher of the message. The fact that private funds were used to pay for the monument does not diminish or mitigate the appearance of endorsement of this religious message. (It does appear, unfortunately, that some of the fundraisers felt this fact freed them of obligations to conform to the County’s responsibilities to the public in a display intended for the courthouse grounds.)

Once the County of Chippewa Falls accepts and hosts this monument, the personal views of Mr. Zunker take on the power and imprimatur of the County. What was personal speech now becomes government speech. The monument gives an appearance of permanent endorsement by the County of Mr. Zunker’s private and proselytizing religious views.

It is always difficult to deal with requests by mourners to use public land for personal religious use. For instance, enormous crosses and happenstance altars may express heartfelt views at the scene of a highway accident. But such displays not only violate state policy on use of right-of-ways, but often become traffic hazards themselves. It is up to government agents to enforce the law they take an oath to uphold.

The Foundation engaged in a protracted negotiation with the City of Oshkosh over a proposal by a religious family to place a very large “Christmas box angel” in a prime spot in a public park as a tribute to children in the community who have died untimely deaths. While hearts went out to this couple, who had lost a child, and we expressed that fact, our members in the community pointed out that this religious monument would be inappropriate in a public park: that it was the kind of tombstone-like display appropriate for a religious cemetery, not a community-owned park, and would convey an unconstitutional endorsement of Christianity. Our complaint sparked an initial controversy, and a religious-right group offered to “defend the city,” but in the end, the couple made the right decision. They accepted the practical and kind offer by a private facility to display their proposed monument in an appropriate setting.

In this instance, the public land in question is not a park but a courthouse, a *core government building*. The language at issue is specifically bible-based and specifically Christian, commanding the reader to believe in Jesus and the Christian scheme of salvation. Yet your community boasts residents and taxpayers who are atheists and agnostics, as well as nonChristians: Jews, Wiccans, Native American practitioners and others who should not be told by their government in monuments or otherwise to believe in the bible and Jesus. It is difficult to believe that if a deputy or patrolman who was an atheist was killed on duty, that his personal views on religion—such as strongly-stated advice to reject the bible, Christianity and belief in a god—would survive such a vetting process and be written in stone on county ground! Yet the County has now created an unfortunate legal precedent.

We would like to suggest that if the funders of the monument will not compromise on the religious content—as apparently they did not compromise on other parameters set by the County—that the monument be returned to them so that it may be placed prominently and appropriately on private land. This will ensure that the memorial fund honors its intentions, while the Constitutional separation between religion and government is honored by the County.

May hear from you at your earliest convenience?

Very truly,



Annie Laurie Gaylor  
for FFRF, Inc.