



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE:

FFRF asks Swarengin for Non-Sectarian City Council Invocations

Members of the Central Valley Alliance of Atheists and Skeptics have asked the Freedom from Religion Foundation to help end the practice of opening Fresno City Council meetings with unconstitutional prayers.

Fresno, CA (cvaas.org) February 9, 2010 -- The Freedom from Religion Foundation (FFRF) has warned Fresno Mayor Ashley Swarengin that sectarian prayers used to open Fresno City Council meetings are unconstitutional, and against both Federal and State law.

In a letter sent to Mayor Swarengin on February 8, FFRF attorney Rebecca Markert said,

“The Fresno City Council cannot, under current federal and state law, permit any prayers that contain references to an explicit deity. The prayers currently given during Council meetings impermissibly advance Christianity and lead a reasonable observer to believe that the Council is endorsing not only religion over nonreligion, but also Christianity over other faiths.”

A review of the Fresno City Council 2009 Video Archive from the Fresno.gov website by members of the Central Valley Alliance of Atheists and Skeptics has shown that the prayers used to open City Council meetings have all referred to Jesus Christ, or are given “in the name of Christ” or “in Jesus’ name”.

The Supreme Court has found that prayers before legislative bodies are permissible only in narrow circumstances. The Supreme Court has ruled that non-sectarian, non-denominational prayers are allowed. The legislative body in question is not allowed to select the officiant based upon any impermissible religious motive.

The Fresno City Council has shown that it favors prayers that are explicitly Christian, which gives the impression that the Council is endorsing Christianity over all other religions, and over non-religion. The City Council's preferential treatment of one religion over all others is a reproach of religious equality that ostracizes Fresno citizens who hold non-Christian philosophical or theological beliefs.

The Central Valley Alliance of Atheists and Skeptics encourages the Fresno City Council to discontinue prayers at the start of council meetings. Failing that, CVAAS asks the Council to start using non-sectarian prayer in accordance with State and Federal law, and abiding with the Establishment Clause of the Constitution of the United States of America.

About the Central Valley Alliance of Atheists and Skeptics

Central Valley Alliance of Atheists and Skeptics encourages teaching positive secular philosophy and rational scientific inquiry throughout the California Central Valley. CVAAS supports the separation of state and church, and urges members of the secular and skeptical communities to join or to form affiliated rational organizations.

For more information about CVAAS and for upcoming calendar events, see the CVAAS website at www.cvaas.org. Inquiries can be directed to info@cvaas.org or by phone at (559) 892-0102.

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