

ACCORDING TO THE U.S. RELIGIOUS LANDSCAPE Survey, conducted by the Pew Research Center's Forum on Religion & Public Life, 5% of American adults say they do not believe in God or a universal spirit, but only about a quarter (24%) of these non-believers actually call themselves atheists.

Whether you would call people with no religion "atheist" is unclear. Many self-professed atheists describe themselves in terms that are usually indicative of agnosticism. If you ask people, "Do you believe that God does not exist?" you will get more positive responses than if you ask "Are you an atheist?" given the stigma of the term "atheist" in the minds of many.

Non-belief growing

According to the more extensive American Religious Identification Survey (ARIS), roughly 12% of Americans are atheist (no God) or agnostic (unknowable or unsure).

One sign of the lack of attachment of Americans to religion is that 27% do not expect a religious funeral at their death.

Self-identification as Agnostic or Atheist rose markedly from over a million in 1990 to about 2 million in 2001 to about 3.6 million today.

The "Nones" (no stated religious preference, atheist, or agnostic) continue to grow, though at a much slower pace than in the 1990s, from 8.2% in 1990, to 14.1% in 2001, to 15.0% in 2008.

For more statistics and information, go to: <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/metro/documents/aris030609.pdf>

The Barna Group, which does religion surveys, found in a 2007 poll of teenagers and young adults:

"...only 3% of 16- to 29-year-old non-Christians express favorable views of evangelicals. This means that today's young non-Christians are eight times less likely to experience positive associations toward evangelicals than were non-Christians of the Boomer

generation (25%)."

Also in the study: Among young non-Christians, nine out of the top 12 perceptions were negative. Common negative perceptions include that present-day Christianity is judgmental (87%), hypocritical (85%), old-fashioned (78%), and too involved in politics (75%)—representing large proportions of young outsiders who attach these negative labels to Christians.

Interestingly, only about five million adults unequivocally use the label "atheist" and, when asked to describe the nature of God, staunchly reject the existence of such a being. In other words, most of those who align with the no-faith viewpoint harbor doubts as to the existence or nature of a supreme deity but do not express outright rejection of God.

Atheists and agnostics are distinct demographically from the active-faith segment. The no-faith audience is younger, and more likely to be male and unmarried. They also earn more and are more likely to be college graduates. Asian Americans are substantially more likely to indicate no religious identity than other racial or ethnic groups.

Between 1990 and 2008, the Catholic population proportion of the New England states fell from 50% to 36% and in New York it fell from 44% to 37%, while it rose in California from 29% to 37% and in Texas from 23% to 32%. **A**

CLASSIFIEDS

Classified ads are published free for all active members of Atheists of Florida. Send your ad information to: AthAFLE@aol.com Subject line "CLASSIFIEDS."

Typewriters—Atheists of Florida has two SCM, Corona-matic 8000 and Secretarial 300, and IBM Wheelwriter 3. One or all, make offer.

Meet-ups—Get together with other freethinkers—two opportunities every month.

Every third Tuesday of each month—St. Pete Atheist / Freethought group meets for good food, good drink, good conversation, and lotto tickets! FMI: contact Gary Thompson at easy8@tampabay.rr.com.

Every fourth Tuesday of each month—Atheists of Florida meet-up at the A of F office (see Chapter Meetings).

Fine American-made, Hand-crafted Jewelry—If you're looking for that special one-of-a-kind piece for yourself or that special someone, take a look at the Swarovski crystal, pearl, amethyst, turquoise, jade and other gorgeous gemstone bracelets, necklaces, and earrings available from TRACY'S TRES CHIC. Tracy Thomas, Jewelry Artist, 727-235-3220, mschacha@tampabay.rr.com.

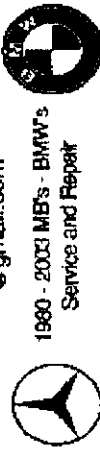
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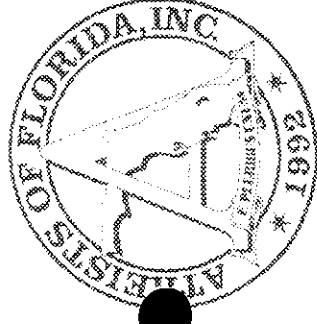
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Atheists of Florida

Dedicated to the absolute separation of State and church
A Founding Member Society of the Atheist Alliance International
(The Democratic Alliance of Autonomous Atheist Societies)



Volume XIV No. 7 June 2009

Atheist Forum Web cast

ABOUT THREE YEARS AGO, ATHEISTS OF Florida hosted *The Old Time Atheist Hour* as a live, audio Web cast with audience participation, as well as a live call-in Public Access television show titled the *Atheist Forum*. Both suspended production before 2009 for different reasons.

We have now renewed our Internet outreach by bringing back the audio Web cast with the *Atheist Forum* brand. The *Atheist Forum* was always a lively show when Public Access TV functioned effectively in the Tampa area, featuring news and events, debates, political and philosophical discussions—and in 2007, even an atheist wedding broadcast live!

So it is a great pleasure that we can announce our new schedule for the *Atheist Forum* Web cast, produced by A of F Executive Director Ed Golly now produced every Tuesday evening at 8:00 PM.

Can't hear it live? No problem. All productions are archived and available at the same Web site, TalkShoe, to be heard at your convenience.

We would also like to hear from anyone interested in appearing as a guest on the *Atheist Forum*, as well as your suggestions for future guests. These interviews may be held either by phone or in person at the Michael Zaccar Studio in South Tampa, Florida.

How to find us

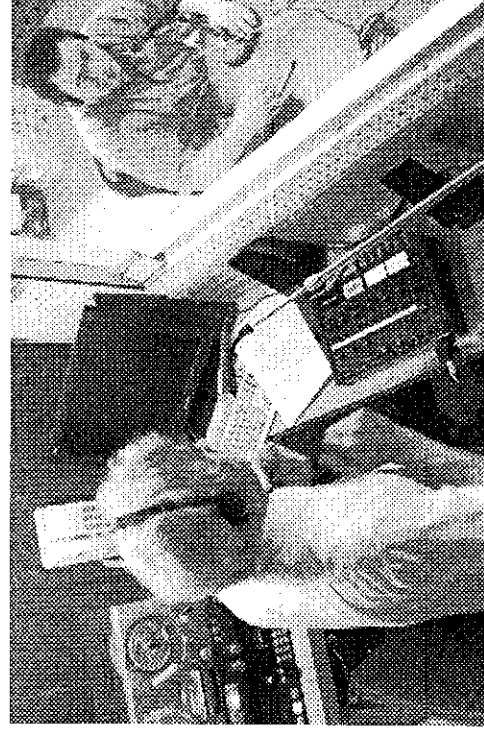
The Web casts are scheduled to be produced live every Tuesday night at 8:00 PM EDT.

You can join from any computer.

<http://www.talkshoe.com/talkshoe/web/tscmd/tc46116>

If you don't have the link in front of you, just Google Talkshoe. The listing will offer several options. No need to sign in, just select **Browse** and you will be connected to the main Talkshoe screen. In the upper right corner, locate the white **SEARCH** box and simply type in "Atheist Forum" which will call up the information box for our show. **CLICK** on "Listen" and it will list all archived programs, plus give you a countdown to the next scheduled live show.

If you are listening to a live show, here's how you can call in and participate:



Ed Golly (left) produces an episode of the *Atheist Forum* from the control room while Brent Yaciw discusses a topic in the Zaccar Studio.

1. Dial: (724) 444-7444
2. Enter: 46116 # (this is the "Call ID" for the *Atheist Forum*)
3. Enter: 1 # (or your PIN if you register at TalkShoe)

You should then be able to hear the program over your phone. We can't screen the calls, but we may send an e-mail in the chat room to ask if you want to talk on the show, so be alert for that. Or you can send a chat indicating your address and that you want to comment.

Thanks for listening. We welcome all comments. **A**

Who was Michael Zaccar?

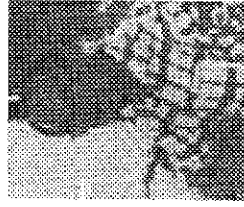
Many of our members inquire about Michael Zaccar and ask why our Web cast studio bears his name.

Of course he was an avowed Atheist long before the formation of Atheists of Florida.

Zaccar was attending all the meetings of the Miami chapter of American Atheists where Atheists of Florida founder Christos Trancakos met him after the debacle of the Murray family and their refusal to bring democratization into the organization. He joined Trancakos and 52 other former members of American Atheists and signed The Chapter Resolution which led to the formation and incorporation of Atheists of Florida, Inc. in 1992.

Zaccar was a bachelor and a printer by trade. His parents were of Jewish descent who lived in Greece, but the exact location or city is unknown. Most probably they were from Salonika, a city in the northern part of Greece which, before WW II, had a population of about 200,000 Jews (the largest Jewish population in Greece).

Zaccar also spoke some Greek and was very interested in science. Without fail, he donated \$10.00 each and every month to the Atheists of Florida. He was also a generous contributor and supporter of its official scholarship. The Mark Twain Scholarship Fund, Inc.



Michael Zaccar

Zaccar left a substantial annuity to Atheists of Florida which we received upon his death in 2007. We are forever indebted to his generosity and concern for our future. For this reason, we have named our Web studio in his honor. **A**

"It's not about being politically correct. For me, it's about being biblically correct." —Carrie Prejean
Miss California, on saying she opposes gay marriage at the Miss USA pageant, which she believes cost her the crown.

THE CREATIONISTS HAVE MADE A LIST OF TEN questions that they give to high school students to challenge public school biology teachers. In response I have made this list of questions for creationists.

1. Are there colleges and universities any place in the world where scientific research is done that supports creationism? If so, name them.
2. Who are the scientists that do scientific research that supports creationism?
3. What scientific research or experimentation has been done that supports creationism and

THE SOLUTION IS EVOLUTION

No. 42—Challenge the Creationists

~Jim Strayer



Jim Strayer is a retired biology teacher living with his wife, Bobbe, in Ormond-By-The-Sea, Florida. He can be reached at BIOJIMS@aol.com.

4. How would a scientist or creationist test for the existence of a creator or intelligent designer? who has validated it?
5. How do creationists explain the existence of genes that have no use (genes to make teeth in birds—genes to make muscles that do not function in humans)?
6. How do creationists explain the many diseases that effect only humans? Common Cold, Mumps, and Yellow Fever are all caused by virus. Typhoid fever, Gonococcus, and Syphilis are all caused by bacteria. River blindness (Onchocerciasis) and Schistosomiasis are caused by worms.
7. Scientists agree on the age of the universe and the dates for return.

What's new at the office?
To begin with, we have a new Atheists of Florida phone number: 813-902-2420. Unlike our former number, this line runs through a computer allowing the caller to leave a message. We will also be able to leave messages for callers containing information about upcoming meetings and events, the Web cast times, outreach events, etc.
Our somewhat extensive library is now fully catalogued. Members may check out books any time. There is no deposit required or due



www.atheistsofFlorida.org
www.free2think.org

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have harbored a burning "eye-for-an-eye" anger toward abortion doctors. He once subscribed to a magazine suggesting "justifiable homicide" against them, and apparently likened Dr. Tiller to Nazi death-camp doctor Josef Mengele.

One may argue that the murder of Dr. Tiller constituted only a single death compared with some 3,000 deaths on 9-11-01. But remember the Oklahoma City bombing of April 19, 1995, when Americans Timothy McVeigh and Terry Nichols used a truck bomb to destroy the Murrah Federal Building in downtown Oklahoma City. It was the most significant act of domestic terrorism in American history prior to the September 11 attacks of 2001, claiming 168 lives and leaving over 800 people injured. The blast destroyed or damaged 324 buildings in a sixteen-block radius, destroyed or burned 86 cars around the site, and shattered glass in 258 nearby buildings. Damages from the bombing totaled at least \$652 million.

McVeigh and Nichols were sympathizers of an American militia movement and were motivated by the federal government's handling of the Waco Siege (1993) and Ruby Ridge incident (1992). The bombing was timed to occur on the anniversary of the Waco incident, when the federal government raided and burned to the ground the fundamentalist Christian compound of David Koresh and his followers. So clearly, just like Tiller's suspected murdered, McVeigh was a Christian sympathizer.

Searching for Truth

Dear Atheists of Florida,
My name is Derrick Claville, a bright young man who's been searching diligently for the "Truth of Life." Unfortunately, I've been searching for the "Truth of Life" in all the wrong places (Christianity, Islam, Judaism, Catholicism, etc., etc.). But as of today, I can honestly say that I've been totally liberated from the clutches of religion with the help of reading one book that changed my life forever. Now I want to know more and share my ideas with those who wouldn't look down on me for thinking outside of the box. And that's the reason why I have chosen to write you today.

LETTERS



I am currently incarcerated for a crime I'm 100% innocent of, and to make matters worse, my funds are in a nonexistent state right now. So if possible, could you please send me all and any old or outdated magazines and newsletters, used or damaged books, and any other material that may be available? I also request to be placed on your mailing list, a catalogue from which I may order your material if ever I was financially capable, and information on how I may be able to support the cause, whether financial donations or otherwise.

We welcome correspondence from readers. Address mail to:

Atheists of Florida
P.O. Box 130753
Tampa, FL 33681
Or email us at:
AtheistForum@aol.com

I truly hope that you take this letter under

Decision is a loss for Constitution

BROOKFIELD, WI—A federal judge ruled June 2 that a Wisconsin public school district can hold high school graduation ceremonies in a church.

Americans United sponsored litigation to stop the practice of the Elmbrook School District on the basis of previous Elmbrook Church graduation ceremonies. Then, graduating seniors received their diplomas in the church's sanctuary on a dais beneath an immense cross, which is nearly 20 feet tall and 10 feet wide. On their way into the sanctuary, students had to pass religious displays and symbols in the church's lobby and passageways. Bibles and hymnals lined the pews where parents and students had to sit.

"Public school graduations should always be held at locations where all families feel welcome," said the Rev. Barry Lynn, executive director of Americans United. "This decision fails to respect all students and the Constitution."

AU maintained that public school students should not be required to submit to a religious environment as the price of attending their graduation. AU submitted documents to the court showing that there were at least 11 secular venues in the area that could accommodate the graduation ceremonies, some of which are used by other local high schools. As of the May 29 hearing, six of those venues were still available.

For weekly state/church separation news, listen to the Atheist Forum Web cast on TalkShoe.com.

serious consideration because I need your help like Jesus needed God :) I will be waiting patiently for your response.
Respectfully yours,
—Derrick Claville
Homer, LA

Atheists of Florida has sent a variety of literature to Mr. Claville, and will send complimentary newsletters for a year.

Stem Cell Research

I remember when the harvesting of body parts of the deceased to implant into sick people was an ethical question. Now, transplantation is so successful that people offer to donate body parts on their driver's license and in their wills. Stem Cell research should be thought of as organ donation of unused zygotes. These zygotes may have had potential but not probability as they were never meant to be implanted into a human uterus. They were intended to be destroyed when no longer needed for implantation. If destroying unused zygotes is akin to abortion, then the parents of the zygote should approve their destruction, their donation to other infertile couples, or continue their financial support in perpetuity, of the few frozen cells that make up a blastocyst a ball of potential but improbable, human cells. Unfrozen, these cells have the potential to grow new organs or fix damaged ones. They are the new potential organ donors, and that is the way we should think of them.
—Gloria Julius
Pineleaf Park, FL

Arizona Supreme Court rules against school vouchers

ARIZONA—The Arizona Supreme Court ruled unanimously that voucher subsidies violate a provision of the Arizona Constitution banning tax funding of religious and other private schools. The March 25 decision upholds the right of taxpayers to support only the religious institution of their choice.

The case, *Cain v. Home*, sought to uphold state voucher programs in direct contradiction of Article IX, Section 10 of the Arizona Constitution, which states that no tax appropriations may be made "in aid of any church, or private or sectarian school...."

Arizona is one of 37 states including Florida with strong constitutional provisions that bar the diversion of tax funding to religious schools. Other state courts have ruled against school vouchers in the past, and more may do so in the future.

States still battle evolution

Oklahoma

NOW, THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED BY THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES OF THE 1ST SESSION OF THE 52ND OKLAHOMA LEGISLATURE:

THAT the Oklahoma House of Representative strongly opposes the invitation to speak on the campus of the University of Oklahoma to Richard Dawkins of Oxford University, whose published statements on the theory of evolution, and even "faculty time spent promoting this event."

Rick Farmer, director of committee staff for the Oklahoma House of Representatives, wrote the University on March 12 requesting confirmation that Dawkins had waived all compensation for the speech.

Resolution 1014 ends with:

THAT a copy of this resolution be transmitted to the President of the University of Oklahoma, the Dean of the College of Arts and Science at the University of Oklahoma, and the Chair of the Department of Zoology at the University of Oklahoma.

Resolution 1015 ends similarly but without reference to Dawkins.

Texas

The March 23 edition of the *Wall Street Journal* deemed it important enough to print an article: "Texas School Board Set to Vote on Challenge to Evolution." The article noted that the Texas Board of Education was to vote on a new science curriculum designed to challenge the guiding principle of evolution: a step that could influence what is taught in biology classes across the nation. Texas is such a huge textbook market that many publishers write to the Texas standards and then market those books nationwide.

The *WSJ* article further claims the proposed curriculum change might require teachers to raise doubts that all life on Earth is descended from common ancestry. According to Texas school board chairman Dr.

of evolution and opinion about those who do not believe in the theory are contrary and offensive to the views and opinions of most citizens of Oklahoma.

THAT the Oklahoma House of Representatives encourages the University of Oklahoma to engage in an open, dignified, and fair discussion of the Darwinian theory of evolution and all other scientific theories which is the approach that a public institution should be engaged in and which represents the desire and interest of the citizens of Oklahoma.

Can you believe this? This is Resolution 1014. Incidentally, the Oklahoma state legislature is investigating the University of Oklahoma for hosting a speech by noted evolutionary biologist Dr. Richard Dawkins.

In early March the Oklahoma legislature put forth two resolutions (House Resolutions 1014 and 1015) condemning both Dawkins, and the theory of evolution as "an unproven and unpopular theory." Despite their efforts, the legislature failed to prevent Dawkins from speaking to an audience of thousands at the University of Oklahoma on March 6.

A letter from the University Open Records Office confirms that on the day of Dawkins' speech, Oklahoma State Representative Rebecca Hamilton requested substantial information relating to the speech from Vice President for Governmental Relations Danny Hilliard. Representative Hamilton's exhaustive request included demands for all e-mails and correspondence relating to the speech; a list of all money paid to Dawkins and the entities, public or private, responsible for this funding; and the total cost to the university, including among other things, security fees,

McLeroy, a dentist, textbooks will "have to say that there's a problem with evolution because there is. We need to be honest with the kids."

Dr. McLeroy leads a group of seven social conservatives on the 15-member board, opposed by a bipartisan group of seven (often joined by an eighth board member considered a swing vote) that support teaching evolution without caveats. All board members have come under enormous pressure in recent months, especially three Republicans who support teaching evolution without references to "weaknesses." The state Republican Party passed a resolution urging the three to back Dr. McLeroy's preferred curriculum. A conservative activist group put out a news release suggesting that all three were in the pocket of "militant Darwinists."

Christian terrorism alive

WICHITA, KS—The murder of Dr. George Tiller in Kansas on May 31 represents nothing less than pure Christian terrorism. Our nation continues to fail to comprehend that while we spend billions prosecuting the so-called "War on Terror" in the Middle East, Christianity can produce home-grown terrorists on par with the Muslims whom we allege have our demise in the forefront of their minds.

Tiller, 67, was murdered while acting as an usher at his Lutheran church in Wichita. He was one of only a few physicians in the nation who performed late-term abortions. The man being held in the slaying is said to

A Brazilian archbishop's decision to excommunicate the mother of a 9-year-old rape victim who had an abortion, as well as the girl's doctor, outrages Anne Eggebroten. She says Catholic leaders need to revisit their own religious teachings.

WOMENSE-NEWS—Saving the life of a 9-year-old rape victim is a crime, according to Brazilian Archbishop Jose Cardoso Sobrinho and Cardinal Giovanni Battista Re, head of the Congregation for Bishops at the Vatican.

The "crime" of ending the pregnancy last month in Brazil has earned excommunication for the mother and doctors of the child, but not for the stepfather who apparently sexually abused the child for three years, and her sister as well.

"This kind of ethics can only marginalize a church that would like to portray itself as a leader for moral guidance in the world. 'Life must always be protected,'" said Re to the daily *La Stampa* in Rome.

The cardinal made no comment on the need to protect little girls or their lives.

"In essence, it appears the church's attitude and the stepfather's attitude are no different, namely, the idea that a female body is not the girl's or woman's own but belongs to men to determine whatever they want with it," notes Letha Dawson Scanzoni, a writer on religion and social issues.

On the other hand, Catholic priests who commit sexual abuse of children are not excommunicated but rehabilitated.

Prominent Catholic feminists have called the church to task, notably Frances Kissling, the former president of Catholics for Choice, and leaders of the Women's Ordination Conference, who underline the continuing need for women in leadership of the Roman Catholic Church.

A further irony, highlighted by Aisha Taylor and Erin Saiz Hanna of the Women's Ordination Conference, is that Pope Benedict XVI issued a March 8 proclamation of the church's commitment to "every woman . . . obtaining complete respect for her dignity, one day after the cardinal's 'right to life' words."

Did the archbishop in Brazil or the cardinal in Rome call for prayers for this child and her family? Who is paying for the counseling this child surely needs? Is a priest or nun visiting the child and her mother and assuring them that God loves and forgives their decision, or even approves it?

Not likely. Archbishop Sobrinho reportedly told the press that abortion is an even more serious crime in the church's view than the rape of a child.

Another Faith May Comfort Her

One blessing in the church's decision to expel the child's family is apparent: She will not remain within a system teaching her that she and

Anne Eggebroten is the editor of *Abortion—My Choice, God's Grace: Christian Women Tell Their Stories (Pasadena: New Paradigm Books, 1994)* and teaches *Women and Religion at California State University, Northridge*. She blogs about women's rights and can be reached at www.mathaymaria.blogspot.com.

Vatican expulsion should start outcast honor roll

~Anne Eggebroten

W.E. News commentator



The abortion was legal because Brazil permits the procedure in cases of rape and to save a woman's life, although it outlaws all other abortions. This case qualified on both counts; the child's life was in danger because she was bearing twins and her body weight was just 80 pounds. The girl's stepfather has been jailed and faces criminal charges.

Brazil's president, Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva, and its progressive health minister, Jose Gomes Temporao, have criticized the excommunication and defended the doctor for performing the legal procedure. Temporao has already called for reforms to Brazil's abortion law in the interest of protecting women's health. About 1 million illegal abortions are performed each year in the nation, and about a quarter-million women are hospitalized after receiving botched procedures, according to the reproductive rights group Ipas.

Father Knows Best

But Father knows best. The Roman Catholic Church in Brazil and in Rome ruled that Brazilian law is wrong: the twin fetuses carried by the 9-year-old had a right to live, a right that outweighed her possible death. Let's count the crimes here:

1. a child is raped;
 2. The Roman Catholic Church wanted to force her to carry twins to full term and undergo either childbirth or Caesarean section;
 3. the church doesn't mind risking the girl-child's life and sanity;
 4. a Brazilian archbishop excommunicated the child's family and her doctors;
 5. local priests may actually deny the Eucharist to these people.
- The list could continue.

her family have committed an unforgivable sin, a murderer. Many other religious communities exist in Brazil, some of which offer a more just interpretation of this tragedy.

Apparently these Catholic leaders have not read chapter 8 of the Gospel according to John lately. When the religious leaders of the first century are about to stone an anonymous woman (but not her partner) for adultery, Jesus warns them, "Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her."

By excommunicating the mother and doctors who made a difficult decision in an ethically complex crisis, the men of today's church defy these words.

Honor Roll of the Excommunicated

To demonstrate the irrelevance of the church's position, women's groups around the world need to start an honor roll of people excommunicated by the Roman Catholic Church, starting with Maryknoll priest Roy Bourgeois, who attended and affirmed the ordination to the priesthood of a Roman Catholic woman in Kentucky last August.

Then add the names of Dr. Rivaldo Albuquerque—who performed the girl's abortion—and others involved in this case, as well as other Catholics whom the church has silenced or excommunicated, primarily for disagreeing with the church's position on social issues such as contraception, gay rights, women's ordination, and clerical celibacy.

Some organization could hold an annual honors banquet with a cash award, or perhaps the excommunicated could be given travel expenses to the annual conference of a para-church group like Call to Action, where they could meet together for support.

IF ALL BEGAN WITH A SINGLE MEMBER SIPPING AN article in the local newspaper. A of F Board member Steve Brown alerted the officers by e-mail that the City of Largo, FL, would be conducting the 30th annual prayer breakfast at a rented church sanctuary. Tickets were available for purchase at City Hall, and city staff was working on preparations for the event on staff time.

This excerpt from the article demonstrated the spirit of the event:

Largo has lined up Peña as its key speaker for the Mayor's Interfaith Prayer Breakfast. The goal of the annual breakfast is

to bring the community together. The city looks for speakers who embrace some type of faith and can share inspiring stories from their lives, said Jonathan Evans, assistant to the city manager. Brown is also a member of the Freedom From Religion Foundation, and alerted them to the issue. FFRF responded with a letter to the mayor in April, only a few weeks before the event was scheduled to take place. Atheists of Florida investigated and determined that this was indeed a city function and prepared to also get involved.

Tampa Bay Rays star Carlos
Rebecca S. Kraiz, Staff Attorney
Freedom From Religion Foundation, Inc.
PO Box 750 / Madison WI 53701 / 608/256-8900
April 14, 2009

The Honorable Patricia Gerard
Mayor, City of Largo / 201 Highland Ave / Largo FL 33779-0296

Dear Mayor Gerard:

On behalf of several City of Largo residents and other Florida members of the Freedom From Religion Foundation (FFRF), I urge you to immediately discontinue using City resources and taxpayer funds to plan, organize and promote the upcoming Mayor's Prayer Breakfast. FFRF is a national nonprofit organization with nearly 14,000 members, including over 700 members in Florida, whose purpose is to protect the constitutional principle of separation between state and church.

It is our information and understanding that the City of Largo, will host the 33rd Annual Mayor's Prayer Breakfast on May 4, 2009. This event will take place at the Christian Life Enrichment Center at St. Paul United Methodist Church in Largo. The City of Largo (hereinafter City) is advertising this event on the official city website. Your name and government title are also prominently listed on the promotional materials being distributed for the event. Our complainants further inform us that tickets for this event are available *only* at City Hall.

The Establishment Clause of the First Amendment to the United States Constitution prohibits the government 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, which has been recurring for the last three decades, certainly has the effect of government endorsement of religion. The official prayer breakfast located at the Christian Enrichment Center sends the message that the City not only prefers religion over non-religion, but also Christianity over all other religions. It alienates non-believers in Largo by turning them into political outsiders in their own community.

Any reasonable City resident would logically interpret the City's actions in this case as government endorsement of religion. The City is prominently advertising a religious prayer event on the official City website. Residents interested in attending the prayer breakfast can only go to City Hall to get tickets. Finally, you appear to be sponsoring and attending the event in your official capacity as mayor of Largo. It is of no consequence that the breakfast will take place on private property. Given the high degree of City involvement and entanglement in the event, any reasonable person would interpret this conduct as government espousal of religion.

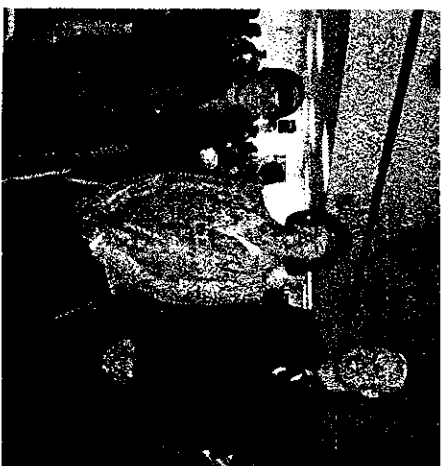
The City must refrain from expending any further taxpayer dollars, using publicly funded employees, and drawing on any other publicly funded resources to host and promote the religious prayer breakfast. This includes publicizing the event on the City website, advertising and handling ticket sales, and being a sponsor (or co-sponsor) of the event. It is not uncommon for ministerial associations or private groups to host a prayer breakfast and invite public officials, who attend as individuals. This is the case at the "National Prayer Breakfast" in D.C., for example. But it is absolutely unlawful, inappropriate and unseemly, under the First Amendment and Art. 1, Sec. 3 of the Florida State Constitution, for a mayor's office itself to host such an event.

We ask that you take immediate steps to remedy the serious violations of the Establishment Clause the City's involvement in the prayer breakfast presents. We further ask that you comply with your oath of office to protect and defend the United States and Florida constitutions. May we hear from you at your earliest convenience about what steps you have taken to ensure constitutional dictates are followed?

Sincerely,
Rebecca S. Kraiz, Staff Attorney



Atheists of Florida at the Largo Prayer Breakfast. From left, Nan Owens, Gina Harvey, president of the Atheist Student Alliance at University of South Florida; Samantha Knight; Rob Curry, president, Atheists of Florida; John Kieffer, and Ed Golly.



Rob Curry (right) poses with Mayor Girard (center) and Gina Harvey. Religious symbols and phrases permeated the hall.

The Largo City Attorney and City Manager responded with an implication that our concerns were unfounded and indicated their intention to continue the prayer breakfast practice unabated.

Since several of our members actually reside in Largo, A of F president Rob Curry wrote to the mayor on May 1 with sentiments mirroring FFRF's. We purchased six tickets to the event to see for ourselves exactly how the affair would be conducted.

The Honorable Patricia Gerard
Mayor, City of Largo / 201 Highland Ave. / Largo FL 33779-0296

RE: City of Largo Mayor's Interfaith Prayer Breakfast

Dear Mayor Gerard:

I encourage you to reconsider your annual prayer breakfast sponsorship. Atheists of Florida broadly supports the concerns raised in the April 14 letter to your office by the Freedom From Religion Foundation. The mere existence of a longstanding tradition does not make it legal, fair, or unalterable. I am confident that you recognize this and will exercise your responsibility to do the right thing for the community as a whole.

To this end, I have two clarifying questions:

Is it the position of your office to promote prayer?

In your view, is it the city's proper function to encourage or to discourage any purely religious rituals, beliefs or practices whatsoever? Consider that a prayer breakfast, no matter how many faiths are represented, is not inclusive of atheists. Let's be fair and honest about this.

The law rightly prohibits using public funds to promote religious practices, and that prohibition includes having your paid staff organize this event while they are working for the city. Such taxpayer financial support for a prayer breakfast has to stop. Any future events sponsored by the city must be structured to eliminate the evident endorsement of religion and the entanglement between government and religion. Because this breakfast is focused on the religious practice of prayer, your office violates the law by sponsoring it and creates an environment hostile to many of your constituents. Emphasizing prayer is inherently exclusive and effectively discriminatory against a portion of the community you were elected to serve. These facts deserve your immediate attention and corrective action.

Please note that Atheists of Florida is a nonprofit, educational corporation created to heighten public awareness about atheism and to monitor state/church separation issues. We are a founding member society of the Atheist Alliance International. We disagree with supernatural doctrines while valuing personal liberty as a precious heritage for everyone. We welcome efforts by the city of Largo to foster a fully inclusive sense of community, inspiration and understanding. In fact, we share these goals. We promote positive aspirations. We are tireless advocates for freedom, honesty and integrity. Our object is not to condemn, but to inform - not to convert, but to educate. Atheists of Florida serves the needs of a significant and growing nonreligious community of reason.

Simple fairness dictates that nonreligious members of the community deserve the same level of acknowledgment and inclusion as anyone else. The undeniable truth is that many people do not find value in prayer. In fact, many feel extremely alienated by the special preference your office is currently granting to an identifiably religious event. When a public official uses his or her office to show a clear preference for one religion over another, or even for religion in general over irreligion, that does not truly support the community as a whole.

Your official sponsorship of a special breakfast devoted to prayers, benedictions and invocations actually divides the community. You need to be aware that it is divisive.

Some members of Atheists of Florida who reside in Largo are dis-

mayed and insulted by your office officially endorsing religious rituals in sponsoring a prayer breakfast. I implore you to recognize that nonreligious Americans, including atheists, Humanists and free thinkers of every description, have always been a part of the community. We have always been here, and the demographic trends show our numbers increasing dramatically. Although in the past we have been marginalized, ignored and silenced, we decline to remain invisible or to accept being relegated to second-class citizenship.

I fully support the freedom of any Floridian to engage in prayer, if so desired. That is a choice for each individual to make. Our concern here is not with prayer per se, but with the improper, official endorsement of religion by a government body.

If you intend to continue sponsoring this annual breakfast, I ask that your office share with me how your future plans will change to include atheists and atheist leaders as an equally valued part of the event, just as we are part of the greater community. How will your office guarantee there is no undue preference for religious practices and rituals such as prayer? How will you acknowledge the equal participation of citizens who are nonreligious? I am willing to work with you to answer any questions, to share the feelings and concerns of our members, to help find solutions that are fair to everyone, and to address in a cooperative manner all our mutual interests in this area.

Together, we may discover effective ways to collaborate that can make future events avoid entanglement between government and religion, while being truly inclusive for all.

Sincerely,
Rob Curry,
President, Atheists of Florida
Alan S. Zimmet, City Attorney

At the breakfast, Curry introduced himself to the mayor and received a most cordial response. Following the event, she continued to discuss the history of the prayer breakfast with Curry, explaining that it had evolved over the past 30 years as different mayors altered it from a non-denominational event to a purely Christian affair, and she had inherited the tradition.

Mayor Gerard did host the event, but her primary action was to present an award recognizing outstanding community service to the local Rotary club. She offered no prayers herself during the entire event.

"After speaking with Mayor Gerard," says Curry, "I feel confident that she supports truly inclusive community participation in all future events sponsored by the City of Largo. We are engaged in planning to join some of these future events, with the long-term goal of helping to insure that nonreligious members of the community are not excluded or marginalized."

Atheists of Florida will work cooperatively alongside any other organization that shares our positive values and inclusive spirit. Please contact Rob Curry if you would like to contribute to our effort in any way.

Atheists of Florida

Atheists of Florida