

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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Atheists Urge End to Divisive City Commission Prayers

LAKELAND, Fla.—Atheists of Florida wants the Lakeland City Commission to abolish its practice of government sponsored prayer. According to this Tampa-based nonprofit, government should be strictly neutral, neither advocating nor discouraging any religious expressions.

EllenBeth Wachs, director of the Lakeland Atheists of Florida chapter, spoke near the end of the Commission meeting on Monday, March 1: "Separate is not equal," she explained. The Commission listened in silence to her idea that an atheist invocation or a Wiccan prayer would serve as examples of a more inclusive approach than the almost exclusively Christian prayers she came to challenge. Wachs was followed by Rob Curry, executive director for Atheists of Florida, who said atheists living in Lakeland feel discriminated against and marginalized by the religious practice of prayer to open public meetings. He suggested a silent moment of reflection as a truly inclusive way to solemnize such occasions without degrading anyone's religion or insulting anyone's intelligence. Both emphasized that the city is obligated to treat all citizens equally. "Many of your constituents are atheists," Curry added.

"This is a basic civil rights issue. Atheists with business to bring before the Commission have no good choices when it comes to dealing with the Commission's prayer ritual," according to Atheists of Florida President John Kieffer. "They must either pretend to be religious, or else be identified as a despised minority if they don't, risking negative treatment from the city or from their own neighbors."

On November 1, 2009, Atheists of Florida brought a controversial billboard to Memorial Boulevard asking "Don't believe in God? You are not alone."

About Atheists of Florida

Atheists of Florida was founded in 1992 to heighten public awareness about atheism and to monitor state/church separation issues. This nonprofit civil rights and educational group is also a founding member society of the Atheist Alliance International. Chapters meet in Lakeland, Largo, St Petersburg, and Tampa and members participate in the Tampa Bay Coalition of Reason, a collection of a dozen atheist, humanist and freethought groups. Atheists of Florida serves the needs of a nonreligious community that disagrees with supernatural doctrines while valuing personal liberty as a precious heritage for everyone. Recent national surveys show that 16% of the American population is nonreligious, an increase from 14% two years prior.

Objectives include: (a) advocating state/church separation, (b) defending the civil rights of atheists and others with minority views on religion, (c) educating the public to dispel common misconceptions about atheism, (d) offering social support for atheists, (e) encouraging an inclusive sense of community, inspiration, mutual understanding and respect, and (f) promoting freedom, honesty and integrity.

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