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"Single Faith" Federal Prison Programs Canceled after FFRF Files Suit

A Major Victory for FFRF!

October 27, 2006

(MADISON, WIS.) In response to a legal challenge by the Freedom From Religion Foundation, the Federal Bureau of Prisons quietly canceled its plan to open at least five "single faith" programs at federal penitentiaries.

The Bureau in late May had suspended calls for solicitations to run "single-faith" programs at as many as six federal prisons. The Foundation filed suit on May 4. The Bureau posted a short announcement at its website yesterday that "it is determined to be in the best interest of the government to cancel" the plan.

"We agree that setting up single-faith prison programs is certainly *not* in the best interests of our secular government--or of prisoners," comments Annie Laurie Gaylor, Foundation co-president. "Secular, practical education is the answer in our prisons, not proselytizing a captive audience of prisoners, most of whom are already religious!"

"Our lawsuit has averted an egregious First Amendment violation, but the federal prisons are still engaging in unconstitutional activity," Gaylor added.

The Foundation lawsuit will proceed, since it is still challenging the constitutionality of ongoing "multifaith" programs set up by the Bureau.

The lawsuit, filed in the U.S. District Court, Western District of Wisconsin, names **Attorney General Alberto R. Gonzales**; Federal Bureau of Prisons director **Harley G. Lappin**, and **Clay Johnson III**, director, Office of Management and Budget. Plaintiffs include the Freedom From Religion Foundation, a national state/church watchdog group of freethinkers (atheists and agnostics), co-presidents Annie Laurie Gaylor and Dan Barker, and founder Anne Nicol Gaylor.

The Bureau of Prisons' 18-month Life Connections Program, instigated by the Department of Justice Task Force for Faith-based and Community Initiatives, has been operating since at least 2003. Created by Bureau Chaplain Kendall Hughes, it was designed as a faith-based model based "on the premise that inmates should pursue, nurture and commit themselves to religious faith."

Implemented by the Religious Services Branch of the Bureau of Prisons, Life Connections is operating in at least five federal institutions: the Federal Correctional Institution at Milan, Mich.; the U.S. Penitentiary at Leavenworth, Ks.; the Federal Medical Center at Carswell, Texas; the Federal Correctional Institution at Petersburg, Va., and the Federal Correctional Institution at Victorville, Calif.

The Life Connections Facilitators hired by the Bureau of Prisons must have a degree with a major in religious studies, religious education or related curriculum. The facilitator coordinates all components of the Life Connections Program.

The Foundation contends the program goes far beyond accommodation, and instead exists to encourage and promote faith among inmates.

Such activities "violate the fundamental principle of the separation of church and state by using Congressional taxpayer appropriations to intentionally support activities that endorse religion."

The lawsuit further alleges that the Office of Management and Budget engages "in activities that create an atmosphere intended to cause federal agencies to increase their contracting with faith-based organizations merely because the organizations are faith-based." The complaint points out that the Office of Management and Budget gives a "report card" to each major federal agency which apparently grades the agencies on the extent to which they have disbursed or increased their appropriations to faith-based agencies.

The Foundation seeks a judgment declaring that the Congressional taxpayer disbursements for the Life Connections Program violate the Establishment Clause of the First Amendment, an order enjoining the defendants from continuing such appropriations, and an order requiring the defendants to establish regulations and oversight to ensure future funded activities do not include religion as a substantive integral component.

Freedom From Religion Foundation v. Gonzales, Case No. 06-C-0244-S, has been assigned to Judge John Shabaz, U.S. District Court, Western District of Wisconsin.

[Read the Complaint.](#)

The Freedom From Religion Foundation, based in Madison, Wis., is a national association of freethinkers (atheists, agnostics) that has been working since 1978 to keep church and state separate.