



Eastern Region Office  
P. O. Box 40008  
Philadelphia, PA 19106  
215-592-1513 T  
215-592-1343 F

December 7, 2015

Central Region Office  
P. O. Box 11761  
Harrisburg, PA 17108  
717-238-2258 T  
717-236-6895 F

*Via Facsimile (412-856-3366)*

Western Region Office  
313 Atwood St.  
Pittsburgh, PA 15213  
412-681-7736 T  
412-681-8707 F

Gregory Erosenko, Mayor  
Linda Gaydos, Council Member  
Nick Gresock, Council Member  
Ron Harvey, Council Member  
Jim Johns, Council Member  
Paul Caliarì, Council Member  
Steve Duncan, Council Member  
Tom Wilson, Council Member  
City of Monroeville  
2700 Monroeville Blvd.  
Monroeville, PA 15146

**Re: Recitation of Lord's Prayer at Council Meetings**

Dear Mayor Erosenko and Council Members:

We are writing in connection with Monroeville's practice of opening Council meetings with a Christian prayer led by an elected government official. This practice was first brought to the attention of the ACLU of Pennsylvania through the complaints of Monroeville residents. The current Monroeville custom of beginning its Council meetings with prayer led by an elected official has been captured on the video record of Monroeville's Council meetings.

Under our constitutional system, all religions are equal in the eyes of the law. The citizenry must be free to voice concerns to those holding governmental office without fear that their religious affiliation, or lack thereof, will be taken into account by those to whom they bring their concerns. Office holders must strive to wear religious blinders when conducting public business. Thus, to ensure the religious neutrality of government, the Supreme Court has held that office holders may not prescribe the prayers to be recited in our public institutions. *Town of Greece v. Galloway*, \_\_ U.S. \_\_, 134 S.Ct. 1811, 1822.

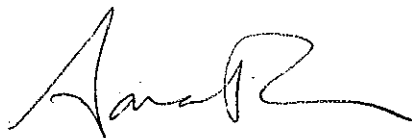
(2014). Government officials violate the Establishment Clause when they recite sectarian prayers, like the Lord's Prayer (*see Mullin v. Sussex County*, 861 F. Supp. 2d 411 (D. Del. 2012) (collecting cases holding that Lord's Prayer is sectarian))), before meetings of legislative bodies because such prayers send the message that the government endorses the religious content of the prayer and coerce those who attend council meetings to participate in them. *See Hudson v. Pittsylvania County*, 2015 WL 3447776 (W.D. Va. 2015); *Lund v. Rowan County*, 2015 WL 2072345 (M.D.N.C. 2015).

The federal and state constitutions mandate maintenance of a wall separating church and state. Such separation is a fundamental component of the American constitutional system. Official endorsement of religion, such as having the chief elected official say a prayer – especially when it's the same prayer – at every meeting is a violation of the Establishment Clause because “it sends a message to nonadherents that they are outsiders, not full members of the political community, and an accompanying message to adherents that they are insiders, favored members of the political community.” *Santa Fe Indep. Sch. Dist. v. Doe*, 530 U.S. 290, 309-10 (2000) (internal quotation marks and citation omitted). Monroeville is a diverse community, with residents from many different faiths, and some of no faith. Elected officials should not be sending a message that any particular faith is preferred by elevating a particular prayer to official status. Monroeville's established Council prayer practice constitutes an impermissible breach of the wall separating church and state, and thus violates the First Amendment.

The ACLU of Pennsylvania is committed to defending the First Amendment. A written commitment from Monroeville to discontinue Council's current unconstitutional prayer practice is requested by January 4, 2016. Should Monroeville fail to communicate such a commitment, or if we receive no response by the above date, the ACLU will consider the pursuit of all remedies, including litigation, available to it.

You can send your response via fax to (412) 681-8707 or e-mail to [srose@aclupa.org](mailto:srose@aclupa.org). We look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,



Sara J. Rose  
ACLU-PA Staff Attorney

Jon Pushinsky  
ACLU-PA Cooperating Attorney

cc: Bruce Dice, solicitor (via facsimile 724 327-9659)