

FREEDOM FROM RELIGION *foundation*

P.O. BOX 750 · MADISON, WI 53701 · (608) 256-8900 · WWW.FFRF.ORG

July 29, 2015

SENT VIA U.S. MAIL & EMAIL
trippw@halifaxnc.com

Wes Tripp
Halifax County Sheriff
P.O. Box 36
Halifax, NC 27839

Re: Inappropriate and Unconstitutional Religious Endorsement

Dear Sheriff Tripp:

I am writing on behalf of the Freedom From Religion Foundation (FFRF) to urge you to remove "In God We Trust" from Halifax County Sheriff's Office vehicles. We were contacted by a concerned Halifax County resident. FFRF is a national nonprofit organization with more than 22,500 members across the country, including more than 570 and a chapter in North Carolina. FFRF's purpose is to protect the constitutional principle of separation between state and church.

It is our understanding that the controversial national motto, "In God We Trust," is displayed on Halifax County Sheriff's Office vehicles. Please see the enclosed photo.

It is inappropriate for the sheriff's office to display "In God We Trust" on county property. The fact that these stickers were privately funded indicates that you know it is inappropriate for the government to fund religious statements. It is just as inappropriate for the government to display them on government property. Statements about a god have no place on sheriff cars. Elected officials should not use their government position and government property to promote their religious views. The sheriff is elected to represent all residents of Halifax County, including those who do not believe in a monotheistic god or any gods.

As you are aware, citizens interact with and rely on law enforcement officers during some of the most urgent and vulnerable times of their lives. These citizens should not be made to feel offended, excluded, and like political outsiders because the local government they support with their taxes oversteps its power by prominently placing a religious statement on sheriff's office vehicles. Nor should the sheriff's office turn religious citizens into "insiders." We think you'll agree that law enforcement must be even-handed and avoid any appearance of bias toward some citizens, and hostility toward others.

Citizens of Halifax County trust their elected officials to attend to their elected secular duties. Spending taxpayer time placing religious messages on patrol cars is beyond the scope of secular government. Further, in a time when citizens nationwide are increasingly distrustful of police actions, it is frightening and politically dubious for the sheriff to announce to citizens that county law enforcement officers rely on the judgment of a deity rather than on the judgment of the law.

The history of the motto “In God We Trust” evidences no secular purpose; on the contrary, the motto was first adopted during the Cold War as a reaction to the purported “godlessness” of Communism. America’s original motto was purely secular—“*E Pluribus Unum*” (“out of many, one”)—and was selected by Thomas Jefferson, John Adams, and Benjamin Franklin.

Overall, 23% Americans identify as nonreligious.¹ That 8-point increase since 2007² and 15-point jump since 1990 makes the “nones” the fastest growing identification in America.³ Nationally, about 35% of millennials are nonreligious.⁴ It stands to reason at least some of your staff are nonreligious. “In God We Trust” is not even accurate. For it to be accurate, it would have to read, “In God Some of Us Trust.” Having a religious motto on patrol cars also implies a religious test for employment.

On behalf of Halifax County residents and taxpayers, we urge you remove “In God We Trust” from all sheriff’s office vehicles. The Halifax County Sheriff’s Office should respect the rights of conscience of all citizens, including those who in good conscience reject belief in a god. Please inform us in writing of the actions you are taking on this matter. We look forward to a reply at your earliest convenience.

Very truly,



Annie Laurie Gaylor
Co-President

Enclosure

ALG:mez

¹ *America’s Changing Religious Landscape*, Pew Research Center (May 12, 2015), available at www.pewforum.org/2015/05/12/americas-changing-religious-landscape/.

² “Nones on the Rise: One-in-Five Adults Have No Religious Affiliation,” Pew Research Center, The Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life (October 9, 2012) available at <http://www.pewforum.org/Unaffiliated/nones-on-the-rise.aspx>

³ Barry Kosmin, National Religious Identification Survey 1989-1990.

⁴ *America’s Changing Religious Landscape*, *supra*.