



Press Release

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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MSU-Northern Graduation Prayers Violated Rights

Overtly sectarian prayers defied separation of church and state

MISSOULA, MT — The ACLU of Montana is urging Montana State University Northern officials to apologize for and prevent the reoccurrence of proselytizing at its commencement ceremonies in violation of First Amendment protections of separation of church and state.

Several members of the faculty contacted the ACLU after the May 10 graduation ceremony at the school's Havre campus to report and voice their concerns over the evangelical Christian prayers given.

"Separation of church and state is a cornerstone of the U.S. and Montana constitutions. The ability to practice any faith or no faith at all goes to the essence of what it means to be a free person," said ACLU of Montana Legal Director Betsy Griffing. "MSU-Northern showed poor judgment and a lack of respect for its students, faculty and staff by overtly endorsing one specific religion at its graduation."

The administration at MSU-Northern had been cautioned by a faculty member prior to graduation that if the university proceeded with the invocation and benediction, then they must be done in a careful, nonsectarian manner. Instead, an evangelical minister, Pastor Tim Zerger of the Community Alliance Church, was selected, and according to a number of faculty statements repeatedly referenced Jesus as personal savior in accordance with his church's alignment with the Community and Missionary Alliance.

As faculty are required by university policy and their employment contract to attend commencement ceremonies, they were a captive, and in some cases unwilling, audience. Some were shocked and offended by the prayers.

Professor Janet Trethewey stated she was more shocked than personally offended, but added, "The minister in question was definitely proselytizing and was very forceful in his convictions and manner of speech. I can see where someone who is of another faith or a non-believer could be offended." Professor John Snider also expressed his concerns, stating, "My spiritual and religious views are private, and I do not wish the state to force me to attend graduation as part of my job and then force me to listen to any prayer from any religious tradition."

The ACLU supports freedom of religion, including each person's constitutional right to worship or not to worship in the faith and manner of his or her choosing. Government institutions, like public universities, are expressly prohibited from endorsing one religion over another.

The ACLU has asked that the Montana University System Board of Regents investigate how this breach of constitutional rights occurred and take action to prevent it from happening again.

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