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A federal appellate court has struck down a North Carolina county's policy of opening board meetings with sectarian prayers. The 4th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals today ruled 2:1 that the Forsyth County Board of Commissioners' preference for Christian prayers violates the constitutional separation of church and state.

[Americans United for the Separation of Church and State](#) (the nearest equivalent to the NSS in the USA) — a group devoted to protecting the First Amendment — hailed the court's ruling.

"This decision says all Americans are equal regardless of their beliefs about religion," said Americans United Legal Director Ayesha N. Khan. "The government must never send the signal that one faith has preferred status. When Americans go to government meetings, they should feel welcome regardless of their beliefs about religion," she continued. "The Forsyth board's regular use of Christian prayer clearly violated the separation of church and state."

The record in the case indicates that 26 of the 33 invocations given from May 29, 2007, until Dec. 15, 2008, contained at least one reference to Jesus, Jesus Christ, Christ, Saviour or the Trinity. The appellate court majority said government favoritism in religion is wrong.

"Faith is as deeply important as it is deeply personal," wrote Judge J. Harvey Wilkinson, "and the government should not appear to suggest that some faiths have it wrong and others got it right."

Observed Wilkinson, "Because religious belief is so intimate and so central to our being, government advancement and effective endorsement of one faith carries a particular sting for citizens who hold devoutly to another. Citizens should come to public meetings confident in the assurance that government plays no favourites in matters of faith but welcomes the participation of all."

Keith Porteous Wood, Executive Director of the National Secular Society, said: "The NSS is [fighting a similar case](#) in Britain, aimed at stopping the practice of including prayers as part of council meeting agendas. The case is due to be heard in the High Court on 17 November. Let's hope we get a court as enlightened as the one run by Judge Wilkinson."

A similar battle is also being fought in New Zealand where the District Council in Wanganui has been challenged on the saying of prayers at meetings.

When a ratepayer recently raised an objection to the practice, Councillor Clive Solomon took up the issue and asked for a change. Mayor Annette Main suggested that the prayer could be easily amended to remove references to a god. Instead the Council voted 12 to 1 to retain the prayer at their meetings. Councillor Solomon has now appealed to the Human Rights Commission.

In a letter to the *New Zealand Herald*, Des Vize wrote: “It is high time that the Minister for Local Government intervened and reminded the Wanganui District Council that it is not their business, or the business of any other council in New Zealand, to either confirm or deny the existence of gods. And when an invocation, designed to bring people together, ends up dividing them, then there is something wrong with that invocation.”

See also:

[*Politics and Prayer*](#)

[*Sacred Sessions*](#)