

# Councils abandon prayers following NSS High Court victory

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A survey by *The Sunday Telegraph* has found that 40 councils have recently decided to drop, or "water down" the practice of saying prayers, with more considering doing so.

According to the *Telegraph*, just 21 authorities said they planned to continue their arrangement of "formal" prayers without any changes. Other councils not making changes already hold "informal" prayers before meetings have officially started.

One council in Gloucestershire, unable to completely let go of its ritual has removed all references to "God" and "Jesus Christ" from a prayer traditionally read out at its meetings.

Rev Ross Moughtin is a former chaplain to West Lancashire council where prayers will no longer be included in the formal business. Speaking to the Christian Institute, he said: "The national picture is sad. I would support prayers in council meetings. It helps people to recognise that council meetings are more than simply business meetings – that they have a spiritual dimension."

NSS Campaigns Manager Stephen Evans said: "If individual councillors wish to seek spiritual guidance before meetings their freedom to do so remains intact. Removing prayers from the formal business simply means prayers are no longer imposed on unwilling participants.

"However much the Government wants to believe it, this is not a Christian country. There is therefore simply no justification for Christians, or any other religious group, to assert their supremacy over other religious groups or over non-religious people by making prayers an integral part of the formal civic business.

"The absence of prayers doesn't impose atheism on anyone; it simply creates a neutral space and removes an unnecessary barrier to local democracy being equally welcoming to all sections of society."

However, Andrea Minichiello Williams, CEO of Christian Concern and a director of the Christian Legal Centre was less impressed. Responding to news that councils are abandoning prayers she said:

"These changes highlight the rise of a totalitarian and bitter kind of secularism that seeks to remove all traces of Christianity from public discourse. The claim that secularism is the more neutral option is a myth.

"Secularists are determined to uproot our Christian foundations whilst simultaneously advocating the false notion that atheism provides the correct principles upon which society - and its values - should be based.

"Atheism however is by no means neutral. It is deeply rooted in the rejection of God and the objective standards of morality that He lays for the benefit of all mankind.

"As a nation we need to be determined not to forego the values based on the Gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ, which have shaped our country for centuries and made it the thriving and flourishing nation that it is today.

"I urge all other councils not to give in to the pressure to conform, but to be vocal and visible for the Lord Jesus by continuing to keep prayers on their agenda."

Responding to Ms Williams, NSS Executive Director Keith Porteous Wood said: "she is blatantly and deliberately misrepresenting secularism for her own evangelical ends. The Bideford court order remains in force and she and others are shamelessly inciting councils to break the law.

"The courts have similarly seen through these unprincipled religious tactics - that is why we won the court case and why they have ultimately lost every employment case they have brought."

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