

Testimony of  
**Mr. Steven Rosenauer**

June 8, 2004

Good afternoon. My name is Steven Rosenauer and I live with my wife and two children in Bradenton, Florida. At the request of the Committee, I am here to testify about the important issue of religious liberty in America as it has recently affected my family.

Both my children attend public school in Manatee County, where we live. Last spring, my wife and I were very proud when we were invited to the school board meeting on May 5, 2003, along with my son Joshua, so that the board could recognize and honor him for winning first place in several events at the Technology Student Association State Competition. Several other students were at the meeting so that they could be recognized for similar achievements.

As my wife and son and I sat in the audience, the school board's chair called the meeting to order. Then, to my surprise, she told everyone in the audience to "please stand for the Lord's Prayer" and the pledge of allegiance. The Board members then stood, bowed their heads, and led most of the audience in reciting the Lord's Prayer, a well known Christian prayer considered by Christians to be the prayer taught by Jesus to his disciples. My family is Jewish, and we were shocked and felt uncomfortable and excluded by these actions of our community's elected officials at an official school board meeting. On our way home, my son, my wife and I were all upset. As I explained in a letter I wrote that same night to the school board chair, "I was very offended when you had everyone present rise for a ceremony that I consider against my religion."

For the next several months, board members continued to lead the Lord's Prayer at board meetings, despite my letter as well as letters from People For the American Way Foundation, which had agreed to help me and my family. Some community members made disturbing statements, such as one urging the board to "stand on Jesus Christ" and not to bend to "foreign gods." Some board members strongly defended their actions as permissible religious expression of their faith. One went so far as to state that the Supreme Court isn't "the eternal supreme court," and that perhaps he would have to be taken out in handcuffs one day. But even Pat Robertson's American Center for Law and Justice recognized that the practice was unconstitutional, and that the only type of invocation that could possibly be legal would have to be truly nonsectarian and clearly voluntary. As the Sarasota Herald Tribune explained:

"Manatee is home to a diverse mix of religious faiths. It's chauvinistic for the board to impose a distinctly Christian prayer on everyone attending its meetings. Doing so sends a message, intentional or not, that citizens who don't share the board's faith are viewed in a lesser light...Out of respect for the community's religious diversity - not to mention the Constitution - the board should drop the prayer and end this controversy."

I became hopeful in August, when the board adopted guidelines for its meetings to begin with nonsectarian invocations. But the board repeatedly violated those guidelines as ministers invited by the board led public, sectarian prayer, including prayer in the name of Jesus, despite repeated letters from us. In February, with the pro bono help of People For and the law firm of Hunton and Williams, we filed suit in federal court, after trying for more than six months to resolve the issue.

For awhile, things got even worse. We received anonymous threatening phone calls, like one telling us we should move out of the county if we didn't like "the way they do things here," and the call that threatened "we know where you Jews live and if you don't drop the lawsuit there will be trouble." And during the Jewish holiday of Passover in April, someone vandalized our home by throwing red oil-based paint on the front door and garage door of our house and our truck outside. It reminded us all too chillingly of what has happened to Jews and other religious minorities in other countries, where they don't have the religious freedom and separation of church and state that are the foundation of our great country. My family believes that some school board members and others in the community helped foster the atmosphere where these types of actions occurred when they made public statements of intolerance and their own disdain for the courts.

Both newspapers in our area have strongly supported our position. And I am pleased to report that just last week, the court approved a settlement that we reached with the board, which includes an enforceable consent decree calling for the board to make sure that only truly nonsectarian prayer can be used to open board meetings.

We are hopeful that this situation is now truly behind us. But it has reminded us of the importance of true religious liberty in America, and the dangerous consequences of allowing improper government promotion of religion and eroding the separation of church and state. The Constitution protects the religious liberty of all Americans, not just those of one faith. My family's situation has highlighted the importance of our federal courts in protecting that fundamental principle. Thank you very much.