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Nativity's Potential Removal Sparks Outcry

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Special to the ShowMe Times

MALAKOFF, Texas -- For the sake of his three young sons and the daughter he and his wife will soon adopt from Africa, Pastor Nathan Lorick says he has drawn a line in the dirt of his East Texas community in defiance of an atheist group's demand that a nativity scene be removed from the lawn of the Henderson County Courthouse.

The Freedom From Religion Foundation (FFRF), at the behest of an anonymous Henderson County resident, sent a letter to county officials Dec. 1 stating the religious display was in violation of a United States Supreme Court decision and should be removed from county property. The Henderson County nativity sits amid a collection of Christmas-themed displays, including Santa Claus, Frosty the Snowman, a group of carolers and assorted gnomes.

"What are Christians going to do about this?" the 30-year-old pastor of First Baptist Church Malakoff asked in a phone interview with the TEXAN hours before an appearance at dawn on the nationally broadcast "Fox & Friends" television program. "It's time for the silent majority to wake up, speak up and stand up."

A majority of Henderson County commissioners said they opposed moving the nativity scene based on the FFRF complaint, according to the Malakoff News, reporting on a perspective shared by County Judge Richard Sanders. The county does not own the nativity scene nor the secular decorations, but allows a local group known as Light Up

Athens to set them out on the courthouse lawn on the corner of Palestine and Corsicana streets in Athens.

While FFRF relied on a 1989 Supreme Court case argued by the ACLU as the basis for their complaint of an unconstitutional endorsement of religion, the group claimed the nativity scene on the courthouse lawn is the only seasonal display. Sanders said the county's attorney had reviewed pertinent cases and found Henderson County to be in compliance with federal law.

In the letter to the judge, FFRF argues, "When the county allows this manger scene to be created, which depicts the legendary birth of Jesus Christ, it places the imprimatur of the county government behind the Christian religious doctrine." The East Texas display is one of a dozen nativity scenes that the non-profit Wisconsin-based FFRF is working to eliminate.

Lorick is concerned at the ever-increasing secularization of America, noting that Christian symbols and speech are no longer a significant part of the fabric of the culture and often are marginalized or vilified.

That is not the America in which he wants to raise his children. Lorick and his wife, Jenna, have three sons ages 7, 4, and 2 years old. The couple is in the process of adopting a girl from Africa.

"My kids are young and it's worth fighting to restore the fundamental Christian beliefs we were founded on for my kids' future," he said.

After the Malakoff newspaper broke the story on its Facebook page Dec. 6, Todd Starnes of Fox News Radio, a former Baptist Press employee, spread the word nationally, talking with Lorick by phone. Lorick told Starnes he wants his children to grow up in the same country that had the religious freedom and opportunity to "worship Jesus as I did." That includes the soon-to-be daughter he and his wife are adopting.

"I want to teach her that this is a Christian society," he told the TEXAN.

Lorick also questioned how one local resident and an organization on the other side of the country can turn his county on its head -- a county, Lorick said, that is predominantly evangelical. He feels a "moral, parental and spiritual responsibility" to stand against those who literally would take Christian expression out of the public square.

A Nativity Rally for Dec. 17 is being planned. Among those who joined Lorick in planning it are Robert Welch of Rock Hill Baptist in Brownsboro, Eric Graham of Sand Springs Baptist Church in Athens and Derek Rogers, a county resident who pastors the Cowboy Church of Corsicana. The group circulated a YouTube video at www.youtube.com/watch?v=nW05U6L_MIY calling for Henderson County pastors to meet Dec. 9 at the Athens Sand Springs Baptist Church.

Speaking of himself and his peers, Lorick said, "There's a generation coming up that is willing to take a stand and fight against that and bring our nation back to the Christian principles on which it was founded."

In a Dec. 7 interview with KDFW-TV, FFRF founder Annie Laurie Gaylor said public displays of Christian symbols, such as the nativity scene, can be "intimidating" and send a message to non-Christians that they are not welcome in the county courthouse.

"The reason people come to us is because people are fearful of reprisals. They are fearful of stones being thrown through their window. They are fearful of losing their jobs, losing their friends, losing their clients because there is so much hostility if you speak up for separation of church and state," Gaylor told the Dallas station.

Lorick and others want nothing to do with the kind of visceral response FFRF's spokeswoman alleged.

"Disagreements should be spoken with love and respect," he said. It is his hope that what is said and done in response to the atheist group's demands will "go viral" in news and social media coverage and the entire situation can serve as a platform for the glory of God, he said.

Graham, the pastor of Sand Springs Baptist Church in Athens, said the incident has "awakened" Christians in the county. He also said believers should react with love.

"I know that this thing can be very ugly with people reacting with emotions of anger and outrage," Graham said. "We, however, are making a concerted effort to lead our people to act differently. In a time where Christians are known for what we are against, we want to show that we are for some things too. We are going to act with love, joy, peace, patience, gentleness, goodness and self-control instead of anger and bitterness. "However," Graham added, "we are also going to make it a point to say, 'We have backed up far enough.' Our nation was founded upon Christian principles and with the expressed purpose of Christian liberty. We have been given up those liberties with very little resistance, but it is now time

for Christians to come together in unity and begin pushing back the powers of darkness with the light of Jesus Christ."

Photo Above: Thenativity scene on a courthouse lawn in Henderson County, Texas, could be taken down if an atheist group has its way. Screen capture courtesy WFAA-TV.

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