

## **Faith Leaders Oppose Government-Sponsored Religion in Public School Classrooms**

March 31, 2025

Dear Members of the Missouri General Assembly:

We are faith leaders and houses of worship from across Missouri who value religious freedom for all.

We urge you to vote against SB 594, SB 643, HB 34, and any other bill that would require every K-12 public school to display a government-selected version of the Ten Commandments in every classroom. We believe this legislation is a misguided effort that undermines the faith and freedom we cherish.

The U.S. and Missouri Constitutions guarantee our right, and the right of all Missourians, to religious freedom. That freedom involves respecting the rights of individuals, parents, and faith communities to make decisions about the teaching of sacred texts that inform our religious understandings and practices. Bills mandating the display of the Ten Commandments demean that freedom.

The responsibility for religious education belongs to families, houses of worship, and other religious institutions — not the government. The government oversteps its authority when it dictates an official state-approved version of any religious text. Our faith communities exist to help individuals and families live according to their beliefs. We do not need or want government officials interfering with and usurping this sacred role.

Not only do these unconstitutional bills undermine religious freedom by putting the state in a role of religious authority that will coerce public school students into reading a religious text that directs specific religious actions, they also take sides in important religious debates.

The legislation requires the use of a specific translation of the Ten Commandments — down to individual word choices — that is not remotely universal or inclusive of all faith traditions, even among those of us who incorporate or hold sacred the Ten Commandments. Different faith traditions understand and interpret the Ten Commandments differently. In attempting to reconcile and cobble together these varying interpretations, the text of the display mandated by these bills manages to produce a hodgepodge of scripture that includes twelve, not ten, commandments and fails to reflect the beliefs of many Christian and Jewish communities.

Indeed, the state-dictated version of the Ten Commandments set forth in these bills does not exist in any translation of the Bible. It is simply not possible to create a version of the Ten Commandments that honors every faith tradition's interpretation, and legislators' attempt to do so is deeply offensive to those of us who do observe the Ten Commandments.

We also recognize that the Ten Commandments hold no religious meaning for thousands of Missourians. The Ten Commandments are held in a different light for the many students in our state who are Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist, Sikh, Unitarian Universalist, or who practice other religions or no religion at all. It is not the place of the government or public schools to interpret this text for minority religious groups and for those who are not religious, nor to impose these religious instructions on them.

Finally, this legislation puts every public school teacher in the unenviable position of explaining to Christian and Jewish students why the scripture displayed in their school does not match the translation that a family has chosen to use in their home. Our public school teachers already carry a great load; they cannot be expected to add explaining millennia of biblical nuance to their already full plates.

We do not need to — and indeed should not — turn public schools into Sunday schools. We remain steadfast and united in affirming the values of religious freedom that are foundational to our democracy and will continue to push back against attempts to impose a singular religious viewpoint into our public institutions. We therefore strongly urge you to advocate for and protect the rights of all students by leaving biblical instruction and religious education where it belongs — with our families, churches, and religious institutions!

Sincerely,

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