

Judge Blasts 'Loss of Moral Values,' Reinstates Principal Who Allowed Prayer

A high school principal in Jackson, Mississippi, fired because he allowed a student to read a prayer over the school's intercom system, has been reinstated by a judge who spoke in his decision of the "loss of moral values in public education" which has occurred since the Supreme Court's 1962 decision barring prayer in public schools.

By all accounts, students at Winfield high school had been caught in the same web of violence that has wreaked havoc with the lives of so many of the country's young people. So, in an effort to bring some order out of chaos, the students at Winfield elected to have daily prayer. The school's principal, Bishop Knox, agreed with the students that prayer was a good idea and gave his permission for a short non-denominational prayer to be read over the school's loud speaker system.

The school board, maintaining that the students' prayer was prohibited by the Constitution, dismissed Bishop Knox, an act that set off a firestorm of protest around the state. Subsequently, the Mississippi state legislature passed a law permitting student initiated prayer in the state's schools and Governor Kirk Fordice endorsed the notion of prayer in the schools. Faced with the uproar caused by its decision to fire Knox, the school board reversed itself and imposed a less severe penalty on Knox, voting to suspend him without pay until July 1.

In reinstating Knox, Judge Chet Dillard noted the general decline in the moral fiber of America and he warned against a faulty interpretation of the Constitution which diminished the protections afforded by the Free Exercise Clause. Portions of

the judge's opinion are excerpted below:

This case involves our most treasured freedoms – concerning our schoolchildren, our Constitution, and our religion. Therefore, a short reference to constitutional history is appropriate.

“‘The sacred rights of mankind are not to be rummaged for among parchment, or musty records. They are written, as with a sun beam in the whole volume of human nature, by the hand of the divinity itself, and can never be erased or obscured by mortal power.’ In the beginning, Alexander Hamilton so expressed his views on the value of constitutional rights.

“We have completely missed the main objective of the founding Fathers of our country when we reach the point where we construe our Constitution to allow students to have abortions yet forbid them to pray in our schools...

“The Constitution was designed to preserve a wholesome, regulated, orderly, moral way of life. It was not to destroy the very way of life our forefathers loved, enjoyed, and wanted to guarantee for future generations when it was adopted....In just a relatively few years, beginning in the '60s it has become a constitutional right to have an abortion, avoid the death penalty for at least 10 years, but unconstitutional to pray in school except under very limited circumstances.

“There is a valid argument being made that the attempt to prevent the freedom to offer prayer in school has led to the loss of moral values in public education....All citizens of this country should be concerned enough to help prevent what happened to religion in the Soviet Union. This was brought about by the courts' interpretation of their constitution. That is the reason we must give as much weight to the Free Exercise Clause as we do the Establishment Clause. They must balance.”

Lawyers for the school board have announced they will appeal Judge Dillard's decision to the State Supreme Court.