

## News and Current Events :: Anti-religious group warns Auburn University

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An anti-religion group attempting to throw cold water on an Alabama university after the school's football coach was filmed assisting with the baptism of a student has a "twisted interpretation of the First Amendment," a legal expert says.

On Friday, the Freedom From Religion Foundation (FFRF) sent a letter to Auburn University President Christopher Roberts warning that more than 200 student baptisms, one of which was assisted by Auburn Tigers head football coach Hugh Freeze, somehow violated the Constitution's Establishment Clause.

"These ongoing and repeated constitutional violations at the University create a coercive environment that excludes those students who don't subscribe to the Christian views being pushed onto players by their coaches," it states.

But Tyson Langhofer, senior counsel and director of the Center for Academic Freedom with Alliance Defending Freedom, is calling FFRF's letter a "twisted interpretation of the First Amendment."

The baptisms took place Tuesday night at a lake at Auburn's Red Barn venue, about half a mile from Neville Arena, site of a "Unite Auburn" worship event that drew a massive crowd. (Mateo Arenas)

"Freedom From Religion Foundation's twisted interpretation of the First Amendment has the potential to crush both students' and their coaches' essential right to live out their faith," Langhofer told Fox News Digital in a statement.

Alliance Defending Freedom is one of the most successful Supreme Court litigation firms, winning numerous cases dealing with First Amendment and religious freedoms.

"Public universities are supposed to be the marketplace of ideas and have an obligation to protect and promote free speech and free exercise of religion," Langhofer stated.

"Auburn University is a public university, not a religious one," FFRF stated in its letter. "It is inappropriate and unconstitutional for University employees to use their University position to organize, promote, or participate in a religious worship event. Nor can Auburn's coaches proselytize or participate in religious activities with students or hire a chaplain to do so."

Langhofer, however, says FFRF's letter itself is "unconstitutional."

"As the Supreme Court recently reaffirmed in the Coach Kennedy case, religious coaches and students have the right to engage in religious activities on campus in their private capacity. FFRF's desire to silence religious students sends a clear message: 'You are not welcome here.' That's unconstitutional," he added.

The "Unite Auburn" event featured performances by Christian worship band Passion and included speakers such as Jennie Allen, a Christian author, and Rev. Jonathan Pokluda, lead pastor of Harris Creek Baptist Church in Waco, Texas.

"What was so great about these baptisms is that it wasn't a planned religious event. It was just a whole bunch of college students moved by their desire to follow Jesus."

Following the event, one individual reportedly wanted to be baptized, but a tub was not available for use. Seeking a solution, students began gathering at the lake.

Photographs and video footage from the event showed hundreds of college students lining the banks of the lake as students waded into the water to be baptized one by one over a two-hour period.

"It was one of the most beautiful things I had ever gotten to witness because there was such a genuine joy and sense of peace in the air. I would look back toward campus and constantly see mobs of flashlights from more students that were running to come to join the crowd," Kenzie Gay, a senior at Auburn, told Fox.

"Everyone was just in awe of what God was doing that night," added Gay, who previously represented the school as Miss Auburn University.

"It took me about 45 minutes to get to where the baptisms were held due to the amount of traffic of people who wanted to go witness the event themselves. Once there, it was quite a sight to see, people dedicating their lives to Jesus without fear, just a whole lot of love."

Auburn University confirmed to Fox News Digital it had received a letter and is evaluating it but had no further comment.

Christian Huff, a Christian podcaster married to Sadie Robertson of the Duck Dynasty family, posted on Instagram in reaction to the FFRF letter, saying, "A head football coach baptizing a player after an event and you're gonna warn the university" absolute joke."