

Correspondence addressed to following officials:

Ohio State Board of Education

Ohio House Speaker

Ohio Senate President

Public school superintendents of Ashland, Crawford, Knox, Morrow, Richland & Wayne Counties

March 11, 2020

Re: Clergy response to the promotion of Eastern Religion in public schools

Dear State and School Officials,

Thank you for your dedicated service to our students. As leaders of the faith community in North Central Ohio, we would like to bring to your attention the following concern.

It is our understanding that a form of Eastern Religion called yoga is being proselytized during compulsory class hours in the school districts: Clear Fork, Galion, Lexington, Lucas, Mansfield, and Shelby.

Yoga is not merely an external physical practice with a purely physiological effect, but rather an internal spiritual practice advertised as being able to provide the power to change an individual and transform the world. ¹Specifically, yoga's 'stretching' and 'breathing' components called 'asanas' and 'pranayama' in Sanskrit are intended to be spiritually transformative.

The courts have repeatedly ruled that yoga and meditation are religious practices. A 1988 Arkansas case commonly known as *Powell v. Perry* concluded that "yoga is a method of practicing Hinduism." The 1995 *Self-Realization Fellowship Church v. Ananda Church of Self Realization* case labeled the "Hindu-Yoga spiritual tradition" as a "religious tradition." And the 1979 *Malnak v. Yogi* case outlined Transcendental Meditation as a "religion."²

The practice of Eastern Religion in the classroom during school hours is a form of coercion due to its mandatory attendance, teacher authority, and peer pressure. In fact, the endorsement of yoga is a violation of the First Amendment's Establishment clause, which forbids government from picking religious winners and losers and enforcing its choice. Without question, Eastern Religion is a practice in conflict with the vast majority of those in our region whether from Judeo-Christian traditions or otherwise. ³

After efforts to contact school districts regarding this issue, our findings list the following examples of local Eastern Religion indoctrination:

- ✓ in November 2016 Shelby Auburn Elementary holds assembly during school hours where yoga instructor gives religious instruction to children ⁴
- ✓ Spring of 2017 Galion Intermediate School permits yoga instructor to implement a student-focused religious program for one dozen students with attention, emotional and behavioral issues. District publicly plans to start religious program for second nine weeks of school year ⁵

- ✓ In November 2018 Shelby Auburn Elementary permits middle school student under teacher supervision to give religious instruction to kindergarteners during class bowing to the sun god 'Surya' and using devotional praying hands poses ⁶
- ✓ In November 2018 Shelby Dowds Elementary permits religious instruction to be given to seventy-five third graders during gym class performing yoga poses. Monthly religious instruction ensues ⁷
- ✓ Spring of 2019 Clear Fork Bellville Elementary permits religious instruction to be given to a third-grade class during home room involving devotional yoga poses and yoga mats ⁸
- ✓ In October 2019, Lucas High School permits religious instruction to ninth graders involving devotional yoga poses and yoga mats during Physical Education classes ⁹
- ✓ In November 2019 Mansfield Senior permits yoga instructor to give religious instruction to high school students during Health Technology class involving devotional yoga poses and yoga mats
- ✓ In January 2020, Lexington mother testifies to school board that her sons were pressured to participate in yoga activities without her permission during class. Episodes cited include Music teacher showing video instructing third grade students to do postures 'bow to the sun god,' and to use 'devotional praying hands in front of their heart' on March 2017...Life Skills teacher showing video discussing practice of yoga and how to collect life-giving forces of the universe to seventh-graders on April 2018... and Language Arts teacher requiring sixth grade class to daily perform postures: 'salute the sun god 'Surya' ,' 'bow to the sun,' and 'praying hands posture,'. According to mother, the teacher pressured the students by saying "You are not too cool to not do this (yoga)" on August 2019 ¹⁰

In Plain School District, Stark County parents took issue with the morning yoga routine for all three hundred students involving a Tibetan bell and yoga poses. The elementary school also had a "mindfulness room" featuring scrolls containing quotes by the Dalai Lama. Consequently, the school district took appropriate action and discontinued the program in 2013. ¹¹

The implementation of Eastern Religion yoga in public schools is such a divisive issue that parents in Georgia called into question the practice ¹² and Alabama has banned yoga in schools statewide. ¹³

Proponents of Eastern Religion refute claims yoga is not a religious activity. Subhas Tiwari, professor at the Hindu University of America and graduate of the prestigious Bihar Yoga Bharati University commented "The simple immutable fact is that yoga originated from the Vedic or Hindu culture. Its techniques were not adopted by Hinduism, but rather originated from it."¹⁴ In fact, the American Yoga Association has advised against yoga for children under age sixteen because postures can interfere with still-growing bodies. ¹⁵

Even if yoga is disputed as a form of religious practice, there is little doubt on the effects of yoga. A study found over sixty-two percent of students in secular yoga change their primary reason for practicing. Most initiate yoga practice for exercise and stress relief, but for many, spirituality becomes their primary reason for maintaining practice the study stated. ¹⁶ Additionally in a separate study of mindful yoga retreat participants, Deane Shapiro found that longer-term meditators were less likely to be religious monotheists and more likely to identify as Buddhist or with "All" religions.¹⁷

While proponents of Eastern Religion allege yoga brings benefits to student practitioners, our Biblical faith tradition brings just as many if not more scientifically proven benefits. Yet ironically in a nation with Judeo-

Christian heritage it is school sanctioned prayer, Intelligent Design curriculum and the display of the Ten Commandments that are strictly prohibited from public schools.

Local school districts currently promoting Eastern Religion may be unaware of the less controversial alternatives that provide students better focus skills, improved health conditions, and higher academic performance. These scientifically proven alternatives include aerobic exercise, napping, and healthy lunches.

In summary, this diverse body of faith leaders concurs with our Judicial Branch, and Eastern Religion proponents that yoga is a form of Eastern Religion. Therefore, as clergymen representing (105) congregations, we are requesting a written response from the Boards of the listed school districts assuring that yoga and any forms of transcendental meditation will not be permitted within the school district during school hours. In addition, the American Center for Law & Justice (ACLJ) will be notified about the listed incidents. The ACLJ has launched a national petition and initiated forthcoming litigation regarding this matter.¹⁸

For your reference, a copy of the updated Guidance on Constitutionally Protected Prayer and Religious Expression in Public Schools from the U.S. Attorney General's office has been provided. All written responses to this correspondence should go to attached mailing address.

References

- 1 Letter dated February 2, 2016 regarding Legal & Practical Concerns Regarding the District's Calmer Choice Mindfulness Curriculum, National Center for Law & Policy, 539 West Grand Avenue Escondido, CA 92025 760-747-4529 • www.nclplaw.org
<http://www.nclplaw.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/12/DYRSD-Legal-Opinion-Memorandum-2-2-161.pdf>
- 2 "The debate over yoga and mindfulness in schools," by Candy Gunther Brown, Professor of Religious Studies, Indiana University, Philly Voice, May 13, 2019 <https://www.phillyvoice.com/yoga-mindfulness-schools-religion-controversy/>
- 3 "150 Ohio Pastors Sign Year of the Bible Proclamation: 'Bible Illiteracy Is Plaguing Our Politically-Correct Society'" by Heather Clark, Christian News Network, January 21, 2019 <https://christiannews.net/2019/01/21/150-ohio-pastors-sign-year-of-the-bible-proclamation-bible-illiteracy-is-plaguing-our-politically-correct-society/>
- 4 "Ohio author Chris Stanley came to read his books and do yoga with students..." Shelby City Schools Twitter account, @shelbywhippets on November 4, 2016
- 5 "A little yoga goes a long way for Galion Intermediate School staff," by Galion Inquirer, October 7, 2017, <https://www.galioninquirer.com/news/23223/a-little-yoga-goes-a-long-way-for-galion-intermediate-school-staff>
- 6 "Yoga Studd Studio is at Auburn Elementary School," November 19, 2018, post at <https://www.facebook.com/yogastuddstudio/>
- 7 "Yoga Studd Studio is at Dowds Elementary School," November 26, 2018 post at <https://www.facebook.com/yogastuddstudio/>
- 8 "Thank you! Our classroom got our yoga mats today and we are so excited!" Paula Slezak, January 24, 2019 post at <https://www.facebook.com/paula.a.trippe>
- 9 "We sprinkled a little bit of yoga magic at Lucas High School in PE to help students and teachers relax.." Nichole Witchey Studd, October 29, 2019, post at <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=725906631255535>
- 10 "Lexington parent questions use of yoga in classrooms on religious grounds," by Mark Caudill, Mansfield News Journal, January 17, 2020 <https://www.mansfieldnewsjournal.com/story/news/2020/01/16/lexington-parent-questions-use-yoga-classroom-religious-grounds/4487477002/>
- 11 "Plain Township school stops 'mindfulness' program after some in community raise concerns," by Stephanie Warsmith, Akron Beacon Journal, April 14, 2013, <https://www.beaconjournal.com/article/20130414/NEWS/304149442>
- 12 "Georgia parents' yoga objections: Does 'mindfulness' in schools cross a line?" by Lucy Schouten, Christian Science Monitor, March 24, 2016 <https://www.csmonitor.com/USA/Education/2016/0324/Georgia-parents-yoga-objections-Does-mindfulness-in-schools-cross-a-line>

13 "Yoga remains prohibited in Alabama schools," by Leada Gore, The Birmingham News, August 19, 2019
<https://www.al.com/news/2019/08/yoga-remains-prohibited-in-alabama-schools.html>

14 "Yoga Renamed Is Still Hindu: 'I challenge attempts to snatch yoga from its roots,'" by Subhas R. Tiwari, Professor at the Hindu University of America, Hinduism Today, January February March 2006 <https://www.hinduismtoday.com/modules/smartsection/item.php?itemid=1456>

15 "General Yoga Information," American Yoga Association,
<http://web.archive.org/web/20170629212527/http://www.americanyogaassociation.org/general.html>

16 "Why practice yoga? Practitioners' motivations for adopting and maintaining yoga practice," Authors: Park CL, Riley KE, Bedesin E, Stewart VM, Journal of Health Psychology, July 16, 2014 <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/25030795> Group examined motives for adopting and maintaining yoga practice in a national survey of yoga practitioners (360 yoga students, 156 yoga teachers). Both students and teachers adopted yoga practice primarily for exercise and stress relief. Over 62 percent of students and 85 percent of teachers reported changing their primary reason for practicing; the top changed primary reason was spirituality.

17 Deane H. Shapiro, "A Preliminary Study of Long-term Meditators; Goals, Effects, Religious Orientation, Cognitions," The Journal of Transpersonal Psychology 24.1 (1992): 34.

18 "Conservative legal groups are suing public school yoga and mindfulness programs. This explains why," by Candy Gunther Brown, Washington Post, July 10, 2019 <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2019/07/10/conservative-legal-groups-are-suing-public-school-yoga-mindfulness-programs-this-explains-why/?outputType=amp>

List of endorsing clergy representing one hundred and five (105) North Central Ohio congregations

Pastor George Lewis, Shelby Temple of GOD	Pastor James Marshall, Ganges Community Church
Pastor David Green, Sovereign Baptist	Pastor Steven Hodges, Galion Gospel Baptist
Pastor Layton Broom, Paradise Hill United Methodist	Pastor Les Farley, Irresistible Church
Pastor Christopher Thomas, Diamond Hills Baptist	Pastor Steven Baldrige, Rome Community Church
Pastor Rick Lewis, Shelby Church of GOD	Pastor Doug Tackett, Taylortown Community Church
Pastor Mike Rose, Hope on the Hill Chapel	Pastor Anthony Cooper, Shelby Life Church
Pastor Dink Porter, First Church of Open Bible	Pastor Patrick Bailey, North Bend Brethren
Pastor Bryan Schatzinger, Calvary Chapel	Pastor Bruce Copley, Faith Chapel
Pastor Ron Puff, Pleasant Valley Baptist	Pastor Hank Webb, Belmont Community Church
Pastor Ronnie Conn, Elm St. Freewill	Pastor Chad Hayes, Caeserea Baptist
Pastor Art Kennard, Maranatha Christian Ctr.	Rabbi William Hallbrook, Sar Shalom Center
Pastor Clarence Sanderfer, New Life Baptist	Pastor Denny Finnegan, First Evangelical Presbyterian
Pastor Howard Burnett, Perrysville Baptist	Pastor El Akuchie, Godsfield House of Prayer
Pastor Jerry O'Brien, Faith Harvest Fellowship	Pastor Bill Howell, Shiloh Messiah House Prayer
Pastor Bill Lewis, Butler Connection Church	Pastor Don Wilson, Mansfield Faith Assembly
Pastor Russell Stanford, All GOD's Believers	Pastor James Spencer, Mansfield Peoples' Baptist
Pastor Steve Schag, Shelby Calvary Baptist	Pastor J.C. Church, Victory in Truth Ministries
Pastor Joshua Cole, Crestline Tabernacle Praise	Pastor Glen Phillips, Hillside First Church of GOD
Pastor Mark Wireman, Shiloh Pentecostal	Pastor Chris Spencer, Crestline Grace Baptist
Pastor Ted Howard, Apostolic Holiness	Pastor Paul Matthewson, Maranatha Bible Baptist
Pastor Dave Guild, Mansfield Foursquare	Pastor Brian Phillips, New Beginnings Freewill
Pastor Ferlie Yates, Hanna Rd. Church of GOD	Pastor Rick Wiseman, Promised Land Fellowship
Pastor James Garrett, Ontario Christian Fellowship	Pastor Sylvester Ginn, Hesed Agape Fellowship
Pastor Joe Smith, Westside Baptist	Pastor Mark Meyer, Grace Point Sanctuary
Pastor Eric Byrom, Grace Fellowship	Pastor Ron Smals, Woodville Grace Brethren
Pastor Bruce Philippi, Journey Life Center	Pastor Les Vnasdale, Cornerstone Grace Brethren
Pastor John Grimm, Plymouth United Methodist	Pastor T.J. Waters, Lexington Church of Christ
Pastor Floyd Allen, Philippian Community	Pastor Ron Kosa, Living Word Church
Pastor Merle Stewart, Bethesda Fellowship	Pastor Clyde Kerby, Ministries of Hope & Healing
Pastor Rick Maddox, Galion Alliance	Pastor David Mahon, Galion Apostolic Assembly
Pastor Steve Brenneman, Awakening Christian Ctr.	Pastor John Bouquet, Savannah Bethel Baptist
Pastor David Bates, Unity Freewill Baptist	Pastor Gary Grant, Crestline Church GOD Prophecy

List of endorsing clergy representing one hundred and five (105) North Central Ohio congregations

Pastor Tim Davis, Newville Baptist

Pastor Larry Hulver, New Liberty Baptist

Pastor Paul Larson, First English Lutheran

Pastor Mark Abel, Southview Grace Brethren

Pastor Travis McKenzie, Compassion Freewill Baptist

Pastor Joe Beran, Berlin United Methodist

Pastor Matt Pond, Shelby First Freewill Baptist

Pastor Mark Cobb, Providence Baptist

Pastor David Parsons, Zion's Refuge Baptist

Pastor Bill Fox, Crestline Faith Community

Pastor Mark Hamilton, Providence Church

Pastor Ben Gregg, Plymouth Church of GOD

Pastor James Mitchell, Polk Temple Baptist

Pastor Russ Smith, Shiloh Wesleyan

Pastor Henry Bradley, New Community Temple

Pastor Louis Blevins, Latter Rain COGIC

Pastor Paul Lintern, Oakland Lutheran

Pastor Matt Smith, Love Action Church

Pastor James Hill, Paradise Freewill Baptist

Pastor Dallas Waggle, Lucas Foursquare

Pastor Earl Eiklor, Cornerstone Freewill Baptist

Pastor Steve Burkhalter, Mansfield Potter's House

Rabbi Bob Bauer, Beit El Elyon

Pastor Kevin Evans, Ganges Liberty Baptist

Pastor Robert Bird, Perrysville Vermillion Baptist

Pastor Joe Beran, Batemantown United Methodist

Pastor Robert Kurtz, Mansfield Baptist Temple

Pastor Joe Maggelet, Ashland Fellowship Christian Athletes

Pastor Jason Price, Mansfield Victory Baptist

Pastor Randy Raynes, Mansfield Fellowship Baptist

Pastor Mark Dettmer, Pleasant Grove Community

Pastor Robert O'Brien, Apostolic Faith Assembly

Pastor Rich Hurles, Plymouth Life Point

Pastor Dan Baer, Mansfield Gospel Assembly

Pastor William Jordan, Faith Temple COGIC

Pastor Clinton Hearn, Mt. Hermon Missionary

Pastor David Ferrell, Mansfield Holiness Chapel

Pastor Paul Lintern, Southside Christian

Pastor Dan Zediker, Mission Point Mansfield

Pastor Keith Carlisle, Ontario First Wesleyan

Pastor Bill Strader Jr., Bucyrus First Alliance