ffrf ACTION FUND

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Madison, WI 53701
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November 20, 2026

SENT VIA U.S. MAIL

Sullivan County Board of Commissioners
3258 TN-126, Suite 101
Blountville, TN 37617

Re: Constitutional concerns regarding Resolution No. 2026-11-37

Dear Sullivan County Commissioners:

I am writing on behalf of the FFRF Action Fund (FFRF AF) to urge the Sullivan County Commission to reject Resolution No. 2026-11-37, which seeks to abolish abortion in Tennessee and explicitly establishes Christian scripture and theology as the basis for government action. FFRF AF is an affiliate of the Freedom From Religion Foundation, a national nonprofit organization with more than 40,000 members across the country, including more than 400 members and a local chapter in Tennessee. We work to ensure that our laws remain secular in order to protect the constitutional separation between state and church and to represent the views of nonreligious citizens.

It is our understanding that Commissioners Lakie Derrick and Josh Hayes have sponsored a resolution urging Tennessee lawmakers to enact legislation treating abortion as homicide, including subjecting pregnant women who obtain abortions to the same criminal penalties that apply to the killing of a person. We understand the resolution is expected to come before the Commission for a vote on December 17, 2026.

While commissioners are entitled to hold personal religious beliefs and express their views on abortion, they must not use their official positions to establish an official religion or claim that the county government derives its authority from Christianity. Yet that is precisely what this resolution does. Please see the enclosed copy.

The resolution begins by declaring:

> The risen and ascended Jesus Christ is the King of kings and Lord of lords (Revelation 19:16), having all authority in heaven and on earth (Matthew 28:18), including over the nations of the earth (Daniel 7:14) and their governments (Psalm 2:10–12).

It then asserts that "civil government was created by God to punish evil," citing additional Bible verses, and characterizes the legal availability of abortion as a "civil sin" for which governments must "repent."

These are not neutral statements of public policy or secular legal principles. They are explicit theological declarations asserting that Jesus Christ exercises authority over American government and that civil officials have a religious obligation to enforce biblical commands. Such claims have no place in an official resolution of a government body that represents citizens of every religion and no religion.

The United States is a secular republic, not a Christian nation governed by biblical law. The Constitution derives its authority from "We the People," not from Jesus Christ, the Bible, or any religious institution. The First Amendment prohibits government establishment of religion, such as passing a law that states, "The risen and ascended Jesus Christ is the King of kings and Lord of lords," and protects the freedom of conscience of all Americans. Tennessee's own Constitution similarly provides in Article I, Section 3, that "no human authority can, in any case whatever, control or interfere with the rights of conscience," and that "no preference shall ever be given, by law, to any religious establishment or mode of worship."

The Supreme Court has specifically stated, "If there is any fixed star in our constitutional constellation, it is that no official, high or petty, can prescribe what shall be orthodox in politics, nationalism, religion, or other matters of opinion or force citizens to confess by word or act their faith therein." *W. Va. State Bd. of Educ. v. Barnette*, 319 U.S. 624, 642 (1943).

The resolution's declaration that Jesus Christ rules over civil government is especially troubling because it directly contradicts the constitutional principle that governmental authority belongs to the people, regardless of their religious beliefs. Sullivan County residents who are Jewish, Muslim, Hindu, atheist, agnostic, or otherwise non-Christian are equally entitled to representation by their elected officials. Their government must not officially declare that they are subject to the religious authority of a deity they do not believe in.

Nor does the resolution's invocation of the Fourteenth Amendment transform its religious demands into constitutional obligations. The Equal Protection Clause does not establish the theological proposition that human life begins at fertilization, require governments to classify abortion as homicide, or compel lawmakers to enforce certain biblical teachings about sin and repentance. Those are assertions advanced by the resolution's sponsors, not commands of the United States Constitution.

Commissioner Derrick has reportedly described December as a particularly fitting time to adopt the resolution because it is the month "when Jesus Christ was born." Of course, there is no historical evidence that Jesus was actually born in December, and the Bible provides no date for his birth. But historical accuracy aside, this statement further underscores the religious motivation behind the proposal. The timing of government action should not be determined by a desire to honor Christian religious observances, nor should public policy be presented as an obligation owed to Christianity.

Commissioners are free to practice their religion, advocate their personal beliefs, and participate in public debate. But there is a fundamental distinction between individual religious expression and a government body formally adopting religious declarations as its own. By passing this resolution, the Commission would be speaking in the name of Sullivan County and its residents, including the many residents who do not share the sponsors' Christian beliefs.

The Commission has a responsibility to serve all Sullivan County residents, not to establish an official religion or advance religiously motivated legislation on their behalf. Government officials should evaluate public policy using secular reasoning, evidence, and constitutional principles rather than treating the Bible as a source of binding civil authority.

We therefore urge the Sullivan County Commission to reject Resolution No. 2026-11-37 at its December 17 meeting. At a minimum, the Commission should refuse to adopt any resolution that declares Jesus Christ sovereign over civil government, invokes biblical commands as the basis for state action, or calls upon government officials to repent of purported religious sins.

The separation of state and church protects the religious liberty and equal citizenship of every American. Sullivan County should uphold that principle rather than abandon it.

Thank you for your attention to this important constitutional concern. We request a written response informing us of the Commission's intended action regarding this resolution.

Sincerely,



Christopher Line
Legal Counsel
FFRF Action Fund

Enclosure

Cc:

David.Hayes@sullivancountytn.gov, David.Akard@sullivancountytn.gov, Cheryl.Harvey@sullivancountytn.gov, Barry.Hopper@sullivancountytn.gov, Andrew.Cross@sullivancountytn.gov, Michael.Cole@sullivancountytn.gov, Joyce.Crosswhite@sullivancountytn.gov, Tony.Leonard@sullivancountytn.gov, Hershel.Glover@sullivancountytn.gov, Dwight.King@sullivancountytn.gov, Daniel.Horne@sullivancountytn.gov, Jessica.Means@sullivancountytn.gov, Zane.Vanover@sullivancountytn.gov, Sam.Jones@sullivancountytn.gov, TWard@scsotn.com, Darlene.Calton@sullivancountytn.gov, Mark.Ireson@sullivancountytn.gov, Joe.Carr@sullivancountytn.gov, Joseph.McMurray@sullivancountytn.gov, Larry.Crawford@sullivancountytn.gov, Gary.Stidham@sullivancountytn.gov, John.Gardner@sullivancountytn.gov, Hunter.Locke@sullivancountytn.gov

Item 10
Resolution No. 2026-11-37

To the Honorable Zane Vanover, Sullivan County Mayor and the Board of Sullivan County Commissioners meeting in Regular Session this 19th day of November 2026.

A RESOLUTION OF THE BOARD OF COUNTY COMMISSIONERS OF SULLIVAN COUNTY TENNESSEE URGING THE STATE OF TENNESSEE TO ESTABLISH EQUAL PROTECTION OF THE LAWS FOR PREBORN CHILDREN AND ABOLISH ABORTION

WHEREAS, the risen and ascended Jesus Christ is the King of kings and Lord of lords (Revelation 19:16), having all authority in heaven and on earth (Matthew 28:18), including over the nations of the earth (Daniel 7:14) and their governments (Psalm 2:10-12); and

WHEREAS, civil government was created by God to punish evil (1 Peter 2:13-17) and, among other things, to penalize (Romans 13:1-7) and deter (Ecclesiastes 8:11) the unjustified taking of innocent human life created in the image of God (Genesis 9:6); and

WHEREAS, while the commission of prenatal homicide is a personal sin, its legal allowance is a civil sin — for innocent blood defiles the land (Numbers 35:33-34) — of which every civil jurisdiction with authority to abolish it must repent for its failure to do so (Deuteronomy 21:1-9; 2 Chronicles 7:14); and

WHEREAS, equal protection of the laws is required by the Fourteenth Amendment to the United States Constitution and by the Tennessee Constitution, including with respect to state laws protecting human life; and

WHEREAS, human life begins at fertilization, and the right to life is the first and most fundamental right that government must protect; and

WHEREAS, equal protection requires impartial justice, such that the penalties available for the killing of a preborn child must be the same as for the killing of a born child — to affirm equal value, to deter, and to render justice; and

WHEREAS, these laws must apply equally to all parties willfully involved, including a mother who knowingly and intentionally procures an abortion, any person who pressures or assists a woman procuring an abortion, and an abortionist who performs it; and

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Item 10
Resolution No. 2026-11-37

WHEREAS, the criminal and civil laws against homicide, assault, and wrongful death are generally matters of state law.

BE IT RESOLVED BY THE BOARD OF COUNTY COMMISSIONERS OF SULLIVAN COUNTY, TENNESSEE, THAT:
SECTION 1:

The SULLIVAN COUNTY COMMISSION urges the state government of Tennessee to pass legislation establishing equal protection of the laws for preborn children, protecting the lives of preborn children with the same homicide, assault, and wrongful death laws that already protect born persons, thereby abolishing abortion; and

SECTION 2:
BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that the SULLIVAN COUNTY COMMISSION urges the governor of this state to publicly support and, when passed, to sign equal protection legislation into law; and

SECTION 3:
BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that SULLIVAN COUNTY CLERK TERESA JACOBS is directed to transmit certified copies of this resolution by the second Friday following its passage to the Governor, Lieutenant Governor, Attorney General, and the State Senator and State Representatives serving SULLIVAN COUNTY.

Duly adopted this _____ day of _____ 2026

Reviewed by Chairman: _____
John T. Gardner, Chairman, Sullivan County Commission.

ATTEST: _____
Teresa Jacobs, County Clerk,

Delivered to the Sullivan County Mayor or his secretary this ____day of_____, 20____ at or about the following time _____by the following method: _____.

_____
Teresa Jacobs, County Clerk

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