

5/29/23

Dear Mayor Parker,

As Clergy and professional leaders in faith communities throughout Ft. Worth and Tarrant County, we were deeply troubled to hear that you had removed the option of earning a Pride badge from your Summer Reading Challenge program at area libraries.

It is our understanding that the inclusion of this optional Pride badge has been ongoing since 2020, and your sudden cancellation of this particular challenge, ostensibly due to your receiving some email complaints, leaves us confused about your motivation for this decision.

We know that you care deeply for families and their children, especially when it comes to students' educational needs and emotional well-being. We assume this doesn't just mean heterosexual, cisgender children, but all children, including those who identify as LGBTQ+. Those children benefit in profound ways when they can see their own stories reflected in the books they read. Denying them the ability to earn a special badge for reading these books sends the message that there is something wrong with them; that their identity doesn't, literally, deserve to be acknowledged.

We take serious issue with the initial social media post by the group "For Liberty and Justice" claiming that the reading challenge posed an "anti-biblical agenda toward children." We feel that nothing could be further from the truth.

Although we come from different faith traditions, we are in complete agreement when it comes to interpreting what Biblical texts teach us: that all children are made *imago Dei*, or *B'Tzelem Eloheem*, in the image of God. And if there is any "biblical agenda" at work here, it is one that demands that we not only affirm but celebrate each precious soul for living lives of authenticity. Stripping them of the ability to be rewarded for reading books that reflect their truth is destructive, demoralizing and, simply, wrong.

You state that you want "all families to feel welcome to participate, understand that parents are the right ones to make decisions for the activities that their children are engaging in. My aim is not to tell families what is right for them, but instead allow families to make those decisions...in ways that make sense for each of them."

How can excluding a community of LGBTQ+ children from fully participating in this reading challenge make them feel "welcome?" How is this in the best interest of families who *want and encourage* their LGBTQ kids, or kids of LGBTQ parents, to read books with characters they can relate to, and who bolster their own sense of self-worth? Shouldn't they, as you state yourself, be the ones to make these decisions?

As we begin Pride month, we respectfully ask that you rethink your decision, and give children the option of earning a Pride badge so they can be fully included in this otherwise wonderful reading program.

We also request to meet with you as a group, to further dialogue about ways that we can help support LGBTQ youth in schools and in our communities as they face challenges that will undoubtedly come after some of the egregious anti-LGBTQ bills sitting on the governor's desk will be signed into law.

Mayor Parker, we know that you have stood up for the LGBTQ community in the past. Please do not be swayed by those who refuse to honor the dignity and humanity of LGBTQ children and family members who only seek to live their lives with the same respect all human beings deserve.

Sincerely,

Cantor Elisa Abrams Cohn

Cantor Sheri Allen, Makom Shelanu Congregation

Sarah Berel-Harrop, Director of Religious Education, All Peoples Church Unitarian Universalist

Rev. Dr. Tim Bruster, First United Methodist Church

Rev. Karen Calafat, St. Luke's in the Meadow Episcopal Church

Rev. Dr. Natalya Cherry, PhD

Rev. Dottie Cook, Senior Minister, South Hills Christian Church

Rev. Ken Ehrke, Embrace United UCC

Rabbinical Student puck glass, Makom Shelanu Congregation

Rev. Katherine Godby (retired) Ph.D.

Rev. David Grebel, Pastor for the Sabbatical, Celebration Community Church

Rev. Dr. Katie Hays, Galileo Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)

The Rev. Anthony Hiatt, Vicar, Episcopal Church of the Resurrection

The Rev. Ann I. Hoch, Ph.D., retired Presbyterian USA

Rev. Kevin A. Johnson, Rector, All Souls Episcopal Church

Nicole Kennedy, Director of Lifespan Religious Education, Westside Unitarian Universalist Church

Rev. Kristin Klade, Pastor, Kyrie Pub Church (ELCA)

Father John Paul Luft, Pastor, Saint Anne Independent Catholic Church

Rev. Dr. Shelly Matthews, Professor of New Testament, Brite Divinity School

Rev. Kate McGee, Pastor, Westminster Presbyterian Church
Rabbi Ralph Mecklenburger, Rabbi Emeritus, Beth El Congregation
Rev. Dr. Robyn Michalove, Associate Pastor, First Presbyterian Church
Rev. Dr. Russ Peterman, Senior Minister, University Christian Church
The Very Rev'd Ron Pogue, Episcopal Diocese of Texas
Rev. Jeremy Pope
Pastor Ryon Price, Senior Pastor of Broadway Baptist Church
Rev. Craig Roshaven, Unitarian Universalist
The Rev. Allison Sandlin Liles, Vicar, St. Stephen's Episcopal Church
Rev. Jean-Marie Schweizer, Senior Minister, Unity Fort Worth
Rev. Elizabeth Lee Self, Pastor, Disciples
Rev. Tom Plumbley, Senior Minister, First Christian Church of Fort Worth
Rev. Jeremy Skaggs, The Welcome Table Christian Church
Pastor Curtis Smith, Trinity Metropolitan Community Church
The Right Reverend William Stanford, retired
Rev. Judy Stempel (retired), Disciples of Christ
Rev. Don Strickland, Minister, Westside Unitarian Universalist Church
Rev. Linda Taylor, St. Luke's in the Meadow Episcopal Church
Rev. Jorene Taylor Swift, Pastor, Celebration Community Church
The Rev. Canon Dr. Janet Waggoner, Episcopal Diocese of Texas
Rev. Kristin Warthen, Pastor, St. Andrews United Methodist Church
Rev. David Wynn, Lead Pastor, Agape Metropolitan Church
Rabbi Brian Zimmerman, Senior Rabbi, Beth El Congregation