

Court: Prayers at government meetings can be directed to Jesus

By The Associated Press
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ATLANTA, Ga. — Cobb County commissioners won't have to exclude Jesus Christ from the prayers at their meetings under a new federal court ruling.

U.S. District Judge Richard Story ruled on Sept. 8 that clergy who pray at the meetings could "identify the deity to whom they direct their prayer." But he also took issue with the way commissioners choose the clergy who appear at the meetings because it was clear that "certain faiths were categorically excluded from the list."

The case was filed in August 2005 by the Georgia Chapter of the American Civil Liberties Union on behalf of seven people who felt the references to Jesus were an unconstitutional government endorsement of Christianity.

ACLU lawyer Maggie Garrett said she was "pleased that Judge Story reaffirmed that repeated sectarian prayers can violate the Constitution" but disappointed that the judge didn't feel Cobb crossed the line.

"We feel in this case, it did cross the line," she said.

The ACLU has not decided whether to file an appeal, Garrett said.

Sam Olens, chairman of the Cobb County Board of Commissioners, wrote in an e-mail that he is "thrilled" about the ruling.

"Our policy of engaging all religious faiths is constitutional," he wrote.

Across the state, local government boards routinely open meetings with prayers, including many that invoke Christ's name. State legislators bow their heads to invocations when the Legislature is in session.