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Circuit clerk stands by his poster

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Ostensibly, it's a patriotic **poster** --replete with images like the American flag and Statue of Liberty, and dedicated to those who died on Sept. 11, 2001.

But at the center of the placard hanging in the lobby of the Greene County Circuit Clerk's Office are the Ten Commandments. The picture is also dedicated to "the one who gave it all for us, Jesus Christ."

Which led retired pediatrician Gary Wright and his wife to protest the **poster** during a visit to the office in late June.

"I saw this thing and thought it was clearly Christian," said Wright, of Springfield.

"The images around the center mostly involve the word 'God.' They don't say 'Allah.' There's not another phrase for 'God.'"

Wright found Greene County Circuit Clerk **Steve Helms** and asked that the **poster** be taken down. Wright said he was concerned that the religious wording could make non-Christians feel uncomfortable or unwelcome in the office.

If the **poster** was not taken down, Wright told **Helms** he'd pursue legal action.

The circuit clerk recalled the conversation Tuesday.

"He said, 'I'm going to sue you. When are you going to take it down?'" **Helms** said, as Christian music issued from a boom box in his personal office. "I said 'I'm not inclined to do that.'"

Today, the **poster** still hangs in the circuit clerk's office -- in the same spot where **Helms** affixed it after spotting it in an employee's office several months ago.

He originally intended to rotate the placard with others, but now thinks he'll keep it.

"I really just thought it was an innocuous **poster**," said **Helms**. "I'm in charge of this office. I have no intention of taking it down."

Helms, a Baptist, said the **poster** has done no harm and is merely a representation of the Judeo-Christian ethics the country was founded on.

"My personal view of the separation of church and state is the state stays out of the church," he said. "It's fundamentally wrong to try to drive everything out of the public sector that has anything to do with religion."

Now, Wright says he's trying to bring the case to the attention of the American Civil Liberties Union and plans on writing to Greene County judges about the **poster**.

It won't be the first time he's tackled issues of church and state. When he was 10, he said, he wrote a letter to a Springfield newspaper, protesting the inclusion of "under God" in the Pledge of Allegiance.

Wright's personal views, he said, are that no one religion has a special access to God. He says the sign's placement is an unconstitutional endorsement of one religion. To bolster that argument, Wright pointed to the case of Roy S. Moore, the former chief

justice of the Alabama Supreme Court who displayed a 2.6-ton Ten Commandments monument in the state's Supreme Court building.

Moore flouted a federal judge's order to remove the monument after it was ruled in violation the First Amendment. The justice, who appeared in Springfield last summer to discuss the issue, was eventually removed from office.

Moore's case bears a resemblance to what's occurring in Greene County, said St. Louis-area attorney Cynthia Holmes.

Holmes, who's argued similar issues and once served on the national board for Americans United for Separation of Church and State, said the **poster** could very well be unconstitutional.

"It's a close call," she said. "If they put up the constitution and a bunch of other things around it, they might be able to pass muster."

Springfield attorney Dee Wampler -- who has written a book advocating the display of Christian ideas in public spaces and has another due out next month -- supported **Helms'** decision.

"I have not seen the **poster**, but I'm on the side of **Steve Helms**," Wampler said.

He pointed to the existence of Christian symbolism and Bible excerpts on monuments like the Lincoln Memorial and Liberty Bell and religious writings by the country's Founding Fathers.

"I'm an advocate for truthful American history," Wampler said. "I don't think we're going to be putting a stamp of Buddha on the Liberty Bell or Tomb of the Unknown Soldier. That's going too far."

Greene County has no written policy for or against displaying religious documents in public buildings, said spokeswoman Jenny Fillmer Edwards.

"The county's really not in a position to create policies that serve to interpret state and federal law," she said.

Greene County Presiding Commissioner Dave Coonrod suggested Greene County's judges could decide the matter. But he could not say whether the jurists have authority to order **Helms** to remove the sign. A call to Presiding Judge Dan Conklin was not returned late Tuesday afternoon.

Coonrod, a Democrat, expressed unease with **Helms'** decision to display the **poster**.

"When you're in public service, your views are one thing," Coonrod said. "To foist that on the public in a public waiting area seems wrong."

But **Helms**, who faces two opponents in the Aug. 5 Republican primary for his post, stood by the **poster**.

Does he think Greene County voters will agree?

"We'll find out August 5," he said. "I've got a lot of other things to do than look for new **posters**."