

FREEDOM FROM RELIGION *foundation*

P.O. BOX 750 · MADISON, WI 53701 · (608) 256-8900 · WWW.FFRF.ORG

January 23, 2019

SENT VIA EMAIL & U.S. MAIL:

govgeneral@wisconsin.gov

The Honorable Tony Evers
Governor of Wisconsin
115 E. Capitol #1
Madison, WI 53702

Re: Religiously charged and sectarian inauguration ceremony

Dear Governor Evers:

We are writing on behalf of the Freedom From Religion Foundation to object to your decision to begin your time as governor with a religiously divisive inaugural event. FFRF is a Madison-based national nonprofit with 31,000 members, including more than 1,700 in Wisconsin. FFRF's purposes are to uphold the constitutional separation between church and state, and to educate the public on matters related to nontheism.

On January 7, your inauguration ceremony—the first state-sponsored event with you at the helm—included religious content, and specifically Christian content, that led local FFRF members who were in attendance to feel immediately excluded. For example, the ceremony opened with an invocation by Rev. Willie Brisco that plainly conveyed a Christian message:

May we all bow our heads. God our father, we thank you for your grace and mercy toward us. . . . God, I ask that you invoke [*sic*] your richest blessings on him and his administration as he assumes the mantle of leadership of this state. . . . Give us the strength to stand with our leaders, the courage to encourage them, and continue to pray for them because we know that this journey is not easy. And we must, with those who wait on the Lord, shall renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint.¹ Amen to this, and everyone who agrees, a touch and agree, say, “amen.”

Ironically, this invocation called for inclusiveness while asking everyone in attendance to participate in a sectarian religious ritual.

The ceremony also included a concert of Christian songs by William Reed III Community Choir, a gospel choir, featuring repetitive theological lyrics about worshipping Jesus, such as:

Oh, happy day
When Jesus washed, he washed my sins away!
he taught me how to watch, fight, and pray
and he'll rejoice in things we say everyday

¹ This is a paraphrase of Isaiah 40:3.

“He’s Our Hope,” a song about Jesus, was next performed, also repeating religious lines over and over, followed by “Great God, Great Vision, Great Accomplishments” (ditto).

After the Christian invocation and Christian gospel choir, even the ordinarily banal inclusion of “God bless” by various speakers contributed to an overall impression that the event was intended as a celebration for Wisconsin Christians and/or believers. A gubernatorial inauguration should not be constructed like a worship service. It is a civic ceremony inaugurating the governor’s installation in a secular seat of government. If religious components are desired, there is nothing to stop a governor from holding a private religious ceremony separate from the inauguration at their preferred religious institution. But we are sorry to see state and religion entangled unnecessarily in this manner. It sent a clear message to nonreligious Wisconsinites that we were not a part of the event. This is particularly distressing and frustrating given that 24% of Americans² today are nonreligious, making the nonreligious fastest-growing religious demographic by religious identification. Further, over 54% of Dane County residents—more than half—are nonreligious.³

Injecting one particular set of religious beliefs and exercises into a government-sponsored ceremony sends an unfortunate and divisive message that those who share those beliefs are favored insiders. As governor, you represent a diverse population. A government-sponsored event with Christian prayers and worship songs unabashedly sends an official message of endorsement of religion over nonreligion, and Christianity over all minority religions, to the exclusion of many of your constituents, including those who belong to non-Christian minority religions

As governor you took an oath of office to uphold the U.S. Constitution, which is a godless and secular document in which the only references to religion in government are exclusionary, such as the prohibition on religious tests for public office. The federal and state constitutions dictate that the gubernatorial office may not insert religious rituals into government-sponsored events, including inaugurations.

We urge the Governor’s Office in the future to honor our secular form of government and keep divisive and unnecessary religion out of state-sponsored events. Thank you for your attention to this request.

Very truly,



Annie Laurie and Dan Barker
Co-Presidents

² Robert P. Jones & Daniel Cox, *America’s Changing Religious Identity*, PUBLIC RELIGION RESEARCH INSTITUTE (Sept. 6, 2017), available at www.prii.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/PRRI-Religion-Report.pdf.

³ Dane County, Wisconsin (WI) Religion Statistics Profile. <http://www.city-data.com/county/religion/Dane-County-WI.html>