

FREEDOM FROM RELIGION *foundation*

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SENT VIA U.S. MAIL & EMAIL

shawn.jasper@leg.state.nh.us

The Honorable Shawn N. Jasper
Speaker of the House
107 North Main Street
Concord, NH 03301

Re: Prayer divisive at New Hampshire House of Representatives sessions

Dear Speaker Jasper:

We are writing on behalf of the Freedom From Religion Foundation (FFRF) to object to the New Hampshire's continuing practice of opening sessions with religious devotions. FFRF is a national nonprofit organization representing 24,000 members across the country, including members in New Hampshire. FFRF's purpose is to protect the constitutional principle of separation between state and church.

On behalf of our New Hampshire membership, we urge you to discontinue the practice of scheduling prayers to open House of Representatives sessions.

We understand that on February 4, 2016, Dr. Peter Chamberland, pastor of Granite State Baptist Church in Concord, gave a controversial prayer. In relevant part, Dr. Chamberland prayed, "Lord, through every situation, that You would protect our children through the great drug crisis that goes across our state, *both those that are born and the unborn*, that You would watch over them."¹ (Emphasis added). However, when the prayer was published in the House Journal, the italicized portion of the prayer was redacted.² House Clerk Paul Smith stated that prayers were not supposed to be political and that prayers printed in the House Journal were edited for such content.³

New Hampshire law requires clerks of the House of Representatives to "keep a true and fair record of all proceedings." N.H. Rev. Stat. § 14:3. With proper approval, house clerks "may correct clerical errors or formal imperfections in the printed and bound permanent journals." N.H. Rev. Stat. § 14:7.

The practice of redacting prayers so as to exclude the controversial content of the message from the official House Journal is, at best, inappropriate. Moreover, that prayers need such redaction suggests that the practice of legislative prayer is problematic.

¹ Morris, A. (2016, June 18). "Born or unborn" prayer words prompt editing debate in New Hampshire House. *Concord Monitor*. Retrieved from <http://www.concordmonitor.com/NH-House-prayer-debate-unborn-and-born-2911958>.

² N.H. H.R. 164-11, 2016 Sess., at 1 (2016).

³ Morris, A. (2016, June 18). "Born or unborn" prayer words prompt editing debate in New Hampshire House. *Concord Monitor*. Retrieved from <http://www.concordmonitor.com/NH-House-prayer-debate-unborn-and-born-2911958>.

When the government orchestrates legislative prayer, it is no wonder that guests delivering the prayer use this unique platform to infuse it with political content. It is improper for a visiting pastor to do this at legislative sessions. Even fellow Christians should be outraged that speakers such as Dr. Chamberland leverage their position to preach politics. The New Hampshire House of Representatives ought not to lend its power and prestige to religion. Dropping legislative prayer is the only way to ensure that religious prejudices do not contaminate the legislative function of House sessions.

Government prayer is unnecessary, inappropriate, and divisive. Calling upon representatives, and citizens watching in the gallery or online, to rise and pray (even silently) is coercive, embarrassing, and beyond the scope of secular government. Representatives are free to pray privately or to worship on their own time in their own way. They do not need to worship on taxpayers' time. Even nonsectarian prayer excludes the 23% of Americans who identify as nonreligious.⁴ The exclusion is compounded when a majority of prayers are sectarian, i.e., to Jesus, or a majority of the officiants are of one religion. Such prayer creates acrimony, turns believers into political insiders and minorities into political outsiders in their own community, and confers unconstitutional governmental preference not just for Christianity over other faiths, but for religion over nonreligion.

Christians who know their bible are familiar with the biblical injunction of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount, condemning public prayer as hypocritical. "Enter into thy closet and when thou hast shut the door, pray to thy Father which is in secret" (Matthew 6:5-13). Observing a strict separation of church and state offends nobody, and honors not only the First Amendment, but also the rights of conscience of *all* New Hampshire citizens.

The answers to society's problems will not come from above. Reason and compassion should be invoked, not blind faith. Our advice to pious politicians: get off your knees and get to work. On behalf of our New Hampshire membership and our secular Constitution, we urge the House to concentrate on legislative matters. The tone that should be set is one that respects and reveres the secular and entirely godless U.S. Constitution, which state elected officials take an oath to uphold, and whose only references to religion are exclusionary.

Please ensure that Dr. Chamberland's prayer is published in the House Journal in its entirety. To do less is sheer dishonesty. Additionally, we urge your leadership to take this opportunity to discontinue the practice of scheduling prayers to open House sessions. May we hear from you at your earliest convenience?

Very truly,



Annie Laurie Gaylor
Co-President
Freedom From Religion Foundation

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⁴ *America's Changing Religious Landscape*, Pew Research Center (May 12, 2015), available at www.pewforum.org/2015/05/12/americas-changing-religious-landscape/.