

Congress of the United States

Washington, DC 20510

December 11, 2023

Reverend Dr. Margaret Grun Kibben
Chaplain, U.S. House of Representatives
Room HB25
U.S. Capitol
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Reverend Kibben:

As Members of the Congressional Freethought Caucus, we write to recommend Daniel Barker to serve as a Guest Chaplain and deliver a legislative prayer in the House of Representatives. Mr. Barker is a constituent and friend of Rep. Pocan, who will sponsor him and deliver the welcome speech after the prayer. Rep. Pocan has selected Mr. Barker for this honor due to his role as an eloquent and uplifting thought leader in Wisconsin's Second Congressional District. In Dane County, where the majority of Rep. Pocan's constituents reside, theists and nontheists alike have a proud tradition of community service and moral engagement, and 40% of County residents do not belong to a church or subscribe to a religion.¹ Mr. Barker's message is perfectly ecumenical, inclusive and all-welcoming. He can be reached at (608) 695-7253 or at DBarker@ffrf.org. His biographical information can be found [here](#).

Mr. Barker is ordained by the Standard Community Church and holds a degree in Religion from Azusa Pacific University. He has served as a pastor at the Standard Christian Center, Glengrove Assembly of God, and Arcadia Friends Community Church. After preaching for 19 years, Mr. Barker's beliefs evolved based on his ongoing studies and reflection, and he shifted his focus to advocating for First Amendment values: the protection of freedom of thought and religious exercise, and the central importance of church-state separation to a healthy American Republic. He now serves as Co-President of the Freedom From Religion Foundation, which works to protect the freedom of all citizens from theocratic impositions by specific religious groups that try to use state power to control other people's religious lives, choices and expression. He also supports fellow ordained clergy deepening their moral and spiritual understanding, questioning received orthodoxy and seeking new employment through the Clergy Project, which he co-founded. Mr. Barker's spiritual pilgrimage and moral and intellectual leadership make him an ideal candidate for the Guest Chaplain program, which, according to your guidance, "is intended to honor the Constitution's commitment to religious accommodation and free expression of religion."²

Your guidance on the program invokes the importance of "respecting Members' increasingly diverse faith commitments."³ We enthusiastically embrace this priority. The Congressional Freethought Caucus is a group of Members of diverse religious backgrounds and beliefs—

¹ Public Religion Research Institute, 2020 Census of American Religion, July 8, 2021, <https://www.pri.org/research/2020-census-of-american-religion/>.

² Guest Chaplain Instructions for Member Offices, retrieved from http://chaplain.house.gov/congressional/sponsor_chaplain.html.

³ Ibid.

including Christians, Jews, Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, Humanists, and others—who collectively advocate for the constitutional values of pluralism, equal rights, inclusion, freedom of thought and freedom of worship, and no establishment of religious orthodoxy and tests. We are grateful for your acknowledgement that “[t]he House of Representatives is comprised of Members of many different religious traditions”—including potentially all believers and nonbelievers from agnostics and Anabaptists to Wiccans and Zoroastrians—and we share your belief in “the importance of providing a prayer inclusive of this diversity.”⁴

In this spirit of pluralism and constitutionally protected free expression, we invite you to join us in taking an important step forward by making Dan Barker the first-ever openly atheistic Guest Chaplain. Although he will not be the first to offer a legislative prayer that does not explicitly invoke a deity, we believe it will still be a historic milestone for a self-identified atheist to participate in this tradition. In the interest of reaching this milestone as swiftly as possible, we wish to anticipate and address upfront a couple of questions that may arise as you review this request.

We know that it must have appeared to be a dramatic change when the House of Representatives hosted the first Jewish Guest Chaplain, Morris Raphall, in 1860; the first African-American Guest Chaplain, Henry Highland Garnet, in 1865; the first female Guest Chaplain, Wilmina Rowland Smith, in 1948; the first Muslim Guest Chaplain, Siraj Wahaj, in 1991; the first Hindu Guest Chaplain, Venkatachalapathi Samuldrala, in 2000; the first Native American Guest Chaplain, Verna Teller, in 2019; and the first Sikh Guest Chaplain, Giani Jaswinder Singh, in 2023. But all of these dramatic firsts registered the magnificent diversity that lies at the heart of American culture; all of these big steps helped to make the people’s House truly representative of all the people. Population surveys show that at least 30% of Americans are religiously unaffiliated and unchurched, with millions describing themselves as nontheists of different types.⁵ They should find a symbolic place in our proceedings too.

Dan Barker might be our first-ever nontheistic Guest Chaplain, but he would not be the first to not explicitly invoke a deity or deities in his invocation. That has happened numerous times and that has been seen as perfectly compatible with the expectation that the “opening prayer must be religious in nature.”⁶

As you know, the court’s ruling in *Barker v. Conroy* affirmed our authority in the House to establish and interpret our own rules. Presently the House Rules for the 118th Congress are silent on the details of a Guest Chaplain program, stating simply that “The Chaplain shall offer a prayer at the commencement of each day’s sitting of the House.”⁷ Since the existence of the Guest Chaplain program arises from your authority as Chaplain to broadly interpret your responsibility to “offer a prayer,” it lies within that same authority for you to operate the program in the manner that best advances constitutional values, reflects the spiritual and intellectual diversity of the country and infuses our proceedings with moral fiber and spiritual uplift.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Pew Research Center, “About Three-in-Ten U.S. Adults Are Now Religiously Unaffiliated,” December 14, 2021, https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/wp-content/uploads/sites/7/2021/12/PF_12.14.21_update_on_religion_trends_report.pdf.

⁶ Guest Chaplain Instructions for Member Offices.

⁷ Rules of the House of Representatives, One Hundred Eighteenth Congress, Rule II, clause 5.

According to your guidance, a legislative prayer “lends gravity to public business, reminds lawmakers to transcend petty differences in pursuit of a higher purpose, and expresses a common aspiration to a just and peaceful society.”⁸ You write movingly that legislative prayer should “solemnize the occasion” and “seek peace for the Nation, wisdom for its lawmakers, and justice for its people,”⁹ all of which are excellent purposes that can definitely be achieved by Mr. Barker in a legislative prayer.

We note the expectation on your website that “Guest chaplains must be ordained, or the equivalent, by the religious tradition with which they are presently affiliated.”¹⁰ Mr. Barker is ordained by the Standard Community Church and thus clearly satisfies this expectation. Our roster of past Guest chaplains includes retired ministers who, like Mr. Barker, are ordained but no longer working in active ministry. Prior Guest Chaplains have actually included a judge, a musician, a parliamentarian, and others who (to our knowledge, at least) have neither been ordained at all nor received any equivalent credential.

Thank you for your thoughtful consideration of this request. If you have any questions or concerns, please contact Chelsea Blink of Rep. Pocan’s staff at chelsea.blink@mail.house.gov or (202) 225-2906.

Sincerely,



Mark Pocan
Member of Congress



Jared Huffman
Member of Congress



Jamie Raskin
Member of Congress



Henry C. "Hank" Johnson, Jr.
Member of Congress



Julia Brownley
Member of Congress



Jan Schakowsky
Member of Congress

⁸ Guest Chaplain Instructions for Member Offices.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.