

# FREEDOM FROM RELIGION *foundation*

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## SENT VIA EMAIL AND U.S. MAIL

**senmshirkey@senate.michigan.gov, senjananich@senate.michigan.gov,  
BenFrederick@house.mi.gov, donnalasinski@house.mi.gov**

The Honorable Mike Shirkey  
Senate Majority Leader  
P.O. Box 30036  
Lansing, MI 48909-7536

The Honorable Jim Ananich  
Senate Minority Leader  
Post Office Box 30036  
Lansing, MI 48909

The Honorable Ben Frederick  
House Majority Leader  
P.O. Box 30014  
Lansing, MI 48909-7514

The Honorable Donna Lasinski  
House Minority Leader  
P.O. Box 30014  
Lansing, MI 48909-7514

Re: Drop divisive legislative invocations

Dear Senator Shirkey, Senator Ananich, Representative Frederick, and Representative Lasinski:

We are writing on behalf of the Freedom From Religion Foundation (FFRF) to urge you to drop the practice of opening legislative sessions with invocations. FFRF is a national nonprofit organization with more than 36,000 members across the country, including more than 900 members in Michigan. FFRF protects the constitutional separation between state and church and educates about nontheism.

Recently, Sen. Lana Theis intoned a prayer to open a session that cast aspersions on public schools for affirming gender identity and teaching critical race theory. In an almost QAnonesque manner, she pontificated:

Dear Lord, across the country we're seeing in the news that our children are under attack. That there are forces that desire things for them other than what their parents would have them see and hear and know . . . .  
Dear Lord, I pray for your guidance in this chamber, to protect the most vulnerable among us. Help us to do your will at every step.<sup>1</sup>

At least three legislators, to their credit, walked out in protest during the tirade.

After Sen. Mallory McMorrow tweeted a reasonable criticism of the prayer, Theis retaliated, attacking her in a fundraising appeal that called her a liberal social media “troll” who wants to “groom” and “sexualize kindergarteners” and who wishes to teach “that 8-year-olds are responsible for slavery.”<sup>2</sup>

Sen. McMorrow responded on April 19 with a five-minute floor speech that has garnered tremendous attention, saying:

I am a straight, white, Christian, married, suburban mom who knows that the very notion that learning about slavery or redlining or systemic racism somehow means that children are being taught to feel bad or hate themselves because they are white is absolute nonsense. . . . No child alive today is responsible for slavery. No one in this room is responsible for slavery. But each and every single one of us bears responsibility for writing the next chapter of history . . . we are not responsible for the past. We also cannot change the past. We can't pretend that it didn't happen, or deny people their very right to exist.<sup>3</sup>

This embarrassing national media attention on the Michigan Senate highlights the danger of including religious prayers in state legislative proceedings. Far from a “solemn” or “unifying” practice, as its proponents would argue, in practice these invocations are just another opportunity to score cheap political points, and to send a message that those who do not share the beliefs of the majority are unwelcome outsiders.

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<sup>1</sup> David Eggert, *Michigan lawmaker's forceful speech rebuts 'grooming' attack*, The Washington Post (Apr. 20, 2022).

<sup>2</sup> *Id.*

<sup>3</sup> Available at [twitter.com/MalloryMcMorrow/status/1516453738403143681](https://twitter.com/MalloryMcMorrow/status/1516453738403143681).

It is long past time for the Michigan state house to finally drop the archaic ritual of opening with prayer.

Not only are legislators charged only with secular and civil duties — terrestrial not celestial duties, one must emphasize — but nothing is more divisive in government than religion. To some legislators, like Sen. Theis, their political views are deeply intertwined with their religious views, especially—as is the case here—when those views have no basis in reality. It is no surprise that such lawmakers would view an opportunity to push religion as a chance to also suggest that their anti-gay, pro-racism views carry divine support.

Sadly, all too much of what passes for religion and faith is hateful in this era. There is a difference between religion and outright hate, but in this instance, Theis expressed her hate in the name of religion, using the unconstitutional ritual of government prayer to promote her hateful brand of Christianity. She was able to use this pandering ritual as a free pass to promote her hateful agenda. And she's by no means the first legislator or chaplain to do so.

In FFRF's home state of Wisconsin, more than 130 years ago, a wise State Supreme Court justice recognized the fundamental principle that inserting religion into the government is inherently divisive: "There is no such source and cause of strife, quarrel, fights, malignant opposition, persecution, and war, and all evil in the state, as religion. Let it once enter our civil affairs, our government would soon be destroyed." *State ex rel. Weiss v. Dist. Bd. of Sch. Dist. No. 8 of City of Edgerton*, 76 Wis. 177, 44 N.W. 967, 981 (1890) (Orton, J., concurring). Extremist religion is entering our civil affairs and it is indeed threatening to destroy our government.

Today, non-religious Americans are the fastest growing segment of the U.S. population by religious identification — 35 percent of Americans are non-Christians, and this includes the more than one in four Americans who now identify as religiously unaffiliated.<sup>4</sup> A recent survey found that 21 percent of Americans born after 1999 are atheist or agnostic.<sup>5</sup> Legislative prayers, even if

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<sup>4</sup> Pew Research Center, "In U.S., Decline of Christianity Continues at Rapid Pace," (Oct. 17, 2019) at <https://pewrsr.ch/2VPiES7>.

<sup>5</sup> *Atheism Doubles Among Generation Z*, The Barna Group (Jan. 24, 2018), <https://www.barna.com/research/atheism-doubles-among-generation-z/>.

stripped of hateful political rhetoric, send a message to these young citizens that they are political outsiders in their own community.

Please take this recent media attention as an overdue wake-up call to drop the archaic, divisive and coercive practice of legislative prayers in Michigan legislative sessions. Let Michigan legislators pray (and hate) on their own dime and time.

Very truly,

Handwritten signature in blue ink, reading "Annie Laurie Gaylor Dan Barker". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Annie Laurie Gaylor & Dan Barker  
Co-presidents  
ALG/DB:rdj