

FREEDOM FROM RELIGION *foundation*

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

May 26, 2011

SENT VIA ELECTRONIC & U.S. MAIL

The Honorable Kurt Zellers
Speaker of the House
463 State Office Building
100 Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Blvd.
St Paul MN 55155

Re: Prayer at Minnesota State House of Representatives Sessions

Dear Speaker Zellers:

We are writing on behalf of concerned Minnesota residents and taxpayers and members of the Freedom From Religion Foundation (FFRF) who object to the state House of Representatives practice of opening sessions with religious devotions. FFRF is a national nonprofit organization representing over 16,500 members across the country including over 430 members in Minnesota. Our purpose is to protect the constitutional principle of separation between state and church.

On behalf of our Minnesota membership, we urge you to discontinue the practice of scheduling prayers to open House sessions. Removing official prayers from government meetings is the only way to ensure that the House is in compliance with the Constitution.

It is our information and understanding that the Minnesota State House of Representatives opens its sessions with prayer. We understand that last Friday, May 20th, Pastor Bradlee Dean of Old Path Church in Minneapolis, gave a controversial sectarian prayer. He delivered this prayer "In Jesus' name" despite openly acknowledging the prayer should be non-sectarian and non-denominational. This shows that the House non-sectarian policy is unenforceable.

The following is a transcription of Dean's controversial prayer:

"When I arrived at the capitol today, I noticed all the writings upon the inside of the walls – in the Supreme Court chambers you have Moses awaiting the 10 Commandments, God's Divine Law, you have George Washington quotes, Thomas Jefferson quotes, speaking of unalienable rights given unto us by our Creator. And when I looked at that I thought, 'What an awesome building.' And those in this chamber are very privileged to

be here, and I am honored to be here as well. And if I can give a small prefix to my prayer so my prayer has meaning, I remember when I was a young man I had a friend who founded a company in Fridley, Minnesota. This man built this company from the ground up as he blueprinted everything in great detail. He put his sweat, tears – everything into it to establish the company. Nobody understood what sacrifice he put into his company except them that helped him along. The company grew in such a proportion that he could now sell the company and he did. On the sale of his company the buyers agreed to keep him on to run the company for them and in the process the company sold, and when it sold the buyers went against the contract and fired the founder. How foolish could they be? They thought once they had control of the company they could run it their own way and still prosper and they failed miserably – excuse me. And it sounds much like America today. America has the longest-standing Constitution in the history of the world and might I remind all of us here we have one Constitution. So, let us come together and unite ourselves under its directives. Because we all know the problems didn't come into our country in 1776, they came when we wandered from the founder of the company and tried running it our own way.

So, let us pray. Father God, I just thank You, Father, for what You have bestowed on us and through the sacrifice of our brothers and our sisters, Father God, to ratify the Constitution of the United States, Father God. The fight, the bloodshed, and the sacrifice – from World War I to World War II, to Korea, Father. To Korea, and Hiroshima, and Vietnam, and Father God, Iraq and Afghanistan, and I think about their sacrifice when I go, Father God, to Arlington Cemetery, and I think, 'That's the reason that I fight, that's the reason that I stand, that's the reason I encourage my brothers to do the same thing.' They died so we could have the freedoms that we have today, and they ratified that Constitution and sacrificed their all for it. And I end with this – I know this is a nondenominational pray – prayer in this chamber – it's not about the Baptists, it's not about the Catholics alone, or the Lutherans, or the Wesleyans, or the Presbyterians, Evangelicals, or any other denomination but rather the head of the denomination and His name is Jesus as every president, up until 2008, has acknowledged. And we pray it in Jesus' name."

We understand that you publicly apologized for this prayer and restarted the session with a new prayer given by the House chaplain. While it is admirable that you recognized the problem Pastor Dean's prayer, his prayer and other sectarian prayers offered before House sessions demonstrate why any prayer — sectarian or not — before legislative sessions is inappropriate and should be discontinued immediately.

This controversy should be a learning experience for the House. The Minnesota State Legislature ought not to lend its power and prestige to religion, amounting to a governmental endorsement that excludes some citizens.

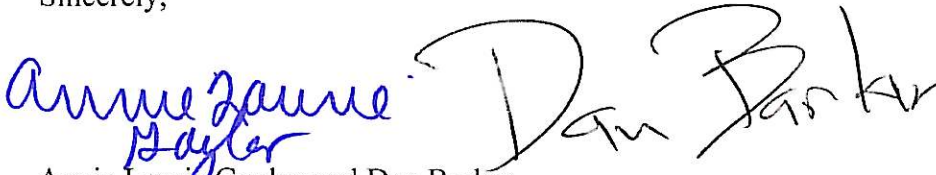
Government prayer is unnecessary, inappropriate, and divisive. Calling upon Representatives and citizens watching in the gallery or online to rise and pray (even silently) is coercive, embarrassing and beyond the scope of secular city government. Representatives are free to pray privately or to worship on their own time in their own way. They do not need to worship on

taxpayers' time. Even nonsectarian prayer excludes the 15% of your population that is nonreligious (Religious Identification Survey 2008). The violation is compounded when a majority of prayers are sectarian, i.e. to Jesus, or a majority of the officiants are of one religion, i.e. Christian or Christian clergy (which inevitably happens). Such prayer creates acrimony, makes minorities feel like political outsiders in their own community, and shows unconstitutional governmental preference not just for religion over nonreligion, but Christianity over other faiths.

Christians who know their bible are familiar with the biblical injunction of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount, condemning as hypocrisy public prayer. "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 very tenets being professed during House prayers.

On behalf of our Minnesota membership and our secular Constitution, we urge the House to concentrate on state 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.

Sincerely,

The image shows two handwritten signatures in blue ink. On the left is the signature of Annie Laurie Gaylor, and on the right is the signature of Dan Barker. The signatures are written in a cursive, flowing style.

Annie Laurie Gaylor and Dan Barker
FFRF Co-Presidents