

FREEDOM FROM RELIGION *foundation*

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January 7, 2011

Via Mail and Email and Fax

The Honorable Kraig Paulsen
Iowa State House of Representatives Speaker
Iowa State House of Representatives
State Capitol Building
Des Moines, IA 50319

Re: Invocations at Iowa State House of Representatives Legislative Sessions

Dear Mr. Speaker:

I am writing on behalf of concerned Iowa residents and taxpayers and other Iowa members of the Freedom From Religion Foundation (FFRF) to urge you to discontinue the practice of opening legislative sessions with prayers. FFRF is a national nonprofit organization representing over 16,000 members across the country including over 100 members in Iowa. Our purpose is to protect the constitutional principle of separation between state and church.

On behalf of our Iowa membership, we urge you to discontinue the practice of opening legislative sessions with prayers. Removing official prayers from legislative sessions is the only way to ensure that the Iowa House of Representatives is in compliance with the Constitution.

It is our information and understanding that the Iowa State House of Representatives will vote on House Resolution 2 at the beginning of the first legislative session of the 84th General Assembly, on Monday, January 10, 2011, appointing a committee of one to arrange opening prayers for the duration of the two-year term (2011 – 2013) of the 84th General Assembly. It is also our understanding that the Iowa State Senate will likewise vote upon Senate Concurrent Resolution 2, establishing compensation and travel expenses for any chaplains officiating legislative session opening prayers.

An analysis of all Iowa State House of Representatives legislative session opening prayers during 2010 of the 83rd General Assembly was particularly revealing and troubling. Of the 56 legislative session opening prayers offered during 2010, 23 were officiated by State Representatives and 33 were officiated by clergy. Of the 33 officiated by clergy, all of the clergy were explicitly Christian. Moreover, the clergy were listed in the official House Journals as the express guests and proxies of specific State Representatives, indicating an official endorsement of one or another Christian denomination by whichever State Representative. We also understand these prayers often invoke Jesus Christ and are typically sectarian in nature, in this instance predominantly Christian.

First and foremost, prayer at legislative sessions is unnecessary, inappropriate, and divisive. Calling upon Iowa State House of Representative members and Iowa citizens to rise and pray is coercive, embarrassing and beyond the scope of secular government. State 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. The Iowa State House of Representatives ought not to lend its power and prestige to religion, amounting to a governmental endorsement that excludes the 15% of the American population that is nonreligious (American Religious Identification Survey 2008).

The Iowa State House of Representatives compounds the violation when the vast majority of opening prayers invoke the Christian deity, as well as Christian saints and prophets, and quote Biblical scripture and when the vast majority of the officiants are Christian or Christian clergy. Such prayer creates acrimony, makes religious minorities feel like political outsiders in their own community, and shows unconstitutional governmental preference not just for religion over non-religion, but Christianity over other faiths.

Citizens are frequently compelled to come before you on important civic matters, to participate in important decisions affecting their livelihood, their property and quality of life. These citizens should not be made to feel offended, excluded and like political outsiders because the government they support with their taxes oversteps its power by imposing religious ritual at secular legislative sessions. Government should not be in the business of performing religious rituals, or exhorting all citizens regardless of beliefs to participate in a Christian prayer, or minimally to demonstrate obeisance to such prayer.

Sectarian Prayers

The prayers being offered before the Iowa State House of Representatives' legislative sessions do not fall into the narrow exception of the constitutionally permissible government-sponsored prayer laid out by the Supreme Court. In *Marsh v. Chambers*, 463 U.S. 783 (1983), the Supreme Court ruled that the Nebraska legislature's history and tradition of opening with a prayer was a constitutional exception. The Court found government prayer, in this case, was confined to a situation involving a non-sectarian, non-denominational prayer, led by an officiant who had not been selected based upon any impermissible religious motive, and which was addressed to the body of legislators present and no one else. *See Marsh*, 463 U.S. 783. Additionally, the Court held that legislators must have the option not to participate. The prayer opportunity must not be "exploited to proselytize or advance any one, or to disparage any other faith or belief." 463 U.S. at 794-795. The Court expressly noted that the content of the prayers was permissible because the chaplain had "removed all references to Christ." *Id.* at 793 n.14.

Even if the Iowa State House of Representatives has had an established history of opening its legislative sessions with prayer, the Iowa State House of Representatives' practice still violates the Establishment Clause because of its exclusive endorsement of the Christian faith by State Representatives. In *County of Allegheny v. ACLU Greater Pittsburgh Chapter*, 492 U.S. 573, 603 (1989), the Supreme Court found that, even if history and custom had saved non-sectarian legislative prayer, "history cannot legitimate practices that demonstrate the government's allegiance to a particular sect or creed." Additionally, the Court reiterated, "not even the 'unique

history' of legislative prayer, can justify contemporary legislative prayers that have the effect of affiliating the government with any one specific faith or belief." *Id.* The Court continued, "The legislative prayers involved in *Marsh* did not violate this principle because the particular chaplain had 'removed all references to Christ.'" *Id.*

Lower federal courts have continued to emphasize that some government-sponsored prayers are constitutionally permissible only because they are non-sectarian, non-denominational and do not invoke a particular faith or deity. *See, e.g., Turner v. Fredericksburg*, 534 F.3d 292 (4th Cir. 2004), cert. denied, 2009 WL 56225 (U.S.) (No. 08-518) (finding constitutional a city council policy prohibiting sectarian prayers); *Wynne v. Town of Great Falls*, 376 F.3d 292 (4th Cir. 2004) (holding that the Establishment Clause was violated when the town council opened sessions with prayer containing references to Jesus Christ); *Bacus v. Palo Verde Unified School District*, 52 Fed.Appx. 355 (9th Cir. 2002) (unpublished) ("These prayers advanced one faith, Christianity, providing it with a special endorsed and privileged status in the school board. Some religions accept Jesus Christ as the Messiah, some do not, and some people do not believe in any religious faith. Solemnizing school board meetings 'in the Name of Jesus' displays 'the government's allegiance to a particular sect or creed.'").

The Fourth Circuit's reasoning in *Wynne* is particularly helpful in understanding the boundaries for prayer at government meetings drawn in *Marsh*. In *Wynne*, the court held that any sectarian invocations of deities in legislative prayer serve to affiliate the government with a particular sect or creed and/or advance a particular faith or belief. *See Wynne*, 376 F.3d at 302. Additionally, both the presence and participation of town citizens were crucial to the court's determination that the Town Council had attempted to advance the Christian faith. *See id.* at 301. Ultimately, the court concluded:

"*Marsh* does not permit legislators to ... engage, as part of public business and for the citizenry as a whole, in prayers that contain explicit references to a deity in whose divinity only those of one faith believe. *The invocations at issue here, which specifically call upon Jesus Christ, are simply not constitutionally acceptable legislative prayer like that approved in Marsh. Rather they embody the precise kind of "advancement" of that Marsh cautioned against.*" *Id.* (emphasis added).

The prayers currently invoked at the Iowa State House of Representatives legislative sessions impermissibly advance Christianity and lead a reasonable observer to believe that the Iowa State House of Representatives is endorsing not only religion over non-religion, but also Christianity over other faiths. This practice inappropriately alienates non-Christians and non-believers. Their efforts to participate are adversely affected by these types of prayers, which turn non-believers and non-Christians into political outsiders of their own community and government.

U.S. Founded on Separation of State/Church

America was founded in part by refugees seeking freedom from government dictation of religion. These refugees wanted freedom from a government telling them which church to support, what religious rituals to engage in, or what to believe or disbelieve. The U.S. founders who adopted our entirely secular Constitution knew there can be no religious liberty without the

freedom to dissent. Whether to pray, whether to believe in a god who answers prayer, is an intensely precious and personal decision protected under our First Amendment as a paramount matter of conscience.

Our nation is founded on a godless Constitution, whose only references to religion in government are exclusionary, such as that there shall be no religious test for public office (U.S. Const. art. VI). The United States was first among nations to adopt a secular constitution, investing sovereignty in “We the People,” not a divinity. Our founders were aware that “[t]orrents of blood have been spilt in the old world” when religion and government were united. (James Madison, Memorial and Remonstrance, 1785). Madison added, “During almost fifteen centuries has the legal establishment of Christianity been on trial. What have been its fruits? More or less in all places, pride and indolence in the Clergy, ignorance and servility in the laity, in both, superstition, bigotry and persecution.”

Religion had been an intensely divisive issue in the original Thirteen Colonies, where religious intolerance was endemic, and citizens might lose civil rights, be banished, jailed or in some instances executed, for holding a religious conviction contrary to that of the government. Today the religious right often touts the pre-Constitutional actions of the Continental Congress that adopted the weak Articles of Confederation, and that failed to include safeguards separating government from religion. The religious right often conflates the short-lived 8-year Articles with the enduring Constitution that replaced it. Yet even at the inaugural session of that Continental Congress in 1774, when a delegate proposed to open a session with prayer, both John Jay and John Rutledge (two future Chief Justices of the Supreme Court) objected, saying Congress was “so divided in religious Sentiments . . . that We could not join in the same Act of Worship.” It is significant that after the catastrophic experiences with the Articles, our founders ensured there was no prayer at the Constitutional Convention, which convened in 1787 to write the U.S. Constitution. *See* Leo Pfeffer, *Church State and Freedom*, 121-122 (Beacon Press, 1967).

Significantly, President Thomas Jefferson, recognizing of the intrinsic problems when religion and government mix, actively opposed government sponsorship of prayer:

I consider the government of the U.S. as interdicted by the Constitution from intermeddling with religious institutions, their doctrines, discipline, or exercises . . .
I do not believe it is for the interest of religion to invite the civil magistrate to direct its exercises, its discipline, or its doctrines; nor of the religious societies that the general government should be invested with the power of effecting any uniformity of time or matter among them. Fasting & prayer are religious exercises. The enjoining them an act of discipline. Every religious society has a right to determine for itself the times for these exercises, & the objects proper for them, according to their own particular tenets; and this right can never be safer than in their own hands, where the constitution has deposited it.

(Jefferson’s letter to Rev. Samuel Miller, 1808).

Likewise, James Madison, the primary architect of the U.S. Constitution and Bill of Rights, and our second president, ultimately opposed government prayers and congressional chaplaincies. *See* Andy G. Olree, *James Madison and Legislative Chaplains*, 102 *Northwestern L. Rev.* 145 (2008). In his *Detached Memoranda*, Madison criticized the chaplaincies and the idea that

“religious truth is to be tested by numbers or that the major sects have a right to govern the minor.”

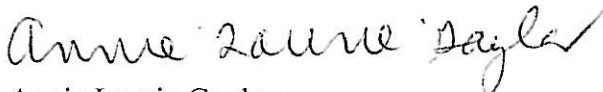
Solution is to Discontinue Prayer

The constitutional rights of citizens to participate in and be represented at the Iowa State House of Representatives legislative sessions should not be predicated upon being subjected to Christian-based, or even non-denominational prayer. By hosting prayers, which inevitably show preference for Christianity, the House of Representatives is illegally and inappropriately imposing its religious beliefs on the citizens of Iowa.

Moreover, these types of government prayers not only conflict with the Constitution, but also with biblical teachings. 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).

To avoid the constitutional concerns these prayers cause for the Iowa State House of Representatives and the divisiveness these prayers cause within the community the solution is simple: discontinue official, government prayers before legislative sessions. We request a prompt response in writing about what steps you are taking to respect the Establishment Clause and remedy these constitutional violations.

Sincerely,



Annie Laurie Gaylor
Co-President

Enclosure

cc: Chief Clerk Charlie Smithson
House Speaker Pro Tempore Jeff Kaufmann
All Members of the Iowa State House of Representatives