



FREEDOM FROM RELIGION FOUNDATION

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May 5, 2009

The Honorable Tom Barrett
Mayor of Milwaukee
City Hall
200 E Wells St., Rm. 201
Milwaukee WI 53202
Fax (404)286-3191

RE: Mayoral sponsorship of Ceasefire Sabbath Breakfast/Open Records Request/Infusion of Christianity into City of Milwaukee Website

Dear Mayor Barrett:

On behalf of several Milwaukee complainants and our Milwaukee membership, we are contacting you regarding concerns over the "Ceasefire Sabbath Breakfast." According to the City's electronic alert system, you, the Mayor, are sponsoring a Ceasefire Sabbath Breakfast on Friday, May 8.

According to The Barrett Report, the purpose of Ceasefire Sabbath, laudably, is to deliver a message of nonviolence. While it is certainly acceptable for a public official to enlist the cooperation of clergy and "leaders of the faith community," among others, to deliver this message, we are concerned about the appearance of the religious nature of the breakfast ("Sabbath" is a religious term), which is held the day after the National Day of Prayer. We are seeking the costs to the city to put on a breakfast for the faith community, if that indeed is what you are doing.

Please provide our group with the costs to the City for this breakfast, if any (beyond the website promotion and e-mail notification system). If the City is providing breakfast, etc., for any or all comers, we would like know the costs, and see any relevant documentation, such as contracts with caterers, receipts, rental of the room, etc. We would also like to know how many clergy and "faith leaders" were invited, and how you contacted them, and the additional costs to the City (in terms of postage, printing, and/or staff time for e-mails and amassing lists of clergy, etc.)

The Establishment Clause of the First Amendment to the United States Constitution prohibits the government from endorsing, advancing or promoting religion. Therefore, it is inappropriate for the City to be hosting, organizing, supporting or otherwise promoting a patently religious event, such as a prayer breakfast, or a breakfast reserved for faith leaders.

Any reasonable City resident could logically interpret the City's actions in this case as government endorsement of religion. The City is prominently advertising this event via e-mail and at its website. The e-mail notification says the "Ceasefire Sabbath Breakfast" is "sponsored by Mayor Tom Barrett."

Your statement of May 16, 2008 is also of concern, in which you remark on the annual Ceasefire

Sabbath and note: “faith is the cornerstone of a healthy and productive community. Historically religious leaders have led the charge for social justice and change.”

Freedom of conscience is protected in the United States, and you are entitled to your personal religious views. But a Mayor needs to represent all constituents, not exclude or marginalize those without religious faith. Up to 15% of the Wisconsin and U.S. adult population officially describes itself as nonreligious (American Religious Identification Survey 2008). Those of us who are atheists, agnostics, nonbelievers or nonreligious do not concur that faith is necessary for a healthy and productive community. Many of our Wisconsin members would contend, moreover, that faith can be counterproductive, that nothing fails like prayer, that faith, as Mark Twain put it, “is believing what you know ain’t so.” We prefer to place our faith in humankind and human action, not cede control to the supernatural.

As for religious leaders historically leading the charge for social justice and change, that is true in the black community in the recent civil rights movement, up to a point. The black church, in our devout nation which places a premium on religion, was one of the few institutions where black Americans under segregation could freely meet and work for civil rights. Historically, of course, it was the nonreligious, freethinkers, heretics and unorthodox such as Thomas Paine, Frances Wright, William Lloyd Garrison and Frederick Douglass, etc., who were the first to call for the abolition of slavery and forged the abolition movement. We fought a bloody civil war because the bible clearly and repeatedly sanctions slavery. The churches, with the exception of Quakers, were largely johnny-come-latelies to the abolition movement. And it assuredly has not been the churches which have championed civil rights for women or gays!

We also are uncomfortable with your statement of a year ago that “the criminals aren’t likely to be in church this weekend.” Prison statistics show that prisoners are overwhelmingly religious, undoubtedly in part related to their lack of education and literacy. We are concerned that your remarks imply that non-church-goers tend to be criminals, which would seem to cast aspersions on the exceptionally law-abiding freethought community and Milwaukee’s 19th century freethought heritage.

The City of Milwaukee website is hosting a page called “Faith-based Activities”—aimed at children. If these were secular services, that would be one thing, but we see such activities as “City Kids Bible Camp, a vacation bible school,” being promoted by the City of Milwaukee; “Lift Off: Soaring to New Heights with God” via the Christian Faith Fellowship Church, the Albright United Methodist Church summer youth work program engaging “youth in our community with faith-based activities.” All of these programs are Christian, and all appear to have programs intended to primarily promote religion to youths, rather than social services. It is unacceptable for this City promotion to continue, to single out faith-based programs and exclusively Christian programs whose purposes are primarily proselytizing.

(As far as “safe summers” are concerned, the City of Milwaukee has experienced more than its share of black collar crimes; we know that churches historically do not police themselves, as the unfortunate assumption has been that clergy are above suspicion, that police checks aren’t necessary with church volunteers, that the usual safeguards are not needed—which has led to great harm to children and teenagers, including the barbaric death by exorcism of a vulnerable disabled child who was cruelly tortured at a storefront Milwaukee church in the recent past.) Besides crossing the state/church line, the City action is creating potential liability issues.

We are also startled to see a police insignia at your website, which has a badge and the words: “Milwaukee Police Department Serve & Protect/Welcomes Our FAITH BASED COMMUNITY.” Why is the faith-based community being singled out for special welcome?

Changing the title to “Ceasefire Breakfast” and inviting civic and nonviolence leaders irrespective of their views on religion, would show a good faith effort that the Mayor’s Office is not intending to send out a message of exclusion or religious endorsement. Milwaukee faces enormous violence problems, and we applaud any proactive steps the City is taking. But such steps do not require the unnecessary intrusion of religion into an important civic effort and into the City of Milwaukee website.

These constitutional matters need to be quickly remedied. We await a written response from you on what steps you are taking to address them at your earliest convenience.

Very truly yours

Annie Laurie Gaylor