



September 18, 2007

Attorney General J.B. Van Hollen
Wisconsin Department of Justice
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Dear Attorney General:

We have received queries of concern about religion permeating the first National Day of Remembrance for Murder Victims commemoration scheduled at the Capitol Rotunda on Sept. 25 by the Office of Crime Victims Services.

The State of Wisconsin must scrupulously avoid any appearance of promoting or endorsing religion. The Central Wisconsin Chapter of Parents of Murdered Children, which is cohosting the event, receives federal Victim of Crime Act funding through the Justice Department, which obliges it to be free of partisan or religious bent at a government event and any event paid for by tax dollars.

The ceremony includes the singing of a Christian hymn (see attached lyrics) by a soloist identified as a member of a church choir, and ends with a closing prayer by Pastor Charles Peterson, Christ Lutheran Church. There are many secular options to hymns. A closing prayer should not be conducted at an event sponsored by the Attorney General's Office.

The murder of a child is a horrible trauma for any parent, regardless of religious or nonreligious background, to endure. The Office of Crime Victims Services necessarily serves a diverse population, many of whom are not Christian or do not recognize the "Father" of the hymn, and some of whom certainly do not find solace for personal tragedy in other peoples' religious assertions—much less state-hosted religious ritual and professions of faith. In fact, to nonreligious families, being told "He'll never give you more than you can bear/This too shall pass/So in this thought be comforted/It's in His Hands" would further traumatize them, insult their personal beliefs, and offend them by advancing the idea that the murder of their beloved child was part of a deity's plan!

Grieving and vulnerable families should not be proselytized by state government or be told how or what they are expected to believe. The state should not be selecting which minister, which denomination or which religion should confer blessings, thereby excluding all the rest of us from a part of the ceremony. Parents seeking religious solace are free to do so and have nearly limitless religious resources and opportunities—but the State is not free to program religion for them.

Importantly, this violation of both the Wisconsin constitution (Art. I, Sec. 18) and the First Amendment of the federal constitution further transgresses the rights of state employees to be free from religion while performing official state duties. The State of Wisconsin should not be hosting or cohosting any event which makes either its clients or its staff feel excluded by virtue of personal conscience, which inflicts religion or which favors religion over nonreligion. The Sept. 25 ceremony schedule should be secular.

We ask that you take proactive steps to ensure this, and assure us, that the ceremony will be secular.

The Attorney General's Office further sponsors a ceremony at the law enforcement memorial on the Square to commemorate officers who died in the line of duty, where there traditionally has been a chaplain, a prayer and the rendition of "Amazing Grace," an explicitly Christian hymn of sin and salvation. Religious ritual is not unifying; it is divisive, and it does not belong at government events. There seems to be a troubling pattern developing.

May we hear from you at your earliest convenience?

Very truly yours,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Annie Laurie Gaylor". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Annie Laurie Gaylor