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Praying in public

Phyllis Zagano | Oct. 9, 2013 Just Catholic

The courts support prayers at the opening of public assemblies, and American legislatures have opened with a prayer since 1774. You have to wonder if it's done any good. Congressional leaders certainly don't seem to get along very well these days.

Lately, U.S. Senate Chaplain Barry C. Black has been letting God and the legislators know how he feels about the latest cliffhanger. He's prayed before the Senate: "Save us from the madness" and "Deliver us from the hypocrisy of attempting to sound reasonable while being unreasonable."

Sounds like a good idea to me. If no one else, maybe God can knock some sense into that crowd in Washington.

Elsewhere, the land echoes with the cries of naysayers wanting prayer out of public assemblies. Take the complaints of Susan Galloway, who lives in Greece, N.Y., population 96,095. Since 1999, the town board of Greece has invited local clergy to open its meetings with a prayer. Galloway and her friends don't like that. They complain that the prayer-givers and their prayers are Christian. They sued. They won. Now the whole thing is before the U.S. Supreme Court [1].

Come on. The movement to get all mention of God out of the public square is more than tiresome. Even in other matters, armchair Constitutionalists are getting out of hand. I actually heard a small-town fire commissioner announce that public meeting notices could not appear in church bulletins because of the separation of church and state.

It is more than totally nuts. It's unconstitutional. Whatever happened to freedom of speech?

It is perfectly legal to open public meetings and events with a prayer. The Greece case is complicated by the fact that some of the volunteer chaplains got a little too denominational, mentioning Jesus the Christ in ways the Congress' chaplains don't -- or at least haven't that often in the past hundred years or so.

As it happens, Greece, like the rest of the country, is predominantly Christian. So the houses of worship in the Greece town guide are mostly Christian. Therefore, the list of ministers on the rotating lists of volunteer prayer givers is predominantly Christian.

So what?

The town of Greece is in upper New York state, just south of Lake Ontario. We're talking town board meetings where the board members outnumber onlookers by about three to one. The chaplains are volunteers. They are not town employees. They do not receive a stipend.

While public meetings may open with prayer, no government authority may review or approve the prayer. Therein, as they say, lies the rub. The praying ministers in Greece don't seem to feel bound by big-city customs of interreligious public prayer. While public employee chaplains stick to God and the Lord, a little too much

calling on Jesus in the upper New York frozen night seems to be an issue. But if the town of Greece lays down rules and regulations on how its volunteer chaplains spend their minute or so, then the town establishes (or interferes with) religion. If the town purposefully imports chaplains from other denominations, it could be supporting one religion over another.

You would think they would be able to do what they want, or at least what seems to be the sensible thing: make a list of local volunteers and phone down the list until they find someone who is free on town board meeting night.

The town has already lost in court. The U.S. Supreme Court case seeks to overturn a lower court ruling against Greece. Advantage: anti-prayer folks. And get this: The Obama administration filed a brief supporting the town board of Greece.

Why?

There is a clear distinction between a prayer delivered by a local volunteer and the conduct of a denominational service within a public event. Lately, the town board heard prayers from local Community Church, Roman Catholic, and Church of Christ ministers, as well as a follower of the Bahà'i Faith. So what if they were mostly Christian?

Further, the federal government defends its right to pay all sorts of chaplains, each endorsed by the representative of a religious denomination or body. Federally paid chaplains provide chaplaincy services in Veterans Affairs hospitals, on military installations, and to federal employees around the world. Publicly supported chaplains work in prison systems, and state universities give free space to individual religious bodies for their campus ministries.

The folks in Greece, N.Y., and their unpaid volunteers aren't doing anything improper by asking God to bless them, their proceedings and their township. Neither is any chaplain paid by a public entity.

So let's all get back to praying for Congress, for free or with tax dollars. As Black has prayed: "Remove from them that stubborn pride which imagines itself to be above and beyond criticism" and "Forgive them the blunders they have committed."

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