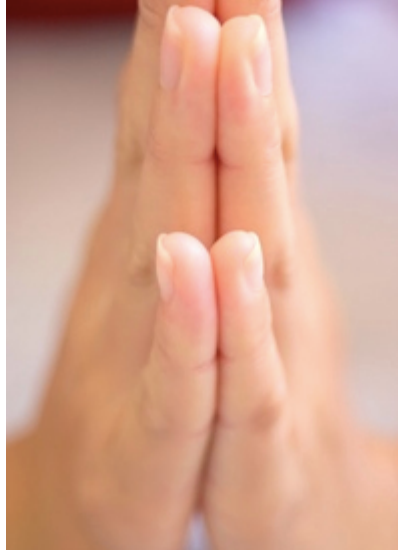




Written by [Dave Bohon](#) on March 17, 2011

## Invocation in Minn. Senate Recalls 1996 Prayer of Repentance in Kan. Legislature

Democratic Senator Terri Bonoff, who is Jewish, said she was asking the Senate's Republican Majority Leader, Amy Koch, to change the invitation that goes out to all visiting chaplains to stipulate that they would be "required" rather than "requested" to keep their prayers non-sectarian. "I'm a very religious woman and believe deeply in God," Bonoff insisted. "We honor God in public and our political discourse, and that's proper. But in doing a nondenominational prayer we are honoring him without violating the separation of church and state."



Koch followed up on Bonoff's request, saying that she would not make any such requirement. She explained that the Senate invites clergy from a variety of both Christian and non-Christian faith traditions to open legislative session in prayer, and reminds them that the Senators come from a variety of backgrounds. "I'm not going to get into the process of sort of editing prayer," Koch told the [Associated Press](#).

Democratic legislators in Minnesota's state House of Representatives have also expressed their displeasure with prayers that mention Jesus. Democratic Representative Michael Paymar said he has protested opening prayer for years by waiting outside the House chambers until they are concluded. In February he complained to Republican House Speaker Kurt Zellers when a local pastor opened up a session with a Christian invocation, and warned that he would turn up the heat if such prayers occur in the future.

Another Jewish Democratic legislator, Senator Ron Latz, said such prayers make "anyone who doesn't pray through Jesus Christ, or believe in Jesus Christ — it makes them feel like they don't belong. It makes me feel like I don't belong on the Senate floor to which I was duly elected by my constituents. In a government chamber, I and others should not be made to feel that way."

The Rev. Campbell defended his prayer, pointing out the important role Christianity played in the founding of America. "There's nobody that loves the Jews any more than the Christians, so that was not meant as an insult or disrespect," Campbell said. "Rather, it was a show of respect to Jesus Christ — just like our founders showed respect to Jesus Christ and the word of God when they built our Constitution."

Several other Democratic state Senators weighed in on the side of Bonoff's offense, but a majority of Republicans agreed with Koch that monitoring the content of prayer, Christian or otherwise, was not appropriate. "I believe we don't have a right to censor their prayers," Republican Senator David Brown told the AP.

However, one secular group argued that Campbell's prayer may have crossed the Constitution's



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supposed “separation of church and state” line. (The phrase is nowhere found in the Constitution, which says, in the First Amendment: “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof....”) Rob Boston, a senior policy analyst with Americans United for the Separation of Church and State, told the [Minnesota Independent](#) that the U.S. Supreme Court ruled in 1983 in *Marsh v. Chambers* that legislative prayers are okay as long as they don’t focus on a specific religious faith. “Some lower courts have weighed in since then, including in some cases sponsored by Americans United,” Boston said. “We have argued that in light of Marsh, legislative prayers must be non-sectarian.”

Boston conceded that in at least one case, heard by the U.S. 11th Circuit Court of Appeals covering Georgia, Alabama and Florida, federal judges found that legislative prayers could be sectarian as long as they didn’t drift into proselytizing. Like the ACLU, however, Boston’s own group has militated against prayers public. “Regardless of what the courts say, Americans United opposes official legislative prayers in all cases,” Boston told the Independent. “Government-sponsored religion inevitably has the effect of elevating one faith over others and sending the message that some citizens are second-class citizens.”

The Independent noted that sour grapes over religion can just as easily happen to conservative Christian lawmakers. “That was the case in 2001 when the Dalai Lama spoke before the Minnesota Legislature,” the paper noted. “While the Tibetan Buddhist leader did not give an invocation, his mere presence as a religious leader riled conservative Christians.”

According to the paper, then GOP state Representative Arlon Lindner was upset over the Tibetan leader’s presence at the legislature. “As a Christian, I am offended that we would have the Dalai Lama come and speak to a joint meeting of our Minnesota Legislature,” the paper quoted Lindner as saying. “He claims to be a god-king, a leader of the Buddha religion, which historically has been considered a cult because of its anti-Biblical teachings concerning the one true Holy God, Creator of Heaven and earth and His Son, Jesus Christ.”

The latest Minnesota case isn’t the first time this year that prayer has become an issue in a state legislature. As reported by [The New American](#), in January a group of state Senators in Hawaii quietly defied a decision by their legislative body to abandon opening prayers. On January 26, a week after the 25-member senate bowed to legal pressure from the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) to stop the traditional opening prayers, nine Senators, all Democrats, held hands, bowed their heads, and quietly asked God’s blessing over the Senate’s business.

In 2008 the Indiana House temporarily stopped its opening prayers after the ACLU filed a lawsuit against the body, but began the prayers again after a federal appeals court overturned a lower court ruling.

Without a doubt, the most celebrated (or notorious, depending upon your view) invocation offered in legislative chambers was the “Prayer Heard ‘Round the World” given by the Rev. Joe Wright, then-pastor of Wichita’s Central Christian Church, when he opened a session of the Kansas House of Representatives on January 23, 1996.

The prayer, which prompted a number of Kansas lawmakers to exit the building in anger, over the next few years became a rallying cry for pro-family and Christian activists around the nation. In the prayer, Wright recalled the scriptural warning, “Woe to those who call evil good,” acknowledging that “that’s exactly what we’ve done.” Noting that “we have lost our spiritual equilibrium and inverted our values,”



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Wright went on to repent for the collective transgressions of the American people:

We confess that we have ridiculed the absolute truth of your Word and called it moral pluralism.

We have worshipped other gods and called it multiculturalism.

We have endorsed perversion and called it an alternative lifestyle.

We have exploited the poor and called it the lottery.

We have neglected the needy and called it self-preservation.

We have rewarded laziness and called it welfare.

We have killed our unborn and called it choice.

We have shot abortionists and called it justifiable.

We have neglected to discipline our children and called it building esteem.

We have abused power and called it political savvy.

We have coveted our neighbors' possessions and called it ambition.

We have polluted the air with profanity and pornography and called it freedom of expression.

We have ridiculed the time-honored values of our forefathers and called it enlightenment.

Then, in the awkward silence of the Kansas House of Representatives, the Rev. Wrights concluded by asking God for both His mercy and His guidance:

Search us O God and know our hearts today; try us and see if there be some wicked way in us; cleanse us from every sin and set us free. Guide and bless these men and women who have been sent here by the people of Kansas, and who have been ordained by you, to govern this great state. Grant them your wisdom to rule and may their decisions direct us to the center of your will. I ask it in the name of your son, the living savior, Jesus Christ — Amen.

According to one report, in the six weeks after Wright offered the prayer, his church logged more than 5,000 phone calls with less than 50 of them critical of the prayer. Since then the church has continued to receive requests for copies of the prayer from all over the nation and from as far away as India, Africa, and Korea. When the late radio commentator Paul Harvey aired the prayer on his "The Rest of the Story" program, he received a larger response to it than any other program he had ever aired.

In addition to the legislators who walked out during the prayer, the *Kansas City Star* reported at the time that a few other Democratic lawmakers made speeches criticizing the prayer, with the Democratic House Minority Leader complaining of the "extreme, radical views" reflected in the invocation.



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