

2007 Commonwealth Prayer Breakfast  
Rabbi Paula Reimers

In my opinion, the 2007 Commonwealth Prayer Breakfast clearly showed state endorsement of one particular religion (Christianity) and one particular sect within that religion (evangelical Protestantism), and even one particular Christian evangelical organization, Capitol Ministries. Many specific indications would lead to this conclusion:

- 1) The songs and hymns were overtly Christian in content.
- 2) The prayer for the state of Pennsylvania was in the name of Jesus.
- 3) The presentation of the Proclamation by the Lieutenant Governor of the State of Pennsylvania to the keynote speaker, Ralph Drollinger of Capitol Ministries, who spoke of the need to evangelize the legislators and bring them to faith in Jesus, clearly implied the state's endorsement of his ideas.
- 4) The choice of Ralph Drollinger as Keynote Speaker for the Prayer Breakfast – with his emphasis on a scriptural mandate to evangelize state legislators and their staffs in the name of Jesus and his view that “once legislators have submitted themselves to the Lordship of Christ, we do not need to coerce their votes,” also implied the state's support for the goals of his organization.
- 5) The composition of the Planning Committee, including its chair, Bob Bastian from the Pennsylvania House of Representatives, and its co-chair, John Pippy from the Pennsylvania Senate – composed primarily of members of the state legislature and their staffs (clearly identified as such) – definitely implied that this was a state function and not a gathering of like-minded individuals. There were two representatives from the PA Catholic Conference and one from the PA Family Institute on the Planning Committee. No other faiths or organizations were represented.

The use of a reading from the Hebrew Bible does not change the overwhelming Christian bias, since the Hebrew Bible is part of Christian Scriptures; rather, it merely reinforces the attitude that Christianity has superseded and replaced Judaism. Judaism is not respected as an independent, legitimate faith on its own, but only as the precursor, the seed-bed of Christianity.

I also felt that the choice of the “theme verse” Micah 6:6-8 was a slight to Judaism (intentional or not), comparing the “earthly” nature of Judaism with the supposed “spiritual” nature of Christianity. That this reading was intended, however, is borne out by the “Welcome” by the chair of the event, Representative Bob Bastian: “Micah's terse response (v. 8) to the rhetorical question (v. 6-7) indicates they should have known the answer. Spiritual blindness led them to offer everything except the one thing God wanted - a spiritual commitment of the heart.” The “they” here are the Jews. This sort of interpretation echoes the innuendo that Jews are “spiritually blind” because they have not accepted Jesus, and reinforces centuries-old prejudices against Jews and Judaism. It has no place at such an event.

It is certainly not my intent to censor the prayers of individuals or to direct their interpretation of scripture. It is to point out that great care must be taken in organizing such activities so that they do not imply state endorsement or a state preference for any particular religion or sect within one religion.

In addition, the only way to prevent minority faiths and their followers from being excluded or demeaned is to include their representatives in the planning at all stages.

The aggressively evangelical Christian character of the 2007 “Commonwealth Prayer Breakfast” does not reflect the religious diversity of the state of Pennsylvania or the spirit of its founder, William Penn, himself a member of a religious minority and well-known for his tolerance of religious dissent.

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