

Dear Commissioners and Fellow Citizens,

I am not among the county clergy to whom Commissioner Bunek has spoken regarding the proposal to add prayer to the agenda of the meetings of the commissioners. I find that odd because I am among the longest serving clergy in Leelanau County. As a local faith leader for over sixteen years, I have developed a sense of the religious diversity in the county, including knowing many citizens who claim no faith affiliation. In addition, I have offered public comment to the Board of Commissioners on issues pertaining to the welfare of the county's residents on more than one occasion in the last few years. It is my concern for the well-being of ALL the county's residents that compels me to express my objection to this proposal.

In Christian scripture, Jesus gives instruction on how to pray.

And whenever you pray, do not be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, so that they may be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. But whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you. (Matthew 6:5-6, NRSV)

In these verses Jesus is clear that prayer is to be offered in private. He admonishes public displays of piety. The Apostle Paul offers additional guidance, instructing followers of Christ to “pray without ceasing.” (1 Thessalonians 5:17)

Prayer is an integral part of the private life of a follower of Christ. I assume anyone who is part of that tradition is already praying. Ergo, there is no reason to add it as an agenda item to become a public display of piety. Indeed, to do so would be antithetical to the Gospel. In a pluralistic and democratic society, public prayer belongs in the context of communal worship among those who choose to participate in a specific religious tradition. It should not be foisted among the beautiful diversity of people of Leelanau County at a meeting of the county government.

Which brings me to a second reason I object to this proposal.

I am part of a Christian tradition that places high value on the separation of church and state. Modern Congregationalists are the religious descendants of the Mayflower Pilgrims who abhorred the state having any form of control over the governance of the church, the expression of its faith, or the dictation of the fidelities of its members. Indeed, I do not write this letter claiming to represent the church I serve nor anyone in it because that is not our way. We are a community of people who support the individual expression of religious convictions without insistence that anyone else

adhere to our beliefs. I believe individual commissioners who wish to exercise their faith should do so, but not within their role as public officials. They are not elected to represent or promote a certain faith tradition, nor the interpretation or expression of religious perspectives or viewpoints.

When attending meetings of our commissioners, I have appreciated the opportunity to recite the Pledge of Allegiance with my fellow citizens and then pause for the moment of reflection to consider the issues at hand through the lens of my own spiritual practices. Those are unifying and clarifying moments. I recommend they remain the same without the addition of a prayer.

Respectfully Yours,
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