

May 17, 2021

To the Leelanau Board of Commissioners:

Few things shock us anymore, but the proposed “Prayer by Clergy” policy rises unfortunately to that level. What strikes us most is that the policy you are debating violates the very standards it attempts to enshrine, failing *on its face* to meet even the basic criteria it purports to embody.

Quoted from the resolution:

“Whereas, the Board desires to adopt a policy that makes clear that the prayer shall not proselytize or advance any particular faith, that no invocation shall denigrate nonbelievers or religious minorities, threaten damnation, or preach conversion, show any purposeful preference of one religious view to the exclusion of others, or exclude or coerce non-believers.”

Consider:

- By limiting participation to “clergy”, this policy at its core advances particular faiths (i.e. those that have professionally hired spokespeople to advance particular viewpoints).
- By limiting participation to only “eligible” members of the clergy you initiate endless debate about the criteria for “eligible”, defining what it even means to be “eligible”.
- By limiting participation to “religious congregations with an established presence in Leelanau County” you exclude many faith communities that may not have an “established presence” (whatever that means, again endless debate) here or in any neighboring County (thinking here of Mormons, Masons, practicing Islamists, Buddhists, Native Americans, etc.).
- By limiting the type of prayer and who recites it you by definition exclude nonbelievers and religious minorities, and those who wish to keep their own prayer practice a private matter.
- By limiting this to “tax exempt” religious organizations you exclude the many for-profit and volunteer entities and individuals who sincerely practice their own “religion”, be it theist, animist or none of the above.

While it probably wasn’t your intention, the unintended consequence is that this proposed policy actually *enshrines* proselytization; advances particular faiths over others; denigrates nonbelievers and religious minorities; and shows purposeful preference of a particular religious view (i.e. those considered “legitimate” and “eligible” for inclusion in such a “prayer policy”).

Please. You already have a Moment of Silence which honors ALL faiths as well as non-believers and non-members of established religions. We believe it’s imperative you withdraw this policy from consideration and don’t waste any more time on trying to “fix” the thing, or further encumber the Clerk’s valuable time in perpetually monitoring, interpreting and regulating the business of trying to sanction some kind of Leelanau County Governmental Prayer.

Focus instead your time and attention on the County’s business and the important work at hand. While you debate divisive and litigious policies, local businesses continue to struggle, county residents can’t find basic affordable housing for themselves and their families and the numbers of homeless continues to grow. The list goes on....

In short the “Prayer by Clergy” policy is exclusionary, discriminatory and counter-productive. Please promote instead the Moment of Silence as a way for all county residents to freely pray (or not), trusting that our thoughts and intentions are heard and honored in infinite ways.

Thank you for listening.

Sincerely,

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