

Municipalities Asked to Stop Praying

Municipal councils have different approaches regarding the customs and conduct of their meetings. Specifically, while some open meetings with the Lord's Prayer, others say a non-denominational prayer, have a moment of silent reflection, or don't pray at all. Secular Ontario is an organization that promotes and defends the secular (non-religious) nature of Ontario society. Recently, the group wrote to various municipal councils and asked them to stop saying the Lord's Prayer at council meetings. Secular Ontario takes the position that because the residents of Ontario hold a variety of religious beliefs, including no religious belief, municipalities should remain secular to insure that all citizens feel included.

Secular Ontario looks to case law to support its view. In the 1999 case of *Freitag v. Town of Penetanguishene*, the Ontario Court of Appeal concluded that by reciting the Lord's Prayer at the start of council meetings, the Town violated the right to freedom of conscience and religion as referenced in section 2(a) of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms. Freedom of religion includes the freedom to practice your religion of choice, freedom from direct or indirect pressure to act contrary to your beliefs, and freedom from pressure to conform with a religious majority. The Court held that the purpose of reciting the Lord's Prayer was to impose a Christian moral tone on council meetings. This practice pressured non-believers to conform with the majority and stigmatized Mr. Freitag because he chose not to rise and pray. The Court also noted that the Town was asked to find a way to achieve a moral tone without saying a Christian prayer (see the more recent case of *Allen v. Renfrew* that says non-denominational prayers are an acceptable alternative to the Lord's Prayer at council meetings) yet it failed to change its practice.

Given the Freitag ruling, Secular Ontario believes that municipal councils who recite the Lord's Prayer are in violation of Canada's Charter right to freedom of religion. The group intends to take municipalities to court if they refuse to revise this custom.

Sources

- "Ontario group threatens court action over Lord's Prayer" CBC News (26 January 2007)
- James Cowan, "Ontario councils refuse to drop prayer - 'Can't privilege one faith'" Canada.com (19 January 2007)
- Carola Vyhnak, "Durham praises the Lord" Toronto Star (18 January 2007)
- *Freitag v. Penetanguishene (Town)* (1999), 125 O.A.C. 139
- *Allen v. Renfrew (Corp. of the County)* (2004), 69 O.R. (3d) 742
- Secular Ontario

Further Reading

- Carola Vyhnak, “New time slot for Durham prayer” Toronto Star (26 January 2007)
- Free Dominion – a Blog
- Erin Hatfield, “Lord's Prayer debate set to go before regional council” My Kawartha.com
“School Prayers and Freedom of Religion” Human Rights in Canada
- Mervyn F. White, “Recent Ontario Decision Revisits Prayer In Government Proceedings” Carters.ca (30 April 2005)