

Local Clergy Accused of Federal, State and Local Violations

(He prayed and spoke aloud the name of Jesus)

A Pastoral Response to Atheist Prayer Protesters

A number of years ago, I was asked if I would come and do the invocation or opening prayer for the **Detroit City Council**. Not long after that enjoyable experience, I was called by the Office of the **Chaplain of the United States Senate** asking if I could come in June of 2003 and lead the **United States Senate** in [prayer](#). Choosing between a few available dates in June, I settled on the 24th which is my wife Theresa's birthday. During that trip, I also made some interesting appointments to discuss urban problems and solutions with some national experts concerning our challenges here in Metro Detroit.



The Michigan Senate with Senator Pappageorge and Father Richard Dalton

A few weeks ago I was asked by a **Michigan State Senator** whom I didn't know, to come and offer the invocation at the **Michigan State Senate**, which I did on the February 4th, 2010. Again, while in Lansing, I used the occasion to set up a few appointments in the Lansing with discussions focused on Metro Detroit.

This morning I read an [article](#) in the **Detroit News** that recounted that a “*Watchdog Group*” of Atheists from my childhood home state of Wisconsin is charging that those prayers are WRONG. According to them, perhaps someone like me should not have even been allowed into the **U.S. Capitol, the Michigan State Capitol, or the Detroit City County Building** in clerical collar with the name of Jesus in my heart and on my lips. (*Feb 25th 2010 – Detroit News - Watchdog group objects to Detroit City Council's prayers - Christian references called violation of First Amendment*)

The **U.S. Supreme Court** declared the “*The opening of sessions of legislative and other deliberative public bodies with prayer is deeply embedded in the history and tradition of this country. From colonial times through the founding of the Republic and ever since, the practice of legislative prayer has coexisted with the principles of disestablishment and religious freedom.*” Tradition has also done this without the “*Watch Dogs*”. How can an Atheist Group “*reviewing*” three minute prayers for content be in any way compatible with my religious freedom as an American Clergy? I object to Atheists who don’t believe in prayer, or the legislators who ask us to come and pray, to demand Jesus’ name neither be mentioned or invoked.

The term “*non-denominational*” in no way leaves Jesus out of the picture, his name and work is central among **Lutherans, Methodists, Baptists, Presbyterians, Roman Catholics, the Eastern Orthodox, Pentecostals, Evangelicals and many others**, even including an **Anglican** like myself. To demand that we must all pray as **Unitarians**, as the Atheists request us to do, is establishing a secular “*religion*” instead of demonstrating true religious tolerance. Please, invite the **Unitarian, the Jewish Rabbi, the Muslim Imam, Buddhist Monk and others**, but let them and us come as we are, with our faith as it is. Neither **Congress, State Officials or Local Governments** should establish or prohibit the free exercise of our religious freedoms during those three minute invites. In spite of the Atheists’ objections, it might be understandable in a nation that counts itself as 76% Christian that the **Detroit City Council** would invite a good representation of clergy from the Christian tradition.

I think we are fooling ourselves to think that the “*Freedom from Religion*” folks will be contented only to control our speech in the **legislative chambers of government** during our short prayers. I have the feeling that they would like us out of their eyesight and earshot altogether. They seem to want **total freedom from us, the ten commandments, manger scenes, the greeting, “Merry Christmas”, and a whole list of other things**. How dare a Sports Figure like Tim Tebow ruin the Super Bowl for them. On a major noisy, high traffic street in the Detroit Suburbs, an evening spotlight on a cross on Church property was seen as a violation. You can put a spotlight on a tree, but not on a cross. Can that really be seen as religious tolerance? Although it’s not crime, there seems to be a whole lot of hate in this Watchdog Group whose **Co-President Dan Barker** called out an evangelical pastor from Indiana for practicing his faith, calling his God a ‘*petty, vain, insecure, egotistical being.*’” One could wonder who really has the ego and insecurity issues in that [Indiana debate](#).

I hope we Christians won’t be intimidated by such attitudes, but will have a more frequent, clearer and helpful voices impacting our communities both in the city and suburbs. We need **more public settings and media outlets** where our stories can be told, our values respected, and the many works of compassion throughout Metro Detroit motivated by the Holy Spirit in the name of Jesus, will be given a better spotlight. Great stories of daily deeds around Metro Detroit **where the hungry are fed, children are tutored, ex-offenders are befriended, the addicted are freed, people find needed shelter**. This Web Blog itself is part of a bigger project to tell those stories and build up our communities. The [LookUpDetroit.com](#) web effort will soon be inviting the Christian Community and others to steward together this Digital Gateway for all of Metro Detroit. **We hope it will be a helpful resource for believers and unbelievers alike.**

I believe I’ve acted appropriately as I prayed in these public settings even without the “*Atheist Watch Dog*” monitoring me. I’ve done no Senatorial altar calls in **Washington D.C. or Lansing**. Major controversial doctrines between denominations were never brought up during the **Detroit City Council Prayer**, but the name of Jesus mentioned and included? **YES !!** He is central to my faith and my access to the Heavenly Throne. His government trumps any other in my life, **so please don’t call me to come pray, if I can’t even mention the wonderful name of Jesus.**

– **Father Richard Dalton**