

MEMO

TO: Ald. James A. Bohl, Jr.
FROM: Jim Owczarski, Legislative Research Analyst
DATE: May 29, 2000
RE: Prayer before council meetings in other communities.

The following is in response to your request for information about the practice of other communities with respect to offering a prayer or invocation before council meetings. I contacted the 12 cities with populations nearest Milwaukee's as well as Chicago, Madison and Minneapolis. The results of my research follow but, in general, the majority of the cities contacted offer either a prayer or invocation before their council meetings. None begin their meeting with a moment of silence.

Austin begins its meetings with a prayer offered by an individual selected from those who volunteer at the City Clerk's office. Although the volunteers have typically been Christian, the employe to whom I spoke said, on more than one occasion, individuals whose beliefs the clerk's office was unable to determine were allowed to offer the prayer.

Baltimore decided to begin its council meetings with an invocation late last year, coinciding with the term of its new council president. The person making the invocation is selected by the City Clerk from a list of volunteers.

Boston begins its council meetings with a prayer. The person offering the prayer is selected by the council president.

Charlotte begins its council meetings with a prayer. The person offering the prayer is selected by the mayor, by-and-large at the time of the meeting. Typically, the prayer is offered by one of the council members or by a member of the city staff.

Chicago begins its council meetings with an invocation offered by a range of clergy and others on a rotating basis based on a list kept by the City Clerk. In the past, and this practice has been in place for over 20 years, the invocations have been offered by, among others, Christians of many denominations, Jews, Buddhists and Muslims.

Columbus begins its meetings with a prayer offered by a member of the clergy who serves as chaplain for this purpose in all but name. The city's practice has been to allow

the same member of the clergy to serve so long as they desire, the most recent replacement coming only after 15 years of service.

El Paso begins its meetings with a prayer offered by a member of the clergy selected by the City Clerk from a list of volunteers. Although theoretically open to all confessions, the prayers of late have been offered entirely by Christians and Jews.

Indianapolis begins its council meetings with prayer. The prayers are offered by council members on a rotating basis. Members may ask others to offer the prayer in their place, but this is rarely done.

Jacksonville begins its council meetings with a prayer, most often offered by one of the council's 19 members on a rotating basis. When it is his or her turn to offer the prayer, the council member may nominate someone else to offer it in his or her place.

Memphis begins its council meetings with a prayer offered by a community religious leader selected by the council chairman.

Nashville-Davidson's metropolitan council has started its meetings with prayer for many years. The area's new vice-mayor, starting in October of last year, began assigning responsibility for offering the prayer to each council member on a rotating basis. Previously, the decision had been made by the mayor at the time of the council meeting.

Denver, Madison, Minneapolis and Seattle have neither a prayer nor an invocation at the start of their council meetings.

Should you have further questions, please feel free to contact me at your convenience. I am at extension x2299.