

The Mayors' Prayer Breakfast: A Case Study, Part I

The Reverend Vern Barnet, DMn

Selected documents in the still-developing story of the 2005 February 11 Mayors' Prayer Breakfast follow.

Because of space, many documents are omitted, such as letters to the editor following the February 11 column, the February 23 NCCJ statement released to the press, the text of William H Dunn Sr's remarks as printed in *The Star* (March 3), the ACLU response (March 3) the columns by Mike Hendricks (March 8) and E Thomas McClanahan (March 9), Lewis Diuguidd (March 18), and a transcript of

the KCPT *Ruckus* program (March 25). Most are available on request to CRES supporters; send a stamped self-addressed envelope to CRES, Box 45414, KCMO 64171. Transitional material here is printed in italics. Because what happened in Kansas City jibes with the nation's theocratic junta, we also reprint Senator Jack Danforth's *NYTimes* comment.

◆ 2005 February 11

Dear Debra [Shultz, President, Mayors' Prayer Breakfast Committee],

So much wonderful effort again went into the Mayors' Prayer Bkfst this morning, it was a shame for it to become a partisan brawl. While Mr Dunn has every right to his own religious viewpoints and to express them, when he referred with moral imprimatur to November's election, the event became in effect a political rally in which the unwilling were forced to participate. The Mayors' Prayer Breakfast should be about the spirit, the unity that brings us together, not about partisan promotion. In my view it was unethical of your speaker to violate the non-partisan intent and expectation of the event.

Afterwards I politely introduced myself to Mr Dunn and thanked him for the many wonderful things he has done in the community. I also carefully said — in words no greater in number than what you see here — that *I thought he had been misinformed about the situation in which he made the claim that the ACLU is preventing teachers from reading the Declaration of Independence because it contains the word "God."* He would not respond to me or even shake my extended hand. This is not the spirit of democracy and not the spirit of the Mayors' Prayer Breakfast.

I talked with a number of people afterwards who shared my disappointment, including those who said they agreed privately but could not be open in their disappointment because of business arrangements. Such informal pressure is not good for democracy. Your speaker took advantage of the situation.

The address was especially inappropriate since proceeds of the bkfst were designated for the NCCJ (of which I am a board member), an organization which

deplores the bias against gays and others your speaker advanced prejudice against. I am grateful for the good spirit and inclusive perspective of the invocation and benediction.

May I respectfully suggest that your future speakers be instructed not to intertwine their partisan views with their remarks on this important annual occasion.

Thank you for your leadership these past several years and for taking the time to consider my suggestion.

Sincerely, *Vern Barnet*

cc: Mayor Kay Barnes

◆ 2005 February 12

Leaders focus on values, unity

By Matt Campbell
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The annual Mayors' Prayer Breakfast on Friday drew the largest turnout in its 44-year history to benefit the National Conference for Community and Justice.

Formerly called the National Conference of Christians and Jews, the organization fights bigotry and promotes diversity training for the young.

More than 1,200 tickets were sold for the breakfast at the Hyatt Regency Crown Center, attended by nearly 30 area mayors, plus other civic and business leaders.

"We are in this together," said Kansas City Mayor Kay Barnes. "This region is a family with different kinds of responsibilities, and yet each one of us in this room is making his or her own unique contribution."

Five area young persons were recognized for their efforts in making a positive difference in the community. They were Tera Brundige of Blue Valley Northwest High School, Christopher Carr of William Jewell College, Greg May of Olathe North High School, Lindsay Priday of Shawnee Mission South High School and Camron B

Smith of Brigham Young University.

Featured speaker William H Dunn Sr bemoaned what he called "a sharp downward trend" in values since he last spoke at the breakfast meeting in 1979. In a 10-minute speech he denounced pornography, illegitimate births, same-sex marriage, activist judges and the American Civil Liberties Union.

"We now live in a secular society when anything seems to go in television, movies and the Internet," Dunn said.

◆ 2005 February 23

Prayer breakfasts should be . . . for all

"Faiths and Beliefs" By Vern Barnet
The Kansas City Star.

Prayer breakfasts in the name of government officials have always made me a bit queasy — for two reasons, one specifically Biblical, and one respecting the Constitutional guarantee of freedom of religion.

First the Biblical reason. Jesus said, "And when thou prayest, be not like hypocrites who love to stand in houses of worship and street corners, to show off in public. . . . But when you pray, go into a room by yourself and shut the door behind you." (Matt. 6:5-6.) Jesus appears to warn against the public prayer because it can be for show and prefers the private prayer because it is more likely to be sincere.

Second, the US Constitution protects our religious freedom. History and evidence in the world today suggest that religion flourishes best without government entanglement. However, I do not think that privately funded organizations sponsoring prayer breakfasts automatically violate that principle even when government officials participate. I think our elected leaders have the right to exercise their religious freedoms, too.

I don't even object when, as in Kansas City, the Mayors' Prayer Breakfast Com-

mittee prints a picture of the legend of George Washington praying at Valley Forge on the cover of the printed program and displays a large version in front of the head table. There may be no more historical justification for this scene than for the fable of Washington chopping down the cherry tree, but I appreciate the desire to impute spiritual practices and wisdom to those who lead us even though I know some want to use the image as support for a disputed understanding of the role religion played in the founding of our nation.

However, a line is crossed when a prayer breakfast becomes partisan. And that is what many folk feel happened Feb 11 this year when the speaker appeared to endorse a particular religious perspective on last November's election. Not only were an array of political positions advanced by the speaker, but folks of Protestant, Catholic, Buddhist, Jewish, Muslim and other faiths were offended by what they perceived to be the speakers' failure to recognize the religious pluralism represented among the thousand or more guests.

This is not the first year that the Mayors' Breakfast has been marred by partisanship or religious insensitivity. For example, in 2002, the mayor, in a magnificent and inspiring gesture, asked members of a particular minority faith to stand and be welcomed, and warmly welcomed they were. The program was beautiful. But at the very end, the person about to give the benediction introduced it by saying that she would use the occasion to proclaim the one true faith.

There is a time and a place for her, but the Mayors' Prayer Breakfast is not it. We should reclaim this event to celebrate our diversity of faiths and our unity as Heartland Americans.

◆ 2005 March 16

Alliance shows power of praying

"Faiths and Beliefs" By Vern Barnet
The Kansas City Star.

Over a career as a clergyman, and before that, as a laymen, I've been to my share of prayer breakfasts. None surpasses last Thursday's breakfast held by the Raytown Community Inter-Faith Alliance. Most prayer breakfasts, frankly, look a bit like posturing for one another and staging for

the Lord. Speeches, awards and pageantry often overshadow prayer. But in Raytown they pray without pretensions.

Public prayer is not easy these days. America's promise of religious liberty has been fulfilled by making us perhaps the most religiously diverse nation in the world. But we have not yet learned how to come together from that diversity and pray together.

Praying together is so important to Raytown Mayor Sue Frank that she assisted the Alliance to sponsor the event when the Crossroads Chamber of Commerce could no longer do so.

Alliance president Michael Stephens, pastor of Southwood United Church of Christ, opened this year's breakfast with an invocation that might have been uttered by inhabitants of this land hundreds of years ago, before Europeans and their descendents came to this place. Though the idiom was American Indian, its spirit was universal.

Holly McKissick, pastor of Saint Andrew Christian Church in Olathe, was the featured speaker. Her theme also was universal, found in every faith: the importance of forgiveness. Regardless of our political views, religious affiliations, economic status, race or sexual orientation, she spoke to all of us and for all of us.

Harold Johnson, chairman of the event, had invited me, but—perhaps deliberately—did not prepare me for the most interesting form of community prayer I've seen at a prayer breakfast.

Here's how it worked. Before the speaker came to the platform, people at their tables were asked to form teams of six to write their local, national and global prayer requests on yellow, green and orange cards. Folks from different backgrounds and viewpoints shared the sacred desires in their hearts with each other.

During the address, the cards were collected and arranged.

Following the inspiration McKissick provided, David Cliburn, pastor of Blue Ridge Presbyterian, appeared with the cards and invited us to pray. Skillfully incorporating the collected concerns of the heart, Cliburn gave voice to the community's heart. The specific longings shared in the small teams were repeated and powerfully amplified as we heard them

become one, united with the aspirations of the community. That it itself was an answer to prayer.

It is easy for a person to pray on one's own behalf, and others can listen to such a prayer. But it is difficult for one person truly to pray on behalf of hundreds of people from different faiths and sundry concerns. The Raytown Alliance has found a way to do this. It demonstrates, as someone has said, that diversity is not a problem; it is a gift.

◆ 2005 March 1 Tuesday 8:33 am

To Donovan Mouton, Mayoral assistant

... I happened to have a chance to visit very briefly with Mayor Barnes Feb 17, I think it was, and she indicated that the Mayors' Prayer Breakfast Committee was working on a statement that would assure those concerned about the 2005 Mayors' Prayer Breakfast that the non-partisan tone expected for the event will be observed in the future, and that the religious diversity of our area will be respected.

I have communicated several times with Debra Shulz, president of the MPB committee, and her responses offer no hope that the committee will adopt or affirm such a policy. It is difficult to understand why a courteous, positive, and forward-looking statement is so difficult to fashion. Do you have any information about whether Mayor Barnes has been misled? ... Thank you ... *Vern Barnet*

◆ 2005 March 1 Tuesday 11:05 am

...
The Mayor has read the note you sent earlier today to Donovan Mouton and asked me to let you know she will be responding later today to those citizens who, like you, have contacted her regarding what transpired at last month's breakfast. She will also be contacting members of the Prayer Breakfast Committee. Mayor Barnes specifically wanted to let you know in advance of what she will send out today that she shares your concerns and has been working on this issue. Like you, the Mayor was hopeful that working with the Committee might result in a affirming statement from them, although this will apparently not happen. ... *Richard DeHart*

◆ 2005 March 1 Tuesday 4:32 pm

Dear Vern, FYI, following is the note I sent to members of the Mayors' Prayer Breakfast Committee earlier today. *Kay Barnes*

Dear members of the Mayors' Prayer Breakfast Committee:

While the Prayer Breakfast is held in the name of all the Mayors in the metropolitan area and none of us have any involvement in the planning or execution of this annual event, as the Mayor of the largest and most diverse City, I feel I need to express my personal dismay with the tone and content of the recent keynote address.

As you may be aware, I have talked at length with Debra Shultz, the current President of the Executive Board of the Committee for the Mayors' Prayer Breakfast. While the board has also received expressions of concern, I am disappointed that the organization decided not to issue a statement regarding this matter.

In addition, I have suggested that the committee consider modifying its by-laws which currently prohibit any **electd official*** from being the principal speaker. If you would amend your by-laws in this manner, I have offered to be the speaker at next year's Prayer Breakfast to reaffirm the intended inclusive nature of the event. My offer was declined.

Therefore, I feel I am left with no option but to inform the Executive Board of the Committee for the Mayors' Prayer Breakfast that I will not participate in nor attend next year's event. I am notifying the many individuals who contacted me about their displeasure with this year's event about my decision.

Sincerely, Kay Barnes

◆ Comment

*Mayor Barnes has been criticized for overreacting to Mr Dunn's remarks. However, it appears that before her announcement, she expended considerable effort to obtain a statement from the MPB committee or find some other way to assure that next year's breakfast would be non-partisan and non-sectarian. Her offer to be the speaker seems reasonable when one considers that George W Bush (who many people think of as an ***"electd official"*)** was the speaker at the National Prayer Breakfast, and the speaker at the Raytown breakfast was a clergyperson who did not use the opportunity to proselytize, and the current dispute arises from a businessman, not a politician or a clergyperson.*

On March 16, the MPB committee met and again was unable to identify its intent

as non-partisan and non-sectarian. Later that day, the NCCJ Board appointed a committee to take this wish in person to the MPB.

◆ 2005 March 31

Mr William H Dunn, Sr
J.E. Dunn Construction
929 Holmes, Kansas City, MO 64106

Dear Mr Dunn:

You may remember me. After others had spoken with you following the Mayors' Prayer Breakfast February 11, I approached you with my hand extended. Very politely I said, "Thank you for the many wonderful things you have done for Kansas City. But you might like to know that the ACLU has not prevented children from reading the Declaration of Independence because it has the word 'God' in it." You would not shake my hand. Although no one else at that moment was seeking your attention, you turned away from me.

Sir, I am a clergyman. Can we talk a little religion?

Thou shalt not bear false witness. Your remarks attacked the ACLU falsely. As a civic leader, you have a responsibility to get your facts straight. You should be ashamed of repeating a Right-wing distortion so severe it is simply a lie. I'd suggest a big donation to the ACLU with your apology.

You also attacked the ACLU because it believes the Boy Scouts should not discriminate against gays. I have been a Scout organizer and featured speaker. My son is an Eagle Scout. But he refuses to be active any more because he abhors its discriminatory policy of excluding qualified people from being a part of this otherwise wonderful program. Would you exclude me?

You certainly have the right to your opinion and to express it. But at a prayer breakfast with many kinds of Christians, Jews, Muslims, Buddhists, and other faiths represented? You, sir, blasphemed the non-sectarian character of the Mayors' Prayer Breakfast by insinuating that your own views are the only possible religious and ethical views.

Jesus said nothing about gays, about

which you spoke. He warned many, many times about the dangers the rich face, about which you said nothing.

Your company motto is "Building lasting relationships," and indeed you and your company deserve much applause for the contributions you have made to United Way and other worthy efforts. I also salute your business focus on relationships above profits. But with the Mayors' Prayer Breakfast you have damaged many relationships. The community is in uproar. Almost every day, weeks later, comments about your speech appear in the paper. Almost everywhere I travel in this city, people are talking. Do you hear? Agency leaders and workers who depend on your funding tell me they are intimidated from expressing their opinions publicly. You have thus distorted democracy.

The Mayors' Prayer Breakfast Committee, despite repeated requests from many quarters, has thus far been unable to issue a statement that the intent of the breakfast is non-partisan and non-sectarian. Others are contemplating an alternative event. You may not only have defiled the very platform on which you spoke; you may have destroyed it.

I am concerned, as you may be, about the overwhelming secularistic character of our culture, and I have dedicated my life to bringing the wisdom of the world's great religious traditions to help our society recover a sense of the sacred. I would be delighted to discuss with you the causes of secularism and ways to recover spiritual direction in private and public life. But your list of complaints was a secular exercise in itself, even partisan, and unworthy of your past insights, generosity, and good will.

You may find the religious language I use problematic; I don't often identify public blasphemy. But since your remarks were expressed with moral and religious attitude, it seems appropriate for me to demonstrate that such language can be used in ways other than you apparently envisioned. You may think me disrespectful, even insolent; I consider you a great man perhaps so respected that only a peircing cry can make its way to you, through the admiring and indebted crowds who are afraid to reflect to you what you now have done.

You, by violating the spirit of the

Mayors' Prayer Breakfast, have not deepened our reverence for each other, but set us at each others' throats. You have the power to study what you said, to consider its effects, and to repent.

In sadness and with hope,

The Rev Vern Barnet, D.Mn

◆ 2005 April 1

The following is a sketch for a column.

Some years ago my respect for Jewish friends, and my desire to express solidarity with them, led me to stop attending the annual Overland Park Mayor's Prayer Breakfast. But as a former resident of Overland Park, I also developed great admiration for Mayor Ed Eilert. So I thought this, his last year in office after serving 24 years so well, I would attend the March 24 breakfast. And I was also curious to see if, in the intervening years, the explicit and exclusive Christian setting had been modified.

Of course there is nothing illegal about the Christian Businessmen's Committee inviting a mayor to such a prayer breakfast. People have the right to exercise their faith and to freely assemble. But when an event is held using the title of a government official whose photo is on the printed program, I get queasy, as I wrote in this space Feb. 23.

As I entered, I did not see any signs saying "No Jews, Muslims or Hindus allowed," but the no-choice breakfast plate served with bacon to each of the 600 of us left little doubt that the dietary restrictions of some observing the practices of those faiths were unimportant to the breakfast planners.

Homeowner association covenants restricting property purchase by Jews and blacks can no longer be enforced, but I saw no person of color present. If you were a white Christian, this may just have been the place for you. But Overland Park encompasses people of many ethnic backgrounds and religious traditions from A to Z, American Indian to Zoroastrian.

It is true that the breakfast program from beginning to end was inspiring. The featured speaker had a powerful personal story to tell about his Christian faith. His presentation ended with a strong invitation to all of those present who had not already

given their lives to Christ to do so right then. While not all Christians are comfortable with an "altar call," no one would want to question the speakers' sincerity and good will.

But our community has equally gripping stories of a Tibetan monk in great peril who escaped Communist rule, of Jews who survived the Holocaust, of a black man whose career was shaped in part by seeing as a child a black man dragged behind a truck to his death because he asked his boss not to "bother" his wife anymore, of a Muslim assaulted by prejudice—folks of every faith with remarkable stories now contributing to our community.

This has been a difficult column for me to write because so many of the people involved in that breakfast are my friends. But it is my duty to ask, "What kind of city do you want? Do you want to model bringing people together or, in a quasi-civic function, convey exclusivity?"

The person elected mayor April 5, or the Christian Businessmen's Committee, may want to rethink the custom of placing the aura of office around an affair that leaves so many wonderful citizens unable to share an annual breakfast together.

This morning I attended a breakfast convened by an organization based in a specific Christian tradition. The food service was not slanted for any particular faith and priest's invocation, which included invoking "Allah," was clearly inclusive. If a church can sponsor a public event which is deliberately embracing, why can't an event in the name of a public official recognize all citizens?

◆ John C Danforth

By a series of recent initiatives, Republicans have transformed our party into the political arm of conservative Christians. The elements of this transformation have included advocacy of a constitutional amendment to ban gay marriage, opposition to stem cell research involving both frozen embryos and human cells in petri dishes, and the extraordinary effort to keep Terri Schiavo hooked up to a feeding tube.

Standing alone, each of these initiatives has its advocates, within the Republican Party and beyond. But the distinct elements do not stand alone. Rather they are parts of a larger package, an agenda of positions common to conser-

vative Christians and the dominant wing of the Republican Party. . . .

High-profile Republican efforts to prolong the life of Ms Schiavo, including departures from Republican principles like approving Congressional involvement in private decisions and empowering a federal court to overrule a state court, can rightfully be interpreted as yielding to the pressure of religious power blocs.

In my state, Missouri, Republicans in the General Assembly have advanced legislation to criminalize even stem cell research in which the cells are artificially produced in petri dishes and will never be transplanted into the human uterus. They argue that such cells are human life that must be protected, by threat of criminal prosecution, from promising research on diseases like Alzheimer's, Parkinson's and juvenile diabetes.

It is not evident to many of us that cells in a petri dish are equivalent to identifiable people suffering from terrible diseases. I am and have always been pro-life. But the only explanation for legislators comparing cells in a petri dish to babies in the womb is the extension of religious doctrine into statutory law. . . .

The problem is not with people or churches that are politically active. It is with a party that has gone so far in adopting a sectarian agenda that it has become the political extension of a religious movement. . . .

Take stem cell research. Criminalizing the work of scientists doing such research would give strong support to one religious doctrine, and it would punish people who believe it is their religious duty to use science to heal the sick.

. . . As a senator, I worried every day about the size of the federal deficit. I did not spend a single minute worrying about the effect of gays on the institution of marriage. Today it seems to be the other way around. . . .

Excerpts from March 30 opinion by former US Senator John C Danforth (MO). He resigned in January as US ambassador to the United Nations. He is an Episcopal minister.

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◆ Comment

What happened at the February 11 Mayors' Prayer Breakfast is part of the same theocratic wave about which Danforth writes. Evolution, the Ten Commandments, you name it. A longer analysis is Frank Rich's March 27 NY Times "The God Racket, From DeMille to DeLay." For the text, visit our web site at www.cres.org/now/theocracy.htm.

The Mayors' Prayer Breakfast: A Case Study, Part 2

Second set of selected documents in the aftermath of the 2005 February 11 Mayors' Prayer Breakfast

An astonishing amount of attention has been given to the Mayors' Prayer Breakfast, and this compilation, like the first published 2005 April, is limited by space. Transcripts of KCPT's *Ruckus* and *Kansas City Week in Review* are omitted as are letters to the editor and other comment. We plan to assemble a complete set on our web site this summer as a case study for those who, like Harvard Professor Diana Eck, study the way pluralism in America is growing; see 2006 February entry below.

The entire Kansas City community owes Mayor Kay Barnes a huge **Thank You** for her principled stand against the sectarian utterances that damaged the Mayors' Prayer Breakfast last year, 2005. This sent a clear message that she did not want to be associated with sectarian strife, and she did not want the city to be marked with such bigoted representation. The planners got the message. Mayor Barnes has led the community and taught us a great lesson, affirming that this community welcomes all faiths.

For context, see 2005 December entry below

◆ 2005 Nov 10

"Tables of Faith" Remarks

MAYOR KAY BARNES

I am pleased to see so many people at the Table of Faiths luncheon, and I welcome each of you and thank you for your presence.

The fact that you are here is evidence of your belief that all of us, working together, can make this City a better place if we commit ourselves to understanding and warmly accepting people whose religious beliefs and cultural practices are different from our own.

In this room are Jews and Muslims, good friends, seated together; there are Buddhists and Christians, Sikhs, Christian Scientists, Southern Baptists, Hindus, Unitarians and Zoroastrians, Catholics and Sufis, Jains, secular humanists, even agnostics, and there are people who have never heard of some of the religions represented here today.

This room is a microcosm of our nation. But we are here together to show our commitment to inclusion and acceptance, and to strengthen our belief that this is a city that welcomes all people.

The religious differences in this room are significant, and should be acknowledged. We are vastly different in our theological beliefs about the deity, death, the food we eat and the clothes we wear, our prayers and rituals—so many things; but we agree on our shared humanity and we agree on the ethic of reciprocity—that we should treat others as we wish to be treated. This is a fundamental idea found in the writings of all religions as well as the work of secular philosophers.

From Socrates to Confucius, in Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Jainism, Hinduism, Buddhism—the message is the same—treat others as you want to be treated.

Understanding these words requires knowledge

and imagination...the knowledge to truly think about the impact we might have on the lives of others, and the ability to imagine ourselves—accurately and vividly—in the place of those who are the recipients of our actions.

But we live in a challenging time... When people say with certainty that God favors the United States over other countries; when wars are mistakenly described as "holy," and natural disasters are interpreted as God's punishment, rather than Mother Nature's temperament.

We live in a time when certain Christian values are apparently requirements for membership on the Supreme Court, and when Muslims, our own friends and neighbors, are considered threats to America regardless of their behavior and in spite of their citizenship and peaceful adherence to the teachings of Allah.

We see religion take precedence over science in our public schools, and first amendment rights under attack from our own government. We see so-called Christians picket with unspeakable hatred at the funerals of the fallen, and we see people insulted and harmed because they are not what other people want them to be.

We hear condemnation of loving couples simply because they are from the same sex and we are confronted by an effort to remove the birthright citizenship guarantee of the 14th Amendment. We are surrounded by endless examples of hatred, greed, indifference, and selfishness from people who consider themselves superior on earth, as well as in the eyes of their God.

Jacques Derrida, the French writer and philosopher said "Religion is responsibility, or it is nothing at all."

It is our duty, to humanity and to whatever higher power we do or do not believe in, that we take responsibility—for other people, for the environment, and for the future...blending an ethic of reciprocity with a sincere acceptance of others, bound together by respect for all beings.

This threw the not-for-profit Prayer Breakfast Committee into something of a pickle. Having the Mayor boycott the Mayor's Breakfast is like having the bride boycott a wedding. In either case, it's just not the same without her. The breakfast organizer, in fact, lamented that the breakfast has been "destroyed" by what she calls a "maelstrom of controversy."

"Destroyed" may be a little strong, but "wounded" the breakfast surely is. As a member of the mainstream—indeed, I voted with the majority in just about every election last year—I feel a new responsibility to heal these wounds. I even half sympathize with The Star's inimitable Lewis Diuguid who publicly yearns for the days when a speech at the Mayor's Breakfast "doesn't reverberate in this community." To prevent future reverberations, or at least to assure balance in the reverberating, allow me to propose some simple guidelines.

Guideline 1: Make sure the ground rules are known and disseminated in advance.

Given the breakfast's mission statement, one can understand how an octogenarian (yes, that's right, kids, someone who eats octopuses) like Mr. Dunn interpreted his mandate as he did. As the mission statement reads, the speaker is expected "to emphasize ethics, morality and spirituality in business, labor, the professions and government." Whether the audience appreciated it or not, Bill Dunn seems to have taken the mission statement at its word.

Dunn addressed what he saw as the nation's "sharp downward trend in ethics, morality and spirituality" and cited some of its seemingly obvious symptoms, among them pornography, the sexual abuse of children, illegitimacy, divorce, a swelling prison population, the breakdown in marriage, par-

We are responsible for what we do, and for what is done in our name. When we consider our version of "the truth," we must remember that truth is not the sole property of any person or religion. We become careless—even reckless—when we dismiss our differences, and inflict our personal values, morals and spirituality on others.

We must also remember that ours is a government separate from any and all religion, and that we are all in this together.

There is an interesting article about President Bill Clinton in this month's issue of *Ladies' Home Journal* in which he is asked about the push for religiosity in law, the courts and schools. Clinton says that it is important to have loving attitudes toward all human beings, because, he says, humans are fallible and make their very best effort. "...I think people should carry their faith and their values into politics, but there needs to be enough humility to know, just as St. Paul said, you are not in possession of the absolute truth."

He goes on to say, "I don't care if you're a liberal Democrat or a conservative Republican. I don't care if you're a Muslim, Christian or Jew. Or Baha'i, Hindu or Buddhist. You are not in possession of the absolute truth... You know it in part. That means that you might be wrong. Once you recognize that you might be wrong, you can deal with anybody, work out anything and go forward."

When you leave today, promise that this message will not be forgotten. Don't give my words a wink and a nod because I'm a nice, optimistic person, and then proceed to accept torture, racism, hatred of foreigners and the myriad problems of the world. You don't want to be tortured or mistreated or victimized in any way. No one does.

The rights you enjoy, whether bestowed by a creator or a Constitution, must also be allowed to others. Behave the way you want others to behave. Go, in peace and accepting responsibility – and prove that Kansas City welcomes everyone, unconditionally.

◆ 2005 April

Planning Next Year's Prayer Breakfast

JACK CASHILL

A certain class of Kansas Citians thinks that all thinking people think as it thinks. As Bill Dunn, chairman emeritus of the J.E. Dunn Construction Co., spectacularly proved at the now notorious Mayor's Prayer Breakfast, that is not exactly so.

According to *The Star*, Dunn's "conservative political emphasis and denunciation of secular society" outraged at least some members of the audience, Mayor Kay Barnes among them. To express her "personal dismay" with Dunn's speech, the Mayor, in fact, announced that she would not attend next year's event.

tial birth abortion and sexually transmitted diseases. Any of us would be hard pressed to speak on "morality and spirituality" without having a strong opinion of some sort. Perhaps those two words should be extracted from the mission statement.

Guideline 2: Make sure that all participants play by the same ground rules.

A few years back, when the good Reverend Robert Meneilly used his prestigious Johnson County pulpit to denounce the social conservatives of Johnson County as a "far greater threat than the old threat of communism," *The Johnson County Sun* reprinted the sermon in full, and *The Kansas City Star* lauded the honorable Reverend as a "drum major for justice."

Then, just about every do-gooder organization that had an award to give gave this proud manufacturer of maelstroms theirs, culminating with the prestigious Harry S. Truman Good Neighbor award. To keep the ideological fires lit, Meneilly helped found a group called—with a wink and a nod—the "Mainstream Coalition." Kay Barnes has sat on its board.

Clearly, Mr. Dunn marches to the beat of his own drum. Given his advanced years, one can forgive him for thinking the Mayor keen on drum majors in general and not just those who play a particular tune.

Guideline 3: Require that all participants at such events reveal their ideological bent.

For some time, I was the only journalist on KCPT's Kansas City Week In Review to be introduced with a political label attached. This was true even though my politics hewed closer to the norm than did those of other panelists like, say, the aforementioned Lewis Diuguid or *The Pitch* editor. When I suggested that all the participants have the privilege of being labeled, the producers decided that it might be just as fair if no one were.

In a similar vein, in all the reporting on the Mayor's Breakfast, only Dunn is labeled—in his case with the Scarlet C for "conservative." He likely doesn't mind. For years, he has been an outspoken advocate of pro-family and pro-life causes. Most of the attendees had to have known this. Still, 1200 people attended, the most ever for a Mayor's Prayer Breakfast.

A good deal less transparent is the group that pocketed the receipts, the NCCJ. Once known as the National Conference for Christians and Jews, the group quietly changed its name some years ago to The National Conference for Community and Justice.

The Star buys the NCCJ line that it "generally does not take stands on political issues." The NCCJ web site, however, proudly declares that political advocacy is a major part of the NCCJ mission. That advocacy, although not hard left, is relentlessly liberal. Even *The Star* admits that the group, like the Mayor, does support "same-sex marriage," an enthusiasm few at the Prayer Breakfast shared.

So why does *The Star* worry that Barnes and the NCCJ people were offended by Dunn's position? Isn't it just as likely that Dunn and much of the audience would be offended by theirs? Besides, it's not as if Dunn walked away with the day's revenues.

More coy still is the one group that Dunn did indeed hammer, the American Civil Liberties Union, or ACLU. "The ACLU's mission," the group argued in response, "is to conserve America's original civic values," particularly the First Amendment.

In theory, maybe, but in reality, the ACLU promotes those "civic values" that excite its decidedly left of center donor base. Thus, in the ACLU's eyes, the right of a homosexual to be a Boy Scout leader, which I can't find in my copy of the Constitution, trumps the truly "original" rights of the Boy Scouts to

freedom of assembly. This is one position that clearly provoked Mr. Dunn, and he said as much. In its response, the ACLU obfuscated as it almost always does. With the possible exception of Fox News, no organization in America conceals its political leanings less convincingly than the ACLU.

Next Year's Breakfast

After the event, Mayor Kay Barnes asked the Breakfast's beleaguered executive committee to change its rules so as to allow elected officials to speak. She volunteered herself as Speaker One in the revised format. The Committee refused.

Even if the Committee reverses its decision, the question remains whether the Mayor would whip up a maelstrom of her own or would she ease Mr. Diuguid's anxiety and return the speech to its pre-reverberating days.

To the ACLU, it may not matter. Mr. Dunn has awakened this slumbering giant to an offense right under its nose, the "Mayor" saying "Prayers" in any which way. Indeed, in its sharply worded response, the ACLU subtly put the Committee on notice that it supports free speech only if "supported by the strict separation of church and state," and "strict" the "separation" at this breakfast definitely ain't.

Given the ACLU's vigilance, "Prayer" may have to be removed from the title of the breakfast. Given the Mayor's likely boycott, "Mayor" better go as well. The "spirituality and morality" part of the mission statement is way too provocative. And who wants to give money to the NCCJ anyhow?

How about a beer after work that day? No one really likes breakfast in any case, and at a bar, a friendly one, you can still say any dang thing you like.

Jack Cashill is *Ingram's* Executive Editor and has affiliated with the magazine for 26 years. He can be reached at jackcashill@yahoo.com. The views expressed in this column are the writer's own and do not necessarily reflect those of *Ingram's Magazine*.

◆ 2005 December

VERN BARNET IN *CAMP*

Here's the story, or at least the part of it I know, about how Mayor Barnes came to speak with such high regard about gay activist, Roger Goodin, who died several years ago, at the Table of Faiths luncheon Nov 10.

You may remember that at the Feb 11 Mayors' Prayer Breakfast Bill Dunn, Sr., chairman emeritus of J.E. Dunn Construction, used the occasion to attack librarians, judges, believers in civil liberties, and the gay community.

I immediately, politely, registered my concern with Mr. Dunn at the conclusion of the event (see my *CAMP* columns for March and April), wrote him a letter (to which he has never responded), and wrote the following to the chair of the breakfast committee:

"So much wonderful effort again went into the Mayors' Prayer Breakfast this morning, it was a shame for it to become a partisan brawl. While Mr. William Dunn, Sr., has every right to his own religious viewpoints and to express them, when he referred with moral imprimatur to November's election, the event became in effect a political rally in which the unwilling were forced to participate. The Mayors' Prayer Breakfast should be about the spirit, the unity that brings us together, not about partisan promotion. In my view it was unethical of your speaker to violate the non-partisan intent and expectation of the event."

When it was clear there would not be a favorable response from the committee, I thought Dunn's damage to our community should be discussed publicly, so I wrote a column in *The Star* Feb 23 which elicited so much public reaction that *The Star* eventually published the text of Dunn's remarks.

Meanwhile, Mayor Barnes sought a statement from the committee that would provide guidance for future planning to avoid such an offense in the future. She even volunteered to be the keynote speaker at the 2006 breakfast "to reaffirm the intended inclusive nature of the event."

The committee rejected her suggestions. On March 1, she issued a statement reporting her disappointment and announcing that she would "not participate in nor attend next year's event." She said, "I am notifying the many individuals who contacted me about their displeasure with this year's event about my decision."

Meanwhile, members of the Interfaith Council, some of whom were at the breakfast, began planning an event which would mark the Council's new status as an independent organization. (From its formation in 1989 through last year, the Council was a program of my organization CRES, and I felt it was now strong enough to function on its own.)

Lama Chuck Stanford of the Rime Buddhist Center, the Buddhist member of the Council, wrote the Mayor with suggestion that she might preside over a metro-wide event at which the values of diversity might be celebrated. She liked the idea.

A committee was formed and the Table of Faiths luncheon was planned.

Over 600 people attended the \$45 a plate luncheon, with some paying \$1000 for a table, quite a remarkable result for the first year of what will become an annual event.

So LGBT people, let's hear it for — Mr. Dunn! His perverse and intolerant views roused a faithful community to respond with a strong affirmation that Kansas City celebrates its diversity. So, ironically, good, much good, has come from what appeared to be an evil morning.

And certainly let us praise Mayor Barnes who, failing private efforts to move the situation forward, took a clear and strong public stand against "the tone and content of the [Feb. 11 Dunn] keynote address."

And let us praise Mayor Pro-Tem Al Brooks, who was a key luncheon planner, unflinching in his devotion to acceptance for all people, along with Jewish co-chair Gayle Krigel, Muslim co-chair Mahnaz Shabbir, co-chair Lama Chuck, Council convener David Nelson, and the entire Council with membership from American Indian to Zoroastrian, who are working hard to make Kansas City "the most welcoming community for all people."

◆ 2006 January

VERN BARNET IN *CAMP*

Last year the anti-gay, single-religion proclamations of Bill Dunn, Sr. at the Mayors' Prayer Breakfast led to an uproar when the organizers refused to state that its purpose was non-partisan and honored all religions. The group has announced that its speaker this year, Feb 22, will be Kansas City native and recently retired chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Gen. Richard Myers. As honored as he may be, and as proud our city may be of him, his prestige and Kansas City origins are overshadowed by the Mayors' Prayer Breakfast committee's apparent determination to further violate and divide the community. So what should he say? Here is my fantasy:

Good people of Kansas City: this occasion's purpose is, through prayer, to celebrate and deepen our sense of

community, embracing gay and straight, every race, the full political spectrum and all spiritual paths.

I say this at the outset because I'm sure many of you were astonished when you heard I was chosen to be the speaker. As a public figure identified with a war that some have called unnecessary and incompetent, I appear to be about as non-controversial as Cindy Sheehan would be on the other side.

You must be asking, "What were the organizers thinking? After the distress and division caused by last year's partisan and self-righteous speaker, why did they not seek a speaker who would not appear to further insult the comity of the community? Will they never learn? Do they still not get it — or are they deliberately destroying this honorable prayer-breakfast tradition in order to further their own partisan and narrow religious interests?"

Your speaker last year has every right to his views and to promote them publicly. I have spent my career defending his freedom — and yours as well. The question is not his right to speak. The question is whether an occasion such as this should be subverted for narrow ends.

I think not, just as a wedding is not the time for political speeches, and a funeral is not the time for protesters to parade their understanding of Leviticus.

We are a nation of many peoples, and that is our strength. We have found ways of separating our private convictions from those that must govern public life. Thus, while I may personally agree with Jesus and Catholics that divorce is wrong, I recognize that my nation contains people who interpret the New Testament differently than I do, and therefore civil law rightly permits divorce.

I have fought for the right of the Jehovah's witness to refuse blood transfusions, but I also have fought for the right of society to allow those who disagree with this stance to seek medical care that respects their different religious convictions.

I am ashamed of the "don't ask, don't tell" policy governing homosexuals in the military. The only people this policy serves is the wedge-issue politicians. Our nation's security is damaged by this policy, especially when we need competent linguists, intelligence officers, and other soldiers who are gay whose excellence is undeniable.

While religions who disapprove of homosexuals have every right to do so within their own organizations, they should not command the US Military. Some of these religions have death penalties for same-sex acts, but our government protects citizens against such acts favored by personal religious opinions.

To force conformity of religious views on gay rights, a woman's right to choose, stem-cell research, the teaching of evolution in science class, marriage, and other such matters would be theocracy, not the democracy which I have pledged to defend.

Finally, when we pray for America, let us also pray for the whole world, as we may be reminded to do by the Gospel song, "He's got the whole world in His hands." Yes, I pledge allegiance to the United States of America, but our allegiance must now also include the vision of Isafah, who saw that the divine is not the property of a single nation, but the gift to all. And in this community, this prayer breakfast should belong not just to those on the right or the left, but to every citizen. I pray that it may be so.

◆ 2006 Feb 15

Prayer breakfast a time to look past divisions

"FAITHS AND BELIEFS" BY VERN BARNET
SPECIAL TO *THE KANSAS CITY STAR*.

Last year's Mayors' Prayer Breakfast in Kansas City led

many folks to think their faiths were not respected.

Since then professor Diana Eck, head of the Pluralism Project at Harvard, has been in town. She asked about our experience here. She said that communities across the nation are addressing such occasions with varying success as Americans become aware of our many faiths.

How do such gatherings best recognize our ethnic, political and religious diversity? Can we use these once-a-year opportunities to rise above our particular agendas and unite together in prayer, to celebrate and deepen our sense of community? Can the prayer, the speakers and even the menu say, "We embrace all spiritual paths"?

Not far from the site of this year's Feb. 22 breakfast is Ilus Davis Park with its inscription of the First Amendment to the Constitution. It can guide us.

It guarantees freedom of religion, of speech, of the press and the right to assemble. Some of us have served in the armed forces to protect these liberties, some have provided other forms of leadership to exercise and guarantee them, and some have died in their defense.

These liberties do not mean it is appropriate to offer political speeches at a wedding, and a funeral is not the time for protesters to parade their interpretation of Leviticus.

Instead a civic prayer breakfast should inspire us to see our differences as pieces in a beautiful mosaic of freedom. We are a nation of many peoples and faiths, and that is our strength. And we have found ways of protecting our freedoms from government usurpation.

Thus, while some may follow a particular faith tradition that teaches divorce is sinful, we also recognize that our nation contains people who apply the New Testament variously, and therefore civil law permits the freedom to divorce. We honor the right of those who, in practicing their faith, refuse blood transfusions; but we also allow those who differ with this stance to accept transfusions.

At least once a year, on this sacred occasion of civic prayer, it is appropriate to forgo arguing about abortion, stem-cell research, the teaching of evolution in science class, gay marriage, the war and other controversial issues. What is appropriate instead is to unite in the consecration of democracy that protects our faiths.

And as we, whatever our belief, pray for America, let us also pray for the whole world, expressed in the gospel song "He's Got the Whole World in His Hands." As we pledge allegiance to the United States of America, let our allegiance also include the universal vision of Isaiah and other seers who proclaim that the divine is given not to a single nation or one religion but to all peoples.

The prayer breakfast belongs not just to those on the right or the left, or those only of a particular faith, but to every citizen, to every soul, as we cherish our community. Let us pray that it may be so.

◆ 2006 Feb 20

Barnes still plans to skip meeting — Mayor had wanted to affirm 'inclusive nature of the event'

Prayer breakfast boycott

By LYNN HORSLEY, *THE KANSAS CITY STAR*

One mayor will be conspicuously absent Wednesday from the Mayors' Prayer Breakfast in Kansas City: Kansas City Mayor Kay Barnes.

Barnes is sticking by her decision, announced last

year, not to attend this year's event because of her displeasure over remarks by last year's keynote speaker, construction magnate Bill Dunn Sr.

This year, the breakfast attracted a nationally prominent speaker, retired Air Force Gen. Richard Myers, former chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and a Merriam native. But that hasn't shaken Barnes' resolve.

And Barnes' boycott hasn't shaken the committee.

Event organizers emphasize that the gathering is the Mayors' Prayer Breakfast — as in more than one mayor — and is designed to salute all mayors and administrators in the Kansas City metro area. They say they just want to put the past behind them.

"We're moving forward," said Debra Shultz, president of the nonprofit Mayors' Prayer Breakfast Committee. "It's going to be a pretty neat event this year."

She said 26 mayors and about 950 people have signed up to attend this year.

Because the event is held at the Hyatt Regency Crown Center hotel in Kansas City, Barnes has normally been considered the "host" mayor and last year gave welcoming remarks that emphasized the contributions of everyone in the room. She later sent a letter to committee representatives objecting to what she considered a divisive speech by Dunn.

In his 10-minute speech, Dunn bemoaned "a sharp downward trend" in the nation's values and denounced illegitimate births, same-sex marriage, activist judges and the American Civil Liberties Union.

Barnes asked the committee to modify its by-laws to allow an elected official to be the principal speaker, and offered to give this year's speech "to reaffirm the intended inclusive nature of the event." Her offer was rejected so Barnes said she would not attend.

Barnes declined to comment last week on her decision, except to say she stands by her earlier letter.

Mayoral press aide Lara Schopp said Barnes' "biggest concern was that people think it's her event. ... She was taking a lot of heat personally for an event we had nothing to do with."

Bill Dunn is out of town until March 1 and was unavailable for comment, but the J.E. Dunn Construction Co. has bought a table at this year's event.

The breakfast is designed to highlight ethics, morality and spirituality in business, labor, the professions and government. This year it is raising money to benefit Camp ChiMer, a summer camp for children ages 9 to 17 with kidney disease.

Shultz said she had spoken with Barnes about her decision and respected it. But she added that the event "is not just one mayor. It's many mayors."

(The Kansas City Star has purchased tickets for the event for many years. The publisher's executive assistant, Candace Spurny, is a member of the prayer breakfast committee. Columnist Steve Penn was invited to give the benediction.)

This isn't the first time the event has offended someone, said John Duncan, vice chairman of the prayer breakfast board.

In 1994, Bailus Tate, who was Kansas City police board chairman at the time, called the Kansas City school desegregation plan "a disaster of monumental proportions" and said money should be spent on good quality neighborhood schools that nurtured children who were disciplined and accountable.

Tate's remarks hit home with many people, but Julia Hill, then school board president, disagreed that the magnet schools were too lavish and said in an interview that neighborhood schools would be a return to segregation.

Board Member Anita Gorman also recalled that

some people took offense when a blessing one year was offered "in Jesus' name." The breakfast is open to people of all religions.

"We had a real uproar about that," Gorman said. "Church fights, religious fights are always special."

Gorman said the breakfast has featured "outstanding" people such as Dunn and Henry Bloch in recent years, but she was especially pleased that Myers agreed to speak this year.

"He was at Liberty Memorial when we had the rededication," she said. "I liked him. He's got a good Midwestern feel about him."

Gorman described Myers as an "exceptionally humble, appealing person" who will speak on how ethics, morality and spirituality helped him in his military career.

He will not, however, speak about last year's controversy or about the Iraq war.

In response to e-mail questions, Myers said he had no comment about Barnes' decision not to attend. He said he talks about the war on terror and Iraq when he lectures in other venues, but that's not what he was asked to talk about at the prayer breakfast.

"I've spoken at prayer breakfasts before and look forward to doing so in my hometown," he wrote.

As for next year, Barnes' staff said there's been no discussion about whether she will return.

◆ 2006 Feb 23

Myers praises military at mayors' breakfast

By LYNN HORSLEY, *THE KANSAS CITY STAR*

Gen. Richard Myers, retired chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, told a Kansas City gathering Wednesday that the U.S. military exemplifies the Golden Rule in action.

Myers was the keynote speaker at the 45th annual Mayors' Prayer Breakfast, which was attended by more than 1,100, including nearly 30 mayors. He said he had expected to serve in the Air Force for only five years but stayed more than 40 years because he loved flying and he loved "the people and the culture."

Myers said the U.S. military around the globe stands for integrity and selfless service, and he described how people in war-torn places such as Iraq and Afghanistan trust and respect Americans in uniform.

"They're living the Golden Rule," he said. "It's the way our troops behave, the values they live and the example they set."

The theme of every Mayors' Prayer Breakfast is ethics, morality and spirituality in business, labor, the professions and government. Kansas City Mayor Kay Barnes stayed away this year because she was upset by remarks made by last year's speaker, construction magnate William H. Dunn.

This year, the prayer breakfast committee had sought out a nationally prominent speaker with Kansas City area roots, and committee members said Myers fit that bill. Myers, who grew up in Merriam, kept his remarks neutral. He did not directly discuss the war on terror but instead focused on how faith and prayer can triumph over division and conflict.

"In this new environment," he said, "it's important for people not to be divided by our different faiths but to be united by the fact that we are people of faith."

He said people have often told him they were praying for him, which gave him the strength to carry on through difficult times.

"My faith is stronger than ever," he said. "I have faith in the power of people who pray together."

The prayer breakfast event this year benefits Camp ChiMer, a summer camp for children ages 9 to 17 with kidney disease.

◆ 2006 March

VERN BARNET IN *CAMP AND VERN'S BLOG*

Anti-gay and other hateful remarks filled the room at last year's Mayors' Prayer Breakfast, but this year, the Feb 22 episode was filled with declarations valuing diversity.

This year no mention was made of the fact that the offense last year was so great, and efforts to get a statement then respecting diversity so difficult, that Kansas City Mayor Kay Barnes, after frustrating negotiations, announced she would not attend this year's breakfast. Her courageous leadership no doubt woke up the business, philanthropic and governmental leaders who decided last year's fiasco must not be repeated. Last year was repudiated this year, clearly and decisively, if subtly.

As about 30 area mayors were individually introduced to the thousand guests, the absence of the mayor of the very city in which the event was held was a silent but powerful reminder — one might even say, judgment — that this year's breakfast was on the edge.

Debra Shultz, chair of the committee which uses the government title "mayors" but which is not legally connected with any government and on which no mayor serves, is retiring from her position after four years. She reviewed her tenure in some detail but made no reference to the turmoil last year for which others thought she was at least partly responsible.

During the half-hour devoted to introductions, welcomes and patriotic exercises, Leawood Mayor Peggy Dunn, made it a point to declare that the gathering represented every faith and race.

Then it was time for the invocation — this is after all a prayer breakfast — and the 90-second prayer by Ramon Murguia pointedly embraced the full diversity found in our community.

In introducing the featured speaker, MC Tom Bowser, chair of the Chamber of Commerce, noted that our community is strengthened by its diversity of beliefs and races — and, with some appreciative laughter from the audience, he added "Republicans and Democrats."

General Richard B Myers, who recently retired as chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, avoided the political and partisan potholes of last year's speaker. He framed his speech to address the breakfast's theme of emphasizing "ethics, morality and spirituality."

The spiritual principle guiding his career, he said, was the Golden Rule. He read the two different versions in the New Testament and said that all religions have similar precepts and read examples from several faiths.

He illustrated the importance of considering how others would like to be treated and acting accordingly with illustrations of how American service people have been embraced abroad because they follow this spiritual maxim. He did not mention Abu Ghraib or Guantanamo or the hundred thousand we have killed in Iraq.

Further, military chapels embrace all religions; they unite people of all faiths, he said. Because those in service demonstrate respect for all faiths, Iraqi leaders held a Christmas party for US military lead-

ers.

In short, the military does not tolerate discrimination "of any kind," he said. I was astonished that he seemed unaware of the fact that openly gay and lesbian folks are discriminated out of the service.

The concluding 60-second prayer by Steve Penn once again trumpeted the morning's theme when he uplifted "different religions, backgrounds and races."

So the *prayer* breakfast was a success, with 2 1/2 minutes of prayer out of a 98-minute ceremony.

Yet I wish we had a prayer breakfast unconnected in name with civic officials where prayers of repentance replaced prayers of pride. The corruption, incompetence, profiteering, cronyism, and mismanagement which led to a dishonest and immoral war and fail to provide those fighting it with adequate armor or an intelligent civilian strategy, is our fault. We have nurtured new breeding grounds for terrorists and subverted our own democratic heritage at home. We need to repent of allowing an administration of desecration, destruction and death to continue in our name.

March 19 is the third anniversary of the worsening war, even though "mission accomplished" was declared May 1, 2003.

◆ 2006 March 1

Civic leaders are setting good examples

"FAITHS AND BELIEFS" BY VERN BARNET
SPECIAL TO *THE KANSAS CITY STAR*.

EXCERPT

But the most unusual example of leadership comes from Kansas City Mayor Kay Barnes. You may recall that, to understate it, last year's Mayors' Prayer Breakfast was not widely hailed as an interfaith love-in. When its planning committee was unable to issue a statement that its intent was to be inclusive, Mayor Barnes said she would not attend this year's breakfast. I wondered, would this be a "teaching moment" for the community?

Her powerful message was received. The defect was repaired. This year, the welcome, the invocation, the benediction, the MC's remarks and the featured speaker all declared the value of religious diversity more clearly, deliberately and forcefully than at any civic prayer breakfast I've ever attended.