

# Council prayers – the ripples spread to Lincolnshire

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The leader of West Lindsey District Council has come under heavy fire from the religious establishment in the town – and some of his fellow councillors – for saying that he would "heartily cheer" when council prayers were outlawed.

Cllr Burt Keimach was responding to an e-mail from an officer asking for councillors' views on prayers being said before council meetings. His response, which was leaked to a local newspaper, said: "I am totally against any and all religious utterances in a public place on taxpayers' money, and will heartily cheer when they become illegal. However, for now I will tolerate, notice I do not say respect, the wishes of the whole council."

This immediately brought a typically over-the-top and nonsensical response from the local Catholic establishment.

Fr Tom Breslin of Market Rasen, said: "It worries me, it seems very dictatorial. You expect the leader of the council to respect the majority. While Christians and people of faith are tolerant of other points of view, the author of this statement displays a high degree of intolerance and talks of using the law to outlaw religious expression of many citizens who may have voted for him in past elections. Perhaps the writer could be reminded that Communists and Nazis and many others have tried to suppress religion in the public arena and failed. I am dismayed also that he should show contempt for the views of his fellow council members, but assure him that we Christians will pray for that he will grow in understanding of the diverse community which he has been elected to serve."

But Cllr Keimach was not going to be intimidated by such stupid and ignorant remarks. He said: "I have no religious beliefs and I don't think they should be forced on people, but our council will obey the law. Eventually, I believe prayers at meetings will become illegal. I suppose you can say it's no longer a Christian country."

"I think America has got it right - I believe in the separation of religion and state and we don't quite have that here."

Cllr Keimach said he does not "completely agree" with local government minister Eric Pickles supposedly overturning the High Court's decision. But local Liberal Democrat councillor Ken Bridger, who describes himself as a "committed Christian", has other thoughts.

He said: "I was a bit shocked when I first read his e-mail. He is totally out of order – as leader of the council I don't think he should be saying this sort of thing. It's a Christian county, that's why people want to live here. Plus, it's part of our tradition and people don't have to take part in prayers if they don't want to."

Rev Michael Cartwright of Market Rasen's St Thomas' Church said: "He's entitled to his views but he should be reminded the law over here is different to the US. And I would remind him they say prayers in parliament before it starts. If he's got a problem with the way things are done over here

then he shouldn't be on the council."

Market Rasen Salvation Army Envoy Anne Chaplain said: "He shouldn't be saying this, as leader of the council. You need to respect what other people want to do."

Caistor Methodist Church Rev Andrew Lomax said: "He has a right to his own opinion but you have to respect the wishes of other people.

"I'm not someone who would force religion onto people but I don't think the government should make such things illegal."

Market Rasen New Life Church Pastor Paul Hiley said: "I'm sorry that our West Lindsey District Council representative feels as he does. "He would struggle if he ever became an MP because for centuries sittings in both houses have begun with Christian prayers, for which attendance is voluntary.

"I hope Mr Keimach would be gracious enough to respect as well as tolerate."

Rev Charles Patrick of St Peter and St Paul's Church, Middle Rasen, said: "As you might imagine I value every opportunity to pray, both as an individual and together with others. I find it keeps me focussed on things beyond myself, to realise that I'm not totally reliant on my own ability and to check my behaviour towards others."

The council is in the process of doing an internal consultation on prayers at meetings and is yet to make a final decision.

Terry Sanderson, president of the National Secular Society, said: "The reaction of the local religious high-ups to the council leader's rather measured remarks indicates that they are rattled by any threat to their interference in public life. I should remind them that the High Court judge who ruled on this specifically stated that the council cannot simply vote themselves the right to do something that is against the law. The High Court judgment stands and Mr Pickles' self-serving claims for the Localism Act are exaggerated and untested. Several authoritative legal opinions have now concluded that the Localism Act does not do what Mr Pickles says it does. We would not like to see Lindsey District Council facing contempt of court proceedings if it decides to defy the law."

Mr Sanderson said he was astonished by the "blinkered and smug" attitudes of local Christians who thought they had a perfect right to intrude their religious views into a secular forum to discuss civic matters.

"There aren't only Christians living in the Lindsey district," he said, "and there are some people who strongly resent having to observe rituals in which they do not believe in a setting that is totally inappropriate for them."

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