

Press Conference  
United church of Christ & Allies respond to treatment of  
Rev. Dr. Scott Jones, UCC Pastor, in Oklahoma State Chamber.  
State Capitol 2/13/09

**My name is Robin Meyers, and I am the minister of Mayflower UCC church in Oklahoma City,** and I speak today on behalf of my colleague in the ministry, Scott Jones—who is a gifted and outstanding minister of the gospel.

I find what happened in this house on Wednesday to be not just disturbing, but appalling. It is also exactly the kind of national publicity that continues to render a verdict on Oklahoma that makes us the object of shame and the butt of jokes in the eyes of people who might otherwise consider living here and working here.

To his credit, Scott Jones did not hide his sexual orientation from the elected officials that he was praying for. This was not “don’t ask don’t tell,” and yet there would have been no vote taken on whether to accept this prayer for the record if Scott had merely kept the fact that he is a gay man a secret. Perhaps he did not do this because the Bible commands us not to bear false witness.

His prayer was very moving, especially when you consider that it was delivered by someone who has been the object of discrimination and homophobia all his life. His prayer was not specifically Christian, but he knew that he was offering it on behalf of a House that is overwhelmingly Christian—and must know, therefore, that Jesus had a reputation for speaking truth to power on behalf of those who have been left out, forgotten, or marginalized. One can only wonder what might happen if Jesus offered a prayer in this house, an itinerant unmarried Jewish man who was hardly a poster child for family values.

That this prayer should have been questioned because of what someone thinks of the person offering it moves us into strange and dangerous waters. Shall we vote on all subsequent prayers based on what we think we know about the one offering it, or shall we, in humility, leave that up to God?

Just imagine, for example, what would have happened if any of the 20 legislators who voted to reject this prayer, and the 17 who abstained because they are taking cover, had been asked by Scott Jones to pray at his church? Whereupon, after the prayer, someone in Scott’s congregation, which is predominately gay, called for a vote on whether to accept the prayer since the one offering it was a heterosexual, and thus in the minority, not to mention a symbol of a culture dominated by homophobia and acts of violence against the gay community. Who are we to reject one another’s prayers?

What the state did on Wednesday was to set itself up as the arbiter of the “approved prayer,” and in so doing violated the separation of church and state in the most obvious possible manner—by voting! My sense is that there is not a lot of love lost on the ACLU around here, but you could not have given them a more open and shut case of the state interfering in the free exercise of religion. That is not the job of an elected official, and you were hired by us to do the people’s business, not God’s business.

Years ago, a Baptist minister in Moore, Oklahoma claimed that, “God does not hear the prayers of a Jew.” Which one can only assume would also include Jesus the Jew. That comment has been repeated, published, and used countless times as an example of theological backwardness, much to the shame of Oklahoma. And now we have done it again. We have proved once more that there are some among us who continue to believe that there is something endearing about ignorance.

I call upon someone in authority in this house to apologize to my colleague Scott Jones, and to the people of Oklahoma, who have been insulted once again. We live in uncertain and difficult times. Oklahomans are losing their jobs and are fearful about the future. I for one don't want my elected officials spending another moment debating the efficacy of a prayer offered on their behalf as they go about the job we sent them here to do—serving the people of Oklahoma who elected them—and that means all the people. We are all Oklahomans, so . . .

Judge not, lest you be judged.

Thank you.

**Rev. Dr. Kathy McCallie, Senior Pastor -- Church of the Open Arms, UCC. 3131 N. Penn OKC, OK 73112**

I hope that each of the twenty legislators who voted to exclude the prayer of Rev. Dr. Scott Jones, will make an apology admitting their mistake. Regardless of differing views, we must uphold the American values of freedom of expression and freedom of religion.

I suspect that some of the twenty now look back on that as a moment of bad judgment when they should have done something different. I cannot believe that those twenty representatives think it wise to start making moral judgments about each chaplain of the day and whether or not to accept their prayers.

I want to thank the sixty-four legislators who had the courage to do the right thing that day. Although I am not in any of their districts, I am glad to know someone represents my voice. I believe that the majority of Oklahomans would agree with me in protecting free speech, freedom of religion, and separation of church and state.

The nation hears this type of news from Oklahoma and people shake their heads in disbelief. That frustrates me, because I know that most people from Oklahoma understand the importance of separation of church and state. Most Oklahomans can accept diversity of opinions with open minds and kind hearts.

I don't know if all twenty will apologize. But, I hope that at least one or two will have the courage to correct their mistake rather than go down in history in that way.

**My name is Chris Moore, I am the pastor of Norman United Church of Christ and the co-chair of the Justice & Witness Commission of the Kansas-Oklahoma Conference for our denomination.**

So, you may be asking yourself - what's the big deal? In a world full of hunger and pain, why be worried about a little vote on a prayer? Don't we have better things to talk about? Well, yes we do. And no, we don't. Now we could have an endless argument on the question of homosexuality and the biblical record. But we aren't here to argue that. We are here to argue

for the right of all people to pray as part of the public record in a public venue such as this. This building, all of this marble and granite, this stone and metal, is not any one person's building, it is OUR building – and that includes everyone, those we agree with and those we don't. Refusing to record the words of a person who prayed for the well-being of all in the room simply because you don't agree with who he loves is, frankly, ridiculous. Do this in your own house of worship if you must, but not here.

I speak today because I cannot allow the fostering of an atmosphere in which we must agree in even principal issues with anyone who might pray. This is more than a Gay rights issue, it is more than a freedom of speech issue, it is a group of people standing up to say that no one has a monopoly on prayer to God. God has always used all kinds of people to deliver God's message –Ruth the foreigner, David the adulterer, the Syrophonecian woman at the well - we cannot discount from whom the spirit of God will emanate.

In a world desperate for the grace of prayer and the presence of Almighty God, the idea that we will somehow censor our prayer-givers, that we will hear some and not others, or that we will judge prayer by anything other than its fruits is absurd and sad. Thankfully there were some here, a majority in fact, who voted to have it part of the public record. I do not for a moment think that they all stand with me on equal rights issues, but they did at least recognize on that day that there are times to voice opposition and times to just be reverent.

We do not come seeking merely an apology; we come seeking recognition of civility. Those of you who voted no to have this prayer submitted into record must be aware that it seems obvious to us why you voted in this manner and that we call on you to recognize that when you were elected it was to serve *everyone* in your constituency and that no matter what district you come from, that includes Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgendered people.

This is why I am saying these words as both a pastor and as part of the Justice & Witness Commission of my denomination's conference. This incident falls under both the justice & the witness portions because we call for equality in both things.

I now call on the Rev. Dr. Scott Jones to close with the prayer he shared in the house on Wednesday.