

Debate on public prayer renewed after incident in Pennsylvania House

A controversial invocation took place just before the House's first female Muslim representative was sworn in.

by [Elizabeth Eisenstadt Evans](#) in the [May 8, 2019](#) issue

A prayer in Pennsylvania's House of Representatives that mentioned Jesus 13 times in less than two minutes sparked extended debate among lawmakers and a wider discussion about how sectarian prayer can coexist with respect for religious diversity in public life.

"Jesus, we've lost sight of you; we've forgotten you, God, in our country," prayed state representative Stephanie Borowicz, a Clinton County Republican who represents Clinton and Centre Counties, on March 25. "Jesus, you are our only hope."

The prayer mentioned President Trump, Pennsylvania governor Tom Wolf, and Israel before closing with a reference to the New Testament verse that "every knee shall bow" at the name of Jesus.

Borowicz's invocation took place just before the House chamber's first female Muslim, Movita Johnson-Harrell, was sworn in. Rep. Johnson-Harrell, a Philadelphia Democrat, said she was appalled by the prayer, not so much for herself as for the 55 guests who had shown up to celebrate the occasion. She also said that Borowicz's remarks were more a political statement than a prayer.

"It was very chaotic and disrespectful," Johnson-Harrell said. "I do not have a problem with Jesus. I understand more than many Western Muslims how important Jesus is to Islam."

Borowicz's prayer may have run afoul of House guidelines.

“We believe we addressed the matter Monday afternoon on the House floor when Speaker [Mike] Turzai reminded everyone that the members of the House come from a wide variety of faiths and we believe it is important to respect this diversity,” Turzai’s office said in a statement. “Speaker Turzai reminded the members that our guidelines ask them to deliver an inter-faith opening prayer.”

Ryan Travis, former communications coordinator with the Republican Caucus of the Pennsylvania House of Representatives, wrote a commentary advising Borowicz to “choose her words more carefully” in the future.

Borowicz’s office did not return multiple calls for this story. But in an interview with the American Pastors Network, Borowicz defended her choice of words.

“I had no idea that that would cause controversy,” she said. “It wasn’t directed at anyone.”

A former teacher, Borowicz, who is married to a pastor, ran as a Christian conservative and made many biblical references in her 2018 campaign. Borowicz also founded Make a Stand USA, a nonprofit whose goal was “to hold prayer rallies in each state, bringing the country back to God,” she told a Pennsylvania newspaper.

Washington University law professor John Inazu, author of *Confident Pluralism*, noted that the Supreme Court has approved sectarian prayers at government meetings, yet “the law encourages generic, nonsectarian prayer.”

“Just because we have the right to say something doesn’t mean we should say it,” he said. —Religion News Service

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