

'Open letter' attacks Sullivan's opening prayer

By CHRIS CONNELLY

WINCHESTER - An unsigned "open letter" on the table at Town Meeting this week charges that the Town Moderator John Sullivan's nondenominational opening prayer is an assault on the First Amendment of the United States Constitution.

Commentary

"One of our most cherished core principals, a right granted to every American, and enshrined in the First Amendment of our Constitution is freedom of religion. A freedom that is further protected by the Constitutional interdiction of governmental establishment or support of religion," the green paper states. At the bottom, the paper says it is put out by a group (the presumption is that it is more than one person) calling itself Winchester Citizens United for Separation of Church and State.

There are a number of problems, as I see it, with this anonymous attack. First, it is anonymous. If you go to their website (www.WinchesterUnited.org) the only name you will find is John Sullivan's. I know something about anonymous publications, and this paper does not publish or respond to them. Occasionally, under extreme circumstances, a name on a letter to the editor might be withheld, but never if the editor does not know who wrote it, and agrees with the need for anonymity. There is no such need in this case.

More importantly, this line of thinking confuses freedom *of* religion with what its supporters really wants, freedom *from* religion.

The principal of separation of church and state is a good one. It renders to Caesar what is Caesar's, so to speak. Sullivan's "prayer" is not pushing a town-sanctioned religion, but is an exercise of his own First Amendment rights to speak his mind. Just because he is the town moderator, does not mean he has to check his rights at the door.

In reality, all this "prayer" is (and I've heard a lot of them over the years) is a reminder to all Town Meeting members that their purpose is to

give the best of themselves for their neighbors. Sometimes, I must admit, when Sullivan begins, "Oh, Lord..." in my mind I finish the line "...won't you buy me a Mercedes Benz." I don't say it out loud for fear of promoting a particular brand name.

The open letter claims that "at least five Town Meeting members are opposed to the opening prayer. The fact that they have kept silent about it is an indication of the degree of intimidation generated by this action.

The late Town Meeting member Sally Kincade may have felt the same way because she never stood during Sullivan's opening prayer, and no one ever made a big deal about it. But now WinchesterUnited.org is.

"At a time when we need to focus our attention on the problems and solutions for the people of Winchester, we do not need a costly diversion to defend our Constitutionally given rights," the letter said. The key word is "costly."

The letter then includes a quote from Thomas Jefferson with the line, the legislature "should make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof." Which warrant article is the one that establishes and funds the Church of Winchester?

There is also a quote from Justice Stevens that contends that an opening prayer at a public event is an act of coercion to participate in an act of worship. Pardon me, but that's bunk.

I suppose the *Pledge of Allegiance* with its "under God" reference is also a coercive statement.

Town Counsel Wade Welch said that in his 27 years as a public official in Winchester he has heard more complaints from citizens than he could have thought possible and he said he has learned to have an open mind about them all.

"I don't see this as a problem. It is not a promotion of a particular religion. There are no public funds involved., like there could be in the case of a crèche.. It is nondenominational. And it is part of the national life. The House and Senate have opening prayers, and, of course, our money says 'In God We Trust.' But if someone feels intimidated by John's prayer I'd be interested in hearing from them, Welch said. "Let's talk about it."

One of my colleagues at the newspaper advised me against this column, saying that the anger and bitterness sparked by something like this could make the Sachus logo debate seem like a friendly chat.

If that's so, God help me. (Oops!)