

**An open letter to John Sullivan and
the elected officials and representatives of Winchester.**

Opening Prayer at Town Meeting

One of our most cherished core principles, 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.

We all have the individual right to believe what we want and how we want. We have the right to pray where and when we want. We have the right to choose whom we want to lead us in prayer. However, the majority **does not** have the right to impose their religious beliefs on a minority through the power of governmental authority. **Mr. Sullivan, as an elected moderator and government representative, does not have the right to ask and lead the Town Meeting in prayer.** Town Meeting Members have the right to pray before, during and after the Town Meeting, under their own motivation and outside their governmental capacities.

In a Supreme Court ruling last year, Justice Stevens wrote for the majority: "...**the delivery of a prayer <at a public event> has the improper effect of coercing those present to participate in an act of religious worship.**" How would you feel about being forced to join in a prayer to something you did not believe in? We are aware of at least five TM members who 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.

Several arguments have been put forth as to why it is acceptable to have prayers lead by the moderator at town meetings, none of them are valid. The bottom line in all cases is that it violates the Constitutional separation of church and state. It is not acceptable for President Bush, the Congress, the Senate, or any other governmental authority to promote or espouse a religious ritual through an official capacity.

The founders of this country were well aware of the dangers of mixing religion and government. They attempted to protect us from ourselves. They knew that many of us would tend to think that anyone who believes differently from us is wrong. They knew that the majority is prone to impose its beliefs on the minority. To paraphrase a famous British statesman – the true character of a democracy is evident in the respect and rights it accords its minorities

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. As aptly put by one of the framers of the constitution:

"Believing with you that religion is a matter which lies solely between man and his God; that he owes account to none other for his faith or his worship; that the legislative powers of the government reach actions only, and not opinions, I contemplate with sovereign reverence that act of the whole American people which declared that their legislature should `make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof,' thus building a wall of separation between church and State." *Thomas Jefferson.*

If you are also concerned about the constant erosion of our First Amendment rights we would like to hear from you, especially if you are a Town Meeting Member.

Winchester Citizens United for Separation of Church & State

Email us at: comments@WinchesterUnited.org

<http://www.WinchesterUnited.org>