

Religious Leaders Offer Alternative to Exclusive Prayer Breakfast

Representatives from a variety of faith traditions will gather outside of the Radisson Penn Harris in Camp Hill at 7:15 a.m. on Tuesday, May 6, 2008 for a brief prayer service and readings from William Penn's Edict of Toleration. The service provides an alternative to the 2008 "Commonwealth Prayer Breakfast," organized and supported by members of the Pennsylvania state legislature. which will take place on the same morning inside the hotel.

Many of those who will be present at the outdoor service attended the 2007 "Commonwealth Prayer Breakfast" at which keynote speaker Ralph Drollinger, president of Capitol Ministries, a privately-funded evangelical Christian organization, told legislators and others gathered in the hotel that his organization hopes to put "men who are Bible expositors" in every state Capitol. The event featured conservative Christian perspectives almost exclusively.

The 2006 "Commonwealth Prayer Breakfast" incorporated no non-Christian traditions represented in the program. That year, the keynote speaker asserted that a person is either "Christian" or "of the world." Romans 1, a text which is perhaps the leading source of anti-gay sentiment in the world today, was selected as the New Testament reading in a year when legislation on the issue of gay marriage was under consideration (HB 2381). The closing prayer was offered by the chaplain from "Capitol Ministries prayed "in Jesus' name," and filled solely with references to the Christian tradition ("the Gospel," "the Word," etc).

On January 19, 2008, 13 local religious leaders representing Christian, Jewish, Hindu, Buddhist and Sikh faiths sent an e-mail to Rep. Robert W. Kauffman offering their services to the Planning Committee of the 2008 Commonwealth Prayer Breakfast, expressing "hope that the event might reflect the broad range of faith expression that we enjoy in our state." The e-mail went unanswered.

For the first time in 2008, invitations explicitly asserted that the Commonwealth Prayer Breakfast is "not a government sponsored event" and provided as a return address the home address of an administrative assistant of Representative Kauffman.

The service seeks to celebrate and give thanks for the history of religious tolerance that is a centerpiece of our history as a commonwealth.