

## **Interfaith Day of Reflection and Prayer 2004**

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May 6<sup>th</sup> 2004 was an excellent day for the Military Pagan Network. On this day I was able to deliver an address as part of an interfaith rally on the Oklahoma State Capitol steps as a representative of MPN and the Pagan community on the National Day of Prayer. It began with an invitation from Mainstream Oklahoma Baptists.

*This letter is written to confirm your invitation to be a speaker at the National Day of Prayer and Reflection on May 6 2004. The rally will be held on the South steps of the state capitol from 11:30 to 1:30 PM.*

*The rally will be a celebration of the religious diversity that exists within our state and nation. We ask that you speak briefly—no more than three minutes—about the value of religious liberty and freedom of conscience from the perspective of your faith tradition...Since the tragic events of September 11, 2001 it has become imperative that people of all beliefs make special efforts to nurture and demonstrate the unity we share as American citizens while respecting and celebrating the diversity of our religious convictions.*

Baptist ministers inviting a Pagan to speak at an interfaith rally: Pinch me, right? But this was a group of Baptists who have rejected the sectarian extremism that is so often exhibited by the Southern Baptist Convention. Mainstream Oklahoma Baptists is directed by Dr. Bruce Prescott. In addition to being the host of *Religious Talk*, a local Oklahoma, religious talk-radio program, he is also the President of the Oklahoma Chapter of Americans United for Separation of Church and State. I have been a guest on his talk radio show several times for Q&A on contemporary Paganism. Bruce has always been a gracious host displaying genuine curiosity in other faith traditions.

The rally was a joint production of Mainstream Oklahoma Baptists, The Oklahoma Chapter of Americans United for the Separation of Church and State, and Stop Theocracy in Oklahoma Policy [STOP]. There were 17 short speeches delivered by an impressive array of ministers and community leaders. Each person discussed not only the historical aspects of freedom of, or freedom from religion, but also what it means to be a good neighbor and a good American citizen with respect to these freedoms. The theme for this year's rally was "Let Freedom Ring." It has to be the most inspiring community event I have attended. Some phrases and themes struck a chord in the audience, and applause would erupt spontaneously, letting the speakers know that they were supported and validated in their convictions and observations.

What made this event noteworthy beyond the notion of having a Pagan as a guest speaker? "*For more than a decade, people of minority faiths have been excluded from full participation in the National Day of Prayer services.*" Prior to this year, whenever the NDP was announced, my response was to groan and roll my eyes with adolescent boredom. It was always a day when I was reminded that we were not truly accepted in this country. It did not matter if we were veterans or civilians; our exclusion in this matter rested in our identity as non-Christians. It was one more reminder that our voice was not

allowed to matter, that we were relegated to the “self styled” category of pseudo-religions not worthy of an invitation. No glass slipper was going to get us into that ball. The Oklahoma 2004 event is a sign. It is a sign that there are many citizens who are “*weary of the fusion of right-wing politics,*” and religion. And rather than protest these gatherings, and be labeled as anti-religion, or even as attackers of First Amendment expression, these disenchanted citizens are instead co-opting these events and making the National Day of Prayer accessible and relevant to all citizens of all faiths. The National Day of Prayer does not have to be an affair that focuses on only ‘approved’ religious expressions; it can be an occasion that starts and maintains interfaith dialogue in communities around the nation.

This NDP caused quite a stir in the Baptist Community. Heated words were exchanged in Baptist publications between these factions.

*Anthony Jordan, executive director of the Baptist General Convention of Oklahoma, criticized Baptist involvement in the interfaith prayer rally in an April 29 column of Baptist Messenger. Jordan said the National Day of Prayer opponents “seek to eliminate every remnant of faith and belief in God from the government” in the name of separation of church and state. “Evangelicals do not have to join with others who pray to ‘whomever,’ and that does not make our prayers at the Capitol a crime against the separation of church and state.*

*qtd by Allen*

A response to the anti-interfaith position in the Baptist Messenger indicated that some of the players display a sarcastic wit when dealing with their less tolerant Baptist brothers-in-Christ.

*To the Editor of the Baptist Messenger,  
I read with interest in the recent “Perspective” in which Baptists in Oklahoma were encouraged to participate in one National Day of Prayer but not in the Interfaith Day of Prayer. The basic reason was that one of these groups was acceptable to Baptists; the other was not because it included the Jewish community, the Islamic Society, the Buddhist community, the atheist/secular humanist community, Native Americans and Pagans. As a representative of the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship of Oklahoma this raises an important issue for consideration. Do Baptists need instruction and guidance concerning who is and who is not acceptable for a time of reflection and a moment of silent prayer? We have recently called a new Coordinator for CBF work in Oklahoma. You will need to be patient with us while we inform him of the subtleties of being Baptist in Oklahoma...They have not been in Oklahoma long enough to learn that, “God does not hear the prayers of the Jews...”*

*Lavonn D. Brown Ret. Pastor, First Baptist Church, Norman Oklahoma*

This should remind us not to judge all Baptists or all Christians by the adherents we see on certain television programs. Like the Pagan community, Christianity is comprised of individuals who provide a continuum of beliefs. It is easy to see them as an army of theological clones that exist in stasis of absolute dogma, and there are some Christians

who would have us believe just that, who would scare us with the illusion of an ‘army.’ I believe that it is more important that we recognize and nurture relationships with those Christians who are more inclined to avoid bigotry and hatred in the name of their faith. Those good Christians are out there, I met quite a few on that Thursday afternoon, along with a dynamic, young Rabbi, a thoughtful, Muslim Cleric, and an intellectual firebrand from Oklahoma Atheists.

I was not interviewed at all, before or after the rally, though the Military Pagan Network was frequently mentioned by name in newspapers and on local television as one of the reasons the interfaith rally would be avoided by ‘true’ Christians. On News Channel 9, the news desk erroneously reported that MPN and the Oklahoma Atheists were the groups staging the rally. This is ironic because the correct information was available on newsok.com through *The Daily Oklahoman* which is also used by News Channel 9 as their website.

*Prescott said the interfaith services will include about 15 speakers from various groups including the Interfaith Alliances of Oklahoma City and Tulsa, the Oklahoma Conference of Churches, the Islamic Society of Greater Oklahoma City, Cooperating Baptists Fellowship of Oklahoma, the Unitarian church, the Military Pagan Network, and the atheist/secular humanist community, along with members of the Jewish, Buddhist and American Indian communities.*

*Hinton*

Part of this quote also appeared in the *Oklahoma Ethics Daily*. The Oklahoma interfaith rally was also mentioned in the *Washington Post*.

*In Oklahoma City, the Rev. Bruce Prescott has planned an interfaith ceremony on the steps of the state capitol today to protest the exclusively Christian ceremony inside the building. “As a Baptist preacher, it’s hard for me to protest prayer,” he said. “What I’d rather do is see if we can’t find a way to do it right.*

*Cooperman*

*The Washington Post* focused on the politics of the National Day of Prayer, and how President Bush would be participating in the NDP and would be broadcasting his participation during “...prime-time viewing hours, on Christian cable and satellite TV outlets nationwide.” The NDP spokesperson, Mark Fried felt that the theme, ‘Let Freedom Ring,’ was in response to what he perceived was a concerted attack on Christianity by other faiths. From my perspective, wanting to be included, represented and visible as part of the citizenry on the National Day of Prayer does not constitute an attack. His argument is, in reality, about visibility. If we [collectively] are not visible then we are not so much of a threat to conservative Christian hegemony. This implies that we are aliens in our own country and that we are vulnerable to the suspicions and rumors that traditionally surround the unknown in the public eye. If we are not visible, then there is plausible deniability that we pray, that we have relationships with a higher power, that our traditions are authentic. If we are visible, then we become authentic, and credible, and therefore equal. That is the heart of the matter for us, for Mormons, Jews, Muslims, for any perceived heretical Christian sect, or non-Christian, or non-Abrahamic tradition.

Anyone who has been denied participation in this event shares in this issue of visibility, voice and equality. *The Washington Post* goes on to discuss the motivation of Bush to broadcast on Christian channels only. “*For Bush, the broadcast is an opportunity to address a sympathetic evangelical audience without the risk of alienating secular or non-Christian viewers.*” The minority faiths in this country do not have that luxury. When we must speak out, we must become visible. And we do so with full knowledge that our very presence isow enough to incite angry responses in at least a portion of our audience.

I am certainly not threatened by the fact that President Bush is Christian, or that he might pray to Jesus exclusively, but I am deeply troubled that he would directly or indirectly exclude others from important events because they are not Christian and do not pray to Jesus. I am also disappointed that the NDP organizers suggested that ‘other’ groups could have their own observances.

*“We are a Christian Task Force,” said Vonette Bright, who—along with Shirley Dobson—founded the organization. (Bright and Dobson are wives of prominent evangelical leaders.* *Felder*

In Oklahoma things were different this year.

*“ In the past, the service on the south steps has been coordinated by Lloyd R. Smith Jr., chairman of the National Day of Prayer Oklahoma Task Force, along with other Oklahoman’s in sync with the National Day of Prayer Task Force founded by Shirley Dobson, wife of Focus on the Family founder James Dobson...Smith said the service in the rotunda will have a Christian-Judeo foundation because the nation was founded on those principles. “Our forefathers founded our nation of Christian-Judeo [sic] ethics and the principles of the word of God,” he said.* *Hinton*

This means the ‘other’ groups would be separate from the ultra conservative evangelicals, invisible and isolated. Are we a nation or a collection of hostile factions? And even if that statement were true, that America was founded on Judeo-Christian values, is the excuse, “*Because we’ve always done it that way,*” defensible?

In Oklahoma, Governor Brad Henry changed the proclamation for the National Day of Prayer, and made that document more inclusive and less sectarian. This was a wonderful surprise for many Oklahomans and made me feel, in particular, less of an outsider.

**Whereas,** the National Day of Prayer is a tradition and important occasion first proclaimed by the Continental Congress in 1775; and

**Whereas,** in 1998, the U.S. Congress set aside the first Thursday of each May as a National Day of Prayer (Public Law 100-307); and

**Whereas,** the First Amendment to the United States of Constitution states, “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise

thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press, or the right of the people to peaceable assemble, and to petition the government for the redress of grievances”; and

**Whereas**, the right to religious liberty is stipulated in Article 1, Section 2 of the Oklahoma Constitution; and

**Whereas**, the 2004 theme for the National Day of Prayer is, “Let Freedom Ring, the freedom to gather, the freedom to worship, the freedom to pray;

**Now, Therefore, I Brad Henry**, Governor of the State of Oklahoma, do hereby proclaim May 6, 2004 as

### **“A Day of Prayer”**

in the state of Oklahoma and welcome my fellow Oklahomans to pray, each after his or her own faith.

Even though we had received this inclusive proclamation, the Lt Governor, Mary Fallin attended the indoor NDP rally and did not visit the interfaith rally outside on the capitol steps. I have been told that several politicians attended the Dobson rally, seated indoors in the comfort of air conditioning, without the prying eyes tolerant citizens who were participating in our interfaith function outside. This illustrated perfectly why individual citizens of Oklahoma had founded organizations such as Stop [Stop Theocracy in Oklahoma Policy]. Some citizens are tired of politicians pandering to religious groups for votes, and of those same politicians promoting some religions over others. Their positions as public servants should preclude the right to only attend certain religious functions in an official capacity, as representatives of the state. Clearly, it lends the appearance of bias. I was informed on the air of KREF that some individuals inside made negative comments about my presence there as a Pagan, but no one approached me directly. This is likely because they could not tell me from anyone else attending. My nice brown suit made me look more like someone’s executive assistant and less like the Wicked Witch of the West. Also, I left my flying monkeys at home. It made me recall an anecdote by Kerr Cuhulain that was posted on The Witches Voice web site. He conducted an experiment at the “Blessed Be and Merry Meet in DC” event in the fall of 2000. He came to the function wearing a dark blue suit. Although he was identified as someone the press could interview and photograph, they did not initially speak to him. Individuals who had agreed to interact with the press were issued blue glow sticks.

*Two television crews attended. These crews flocked to the Wiccan priestesses in the ritual robes with flowers in their hair. Next they congregated around people with pentagrams on their T-shirts. They looked aside at me as if they were wondering why some ordinary guy like me was carrying a blue glow stick: Perhaps I had been issued a glow stick by mistake? Maybe I had stolen it...They wondered why I wasn’t dressed funny: Didn’t all Wiccans dress up in costumes?*

Cuhulain

I suspect that my conservative suit played a part in my lack of interviews and might have saved me from some aggravation as well. That, and the content of my speech, was probably a disappointment to some who were expecting someone more flamboyant and less articulate. My husband (with tongue in cheek) has suggested that I might get more interviews if I brought a light saber next year and quoted Obi Wan Kenobi.

Approximately 110 people attended this rally on the capitol steps; we are hoping for a higher attendance next year. The NDP folks inside the capitol, who were part of the NDP Task Force, had to bus people in to compete with the number of interfaith participants. I have been invited back to speak again at next year's function as a representative of MPN. As soon as next year's theme is released, I will begin working on a new speech. I encourage everyone who is willing and able to participate in their local interfaith functions. When national observances like this arise, try to be involved with many faiths and show unity in diversity. Let the other side know that we will not be kowtowed with empty insults and uneducated guesses. Respectfully remind other Americans that we participate in every aspect of the democratic process, that we are good neighbors, and a deeply spiritual people.

I was honored to be invited to participate in this interfaith rally, and I hope that this one rally in Oklahoma is one of many more to come that will spring up all over the United States. That interfaith groups will take back this country and reflect the true nature of our diversity and tolerance as a nation and as a melting pot.

For more information about Oklahoma Mainstream Baptists or to read their extensive press archive on the interfaith rally, visit <http://www.mainstreambaptists.org>

Americans United for the Separation of Church and State [national]  
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To View all the speeches delivered during the Interfaith Day of Prayer and Reflection please visit <http://www.auok.org>