



Pennsylvania Legislative Black Caucus

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March 26, 2019

Speaker Mike Turzai
139 Main Capitol Building
PO Box 202028
Harrisburg, PA 17120-2028

Dear Speaker Turzai,

As the Chair of the Pennsylvania Legislative Black Caucus, whose top priority is to protect and advance people of color in Pennsylvania, let me say clearly how disgraceful it was to witness yesterday's opening prayer.

I do not take my role as PLBC chair lightly, in fact I feel it comes with a tremendous amount of responsibility. As we have witnessed through recent events, it is an unfortunate truth that there still remains injustice and hatred against Muslim-Americans. It is my hope that we can work to change this reality together as legislators unified against discrimination.

Yesterday should have been a momentous celebration for Rep. Johnson-Harrell and her family. Unfortunately, it instead quickly became an embarrassing display of hateful behavior. I have never witnessed an opening prayer with such aggressive language, but the timing of yesterday's prayer was particularly egregious.

The separation of church and state is clearly stated in the U.S. Constitution. It is inexcusable that Representative Borowicz used her platform to belittle another member through a prayer in which she stated things such as, "at the name of Jesus, every knee will bow and every tongue will confess, Jesus that you are Lord."

I choose to celebrate the diversity of our caucus and welcome Representative Movita Johnson-Harrell with open, loving arms. There is no room for hate, and I believe our Democratic Leader Frank Dermody said it best, "it was beneath the dignity of the House."

Our great Commonwealth was founded by a Quaker. Traditionally, Quakers believe in spirituality as a deeply personal experience in which all are treated equally. In fact, this state was founded to be a haven for all to practice their religions freely without the threat of persecution, death or banishment. It's safe to say that yesterday we fell short of the dream our founding fathers had for Pennsylvania.

Our highest priority as legislators should be equality. People should not have to fight for basic dignity and respect. This year, we have the first openly gay person of color in the Pennsylvania legislature. We have a record number of women serving in office. We need to ensure that our conduct is respectful and welcoming as the make-up of the House changes. Time and again, people of marginalized communities have been made to feel as if they are different or unwelcome. Please do what you can to inspire a change in the behavior of our colleagues.

I look forward to working together to address this incident and create change for the future. If we can break down the barriers of discrimination, we can focus fully on improving Pennsylvania for all its residents.

Best Regards,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Stephen Kinsey". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style with a long horizontal stroke extending to the right.

Stephen Kinsey
State Representative
201st Legislative District
Chairman, Pennsylvania Legislative Black Caucus

cc: Representative Frank Dermody, Democratic Leader
Representative, Bryan Cutler, Republican Leader