

Christians Divided on Bloomberg's 9/11 Prayer Ban

New York Mayor Michael Bloomberg's office has announced that the principle ceremony marking the 9/11 terrorist attacks will exclude clergy and formal prayers. "The move by city hall allows "moments of silence" and for families to share, but specifically excludes religious figures.

"The bottom line is for 10 years we've been doing this for families, and we're going to continue to do it for families," Bloomberg said.

The response from Christians? Divided.

"This is America, and to have a memorial service where there's no prayer, this appears to be insanity to me," former New York Deputy Mayor Rudy Washington told *The Wall Street Journal*.

Bloomberg's controversial decision comes when the Barna Group polling firm finds that 46 percent of New York area residents reported attending worship services in the previous week in 2010, up from 31 percent in 2000. The latest figures also show that 61 percent of New York-area residents agree strongly that religious faith is very important to them. "

"In a city where the most residents in recent memory now cite religious faith as strongly important, New York is tone-deaf to exclude all religion when remembering the slaughter of over 3,000 innocents," says Mark Tooley, president of the Institute on Religion & Democracy. "To exclude clergy even at a memorial service implies that religion is not welcome in the public square, even in mourning."

From presidential inaugurals, to opening Congress, to countless civic events routinely in every community across America, clergy and prayers have been a regular part of public

life for years, Tooley notes. As he sees it, the exclusion of both clergy and prayers is deeply at odds with America's robust religious life and even with the beliefs of most New Yorkers: "Secularist groups like Americans United for the Separation of Church and State naturally applaud New York's ignoring most Americans and most New Yorkers by pretending religion is unimportant, even when remembering mass slaughter and heroic sacrifice."

But not all Christians agree with Tooley's take. Dr. Michael Youssef, senior pastor of The Church of the Apostles in Atlanta, says Bloomberg made the right move. Most likely, he says, Bloomberg's reason for barring "clergy" from the event is fear that he may offend one group or another.

"The way I and many other faithful Christians see it is as an act of mercy—sparing us the spectacle of bundling all religions together as if they are worshipping one god or as if all these gods are equal," Youssef says. "Indeed, Mayor Rudy Giuliani's 'Prayer for America' memorial service, held 12 days after the 9/11 attacks, was extremely painful for the faithful Christians who watched. It gave the impression that all gods are equal to the one true God—the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob; the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ."