Invocation or Provocation? (A)

When Cyndi Simpson asked to be added to the list of local religious leaders offering invocations at Chesterfield County’s Board of Supervisors meetings, she recalled the clerk’s polite response: “Sure, what church do you belong to?” Simpson responded that she was a Witch of the Reclaiming Tradition. After taking down her contact information, the clerk said she would be in touch. Simpson found the conversation “brief and gracious.” Yet after she hung up the phone, she thought: “That was easy. That was too easy.”

Earlier the same day, August 22, 2002, Simpson first learned about the invocations given at the County’s Board of Supervisors Meetings. The prayers regularly invoked the name of Jesus Christ and were given almost exclusively by Christian ministers. The local Unitarian Universalist minister wasn’t interested in being added to the rotation, given his belief in the separation of church and state. While Simpson strongly shared that belief, she also thought that if prayers were allowed, they should represent the diversity of Chesterfield County. Simpson thought to herself: “Well, maybe I’ll offer to do the prayers out of my Pagan, earth-based approach.” She took some time to reflect and pray about what she should do. Then, she picked up the phone and made the call.

Simpson recently settled in Chesterfield County, in the town of Bon Air, just beyond the city line of Richmond, Virginia. Many years earlier, she left the Richmond Area to pursue education and a thriving career in public health; she returned to be closer to her aging mother and to consider the next steps in her personal and professional life. Simpson hadn’t lived in Virginia for thirty years and was still learning about how much the area had changed since she grew up there – and how it hadn’t. Simpson knew that the county was politically and religiously conservative, but it was by no means a monolith: with a population of 280,000, it included suburban growth from Richmond, smaller towns, and more rural areas. She noticed that racial segregation between black and white residents persisted in the area, yet the county was also far more diverse religiously than when she was a child. In 2002, the area was home to large Hindu and Islamic Centers and the Broom Riders Association, a chapter of the Reclaiming Tradition of Witchcraft.

Two weeks later, the County Administrator’s office called Simpson: their written response to her request had been leaked to the press, and they wanted her to see it before it appeared in the newspapers. When Simpson read the letter, she recalled: “My heart sank.”

A Letter to Cyndi Simpson from the Board of Supervisors

The letter from Chesterfield County Attorney Steven Micas arrived by fax at Simpson’s home on September 12, 2002. It began, “This is in response to your recent request to be added to the list of local religious leaders who are invited to give the invocation at regular meetings of the Chesterfield County Board of Supervisors. You indicated that you are a member of Wicca.” The letter continued:

Like many other legislative bodies, Chesterfield County has a long-standing tradition of opening Board meetings with a non-sectarian invocation for divine guidance which is performed by a local minister, priest, rabbi, or other cleric. The use of such non-sectarian invocations to begin legislative sessions was approved by the United States Supreme Court in 1983. [Marsh v. Chambers] As is the case with both the practice approved by the Supreme Court and the practice of the United States Congress, Chesterfield’s non-sectarian invocations are traditionally made to a divinity that is
consistent with the Judeo-Christian tradition. Based on our review of Wicca, it is Neo-Pagan and invokes polytheistic, pre-Christian deities. Accordingly, we cannot honor your request to be included on the list of religious leaders that are invited to provide invocations at the meetings of the Board of Supervisors.2

Endnotes

1 All quotes from Cyndi Simpson: Cyndi Simpson, interview by Ellie Pierce, September 19, 2011.

2 Steven Micas to Cyndi Simpson, letter regarding invocation request, September 12, 2002, from Cyndi Simpson.