Religious Intolerance: Nip It In The Bud

by Kathy W. Stein

In January 1997, with much excitement and anticipation, my family and I arrived in Frankfort for my swearing-in as a member of the 83rd Session of the Kentucky General Assembly.

My young children were dressed in their best. My elderly mother had arrived, despite significant problems, with incredible pride at being there. My husband was beaming.

After the ceremonial swearing-in, the General Assembly began its organizational work. I was as green a freshman as they come, yet eager to begin the task for which my constituents had sent me.

On the second or third day of the session, I was sitting at my desk paying close attention to what was going on in the hubbub of the general work that must be accomplished according to General Assembly rules. Then I heard the words, "A resolution calling upon the Kentucky General Assembly to go on record supporting the posting of the Ten Commandments in public buildings." The roll-call board was opened for co-sponsors.

Mine was the only red "no" vote amid the electronic sea of green "yes" votes. The floor quieted quickly. Everyone looked at the freshman from the 73rd District. I realized then that I was different.

Our state is in a much better position than others to know the rules of posting the Decalogue. The U.S. Supreme Court specifically told us so in Stone v. Graham, a case arising from Kentucky legislation requiring the posting of the Ten Commandments on the walls of public schools.

As a freshman legislator, I felt pretty confident about that Supreme Court pronouncement and assumed that would be the end of the posting issue. Last summer, I began to realize how wrong that assumption was.

There is a significant divide among Kentuckians regarding separation of church and state. In the 1998 session, there was significant debate on a bill allowing prayer in school. When I tried to point out, time and time again, that the U.S. Supreme Court had never outlawed non-coerced, non-disruptive, voluntary prayer by schoolchildren, I met mostly deaf ears from my colleagues.

It was then that I began to recognize that Christian conservatives had done a very good job of persuading the public that the very complex problems our modern society faces would be solved by a deceptively simple solution: Put prayer and God back in the public schools.

Indeed, the public has become so indoctrinated with that simple solution that it is now politically perilous for a public official to cast a vote that could be construed as "anti-religious." Those same Christian conservatives have framed the debate as being for God or against God. How unfortunate for all of us.

I am hopeful that as an elected official in Kentucky, I can point out to its citizens that the true and present peril is the intolerance and bigotry that have evolved from this debate. While the vast majority of Christians are people of good will and honorable intentions, there is a significant threat to our society from groups who are co-opting the Christian congregations.

On Feb. 15, hundreds of Kentuckians converged on the Capitol lawn to demand the posting of the Ten Commandments on the walls of public schools. The rally included much cheering and clapping. Speakers announced loudly into their microphones that Sen. Albert Robinson’s resolution directing the posting of the Ten Commandments was not enough; they demanded a bill with the force of law.

But the most disturbing comments I heard as I made my way through the crowd on my way to the floor of the House were these: “It’s time to reclaim our Christian nation and state” and “We need a religious war to take back our heritage.”

Heavy stuff. Frightening concepts.

As I have said both on and off the record to my legislative colleagues, I have reached the saturation point for such remarks from Robinson and the crowd of supporters who rallied for his viewpoint.

As I walked through that mass of angry people, I was fearful of being identified in the midst of those persons as the legislator who has consistently disagreed with their religious agenda. It occurred to me how much worse it would have been for me to have had my children with me as I passed through that crowd. Their questions would have been simple: Why are they saying those things, and what are you going to do about it?

Hence, I have determined that I will take every opportunity I can to challenge religious intolerance, divisiveness and bigotry. All children in Kentucky, of any religious belief or lack of belief, deserve to be respected, not denigrated.

The speakers at the Ten Commandments rally also referred to an America of yesteryear, when the most popular TV program was “The Andy Griffith Show.”

So, when it comes to the current climate of religious intolerance and bigotry, I’ll borrow a phrase from Deputy Barney Fife: “It’s time to nip it. Nip it in the bud.”

Kathy Stein, an Americans United member, serves in the Kentucky House of Representatives. This essay first appeared in the Lexington Herald-Leader and is reprinted with permission.

CHURCH & STATE APRIL 2000