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DFLers file complaint over colleague's anti-Semitic remark

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A Minnesota legislator has been formally charged with an ethics violation for making a remark taken to be an anti-Semitic slur on the floor of the state House of Representatives.

During a debate Feb. 23 over the rule governing the kind of prayer used to open House sessions, Rep. Arlon Lindner, R-Corcoran, turned to Rep. Michael Paymar, DFL-St. Paul, who is Jewish, and said, "...don't impose your irreligious left views on me."

Lindner's remark was met by gasps and hissing. A number of legislators then rose on the House floor and condemned his statement.

The representatives were voting on a proposed change to the permanent House rules regarding the chaplain's opening prayer — for the fourth time in two years. The proposal sought to delete phrases requiring a prayer that is "non-denominational" and "respects the religious diversity of the House."

Those phrases were inserted in the rules last year following complaints about a youth choir singing a Christian hymn to open the legislative session. The changes to the rules were approved on a largely partisan vote in the Republican-controlled House.

"It certainly shocked me that he would say that...especially, on the floor of the House," Paymar told the AJW last week. "I took it very personally. I didn't say anything...but several of my colleagues blasted Rep. Lindner for making such an inappropriate and offensive statement."

At the end of the House session, 60 lawmakers, both DFL and Republican, signed a formal "dissent and protest" regarding Lindner's remarks. Printed in the official daily Journal of the House, it said, in part: "Representative Lindner defamed people of the Jewish faith by calling them irreligious and impugning the sincerity of their religious beliefs... Representative Lindner's remarks do damage to the tradition of religious tolerance that we enjoy in the State of Minnesota and we must forcefully protest and dissent."

Also, on Feb. 25, four DFL representatives filed an ethics complaint with the House speaker. The complaint will be referred to the bipartisan House Ethics Committee, which is obliged to consider the matter before the end of the legislative session. The committee could recommend disciplinary action, such as a reprimand; any recommendation would go to the full House for disposition.

At a Feb. 24 press conference announcing the intention to file an ethics complaint, Rep. Ann Rest, DFL-New Hope — one of the four Democratic House members bringing the complaint — stated, "Characterizing Rep. Paymar's Jewish faith as 'irreligious' is outrageous. It seems clear that Rep. Lindner does not believe that a person can be pious or principled if they are

not of his faith. There was absolutely no justification for his remarks."

In a Feb. 25 letter to the DFL House caucus, Paymar expressed his desire not to be "involved in the ethics complaint" that his colleagues filed, although he wrote that he appreciated their effort. Paymar stated that he did not intend "to become the lightning rod in this controversy over prayer in the House.... I want to make sure that the focus remains on the larger issue and not on me as an individual."

Christian conservatives in the Minnesota House believe that visiting chaplains should be allowed to say whatever type of prayer they desire — frequently, the opening prayer has been said in the name of Jesus Christ.

In an interview with the AJW, Rep. Arlon Lindner — who holds a master of divinity degree from Central Baptist Theological Seminary in Minneapolis — expressed dismay that the House rule on prayer was changed last year, "because it's been nothing but confusion and a problem for those of us that actually believe that prayer means something."

During the Feb. 23 House debate, both Lindner and House Majority Leader Tim Pawlenty suggested that those who object to such prayers could leave the House floor.

"The statements that Jewish members and other members are expected to leave [the House floor during the prayer] shows the tremendous insensitivity to the rights of anyone who isn't of the dominant religion," remarked Rep. Matt Entenza, DFL-St. Paul, who initiated the protest petition and is one of the legislators filing the ethics complaint against Lindner.

"I think it's important to call this remark what it was, which was clearly anti-Semitic, and inflammatory, and derogatory to all Jewish people. And it requires a very strong reaction," Entenza told the AJW.

He pointed out that Lindner's conservative positions are well known to his House colleagues, but that he "crossed the line this time.... Instead of attacking people on a political basis, he labeled Jewish people 'irreligious.'"

For his part, Lindner allowed that his remark to Paymar "probably wasn't maybe the best choice of words," but said that Paymar, during his remarks on the House floor,



Rep. Arlon Lindner: It's a problem for those of us that actually believe that prayer means something.

"looked right at me, and started using my name..."

Lindner said that he should not be expected "to just stand still and take the kind of crap, basically, that Rep. Paymar was dishing out and then not respond to it."

As to the allegation that his remark was anti-Semitic, Lindner jocularly remarked that Paymar has accused him of "being part of the Christian right, and the religious

right...and I kind of got back by saying, if I'm on the religious right, he's on the irreligious left."

Lindner said that he approached Rep. Jim Rhodes, a Republican legislator from suburban Minneapolis, who is Jewish, following the Feb. 23 incident and explained that his remarks were not "directed at Jews in general, because I love Jewish people, I love Israel. And I have studied Israel's history and the Old Testament, and, you know, the law and the prophets mean a lot to me. And I wouldn't want to do anything that even appeared like I was anti-Jew or something, because I'm not."

In a press statement last week, Steven Hunegs, president of the Jewish Community Relations Council (JCRC), condemned the change in the House rules to allow sectarian prayers, and Lindner's "disparaging comments" to Paymar.

"Simple decency also compels an apology in this matter," said Hunegs. "At the same time, the JCRC hopes to transform these ugly comments into a learning opportunity. State Rep. Lindner and the JCRC will be meeting in the near future to discuss the situation."