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OPINION

Opinion: Nessel threatens religious freedom

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The socio-political discourse in society has descended to a point where elected officials are implored to lead by example and use language that helps set the tone for civility and respect for differing beliefs and opinions.

Simply stated – words are important. They can inform or inspire, but, conversely, they can also disrupt or instigate.

As leaders within our organizations which are informed by sacred principles and values, we share the common concern that those who hold office in Michigan refrain from tearing down or disrespecting others in executing the trusts given to them by residents of the state. Moreover, we hold that in the pursuit of liberty, justice and inclusion no person should be compelled to accept moral standards in their private lives that contravene the faith values to which they subscribe.

Relating to these two issues, our mutual constituents hold concerns regarding recent words – and actions – of Michigan Attorney General Dana Nessel.

On Feb. 21, Nessel provided an update regarding her office's examination of allegations of clergy sexual abuse in the Catholic Church. While we support the necessity to ensure the safety of children and investigation into abuse regardless of where in society it occurs, we found Nessel's comments ("if an investigator comes to your door and asks to speak to you, please ask to see a badge and not their rosary") to be offensive and beneath her office.

Her comment would have been just as troubling if she would have deployed similar language invoking a hijab which is worn by Muslim women or a yarmulke which is worn by Jewish men.

Articles of faith and sacred symbols of Michigianians should not be disrespected or denigrated by any elected official in our state irrespective of political party, much less the person who has been entrusted to uphold justice and fairness for everyone regardless of their religious affiliation. Regrettably, Nessel has yet to apologize for her statement about the rosary beads.

While we urge the attorney general and all elected officials to refrain from insulting religious devotions and articles, we similarly express unyielding support for the right of individual and institutional conscience in the public square.

Freedom of conscience is inherent within the fabric of American history and policy.

In recent years, however, adversarial and litigious organizations have sought to shutter religious organizations based solely on their faith-based mission. Nessel has played an active role in this regard, having referred to those who support policies that protect religious agencies as “hate-mongers.”

Religious child placement agencies, which receive nominal state funds to maintain administrative realities, are now mandated by Nessel to place children within same-sex adult relationships, even when such is contrary to their bona fide religious beliefs and mission.

Two lawsuits have recently been filed in state and federal court in response to Nessel’s ultimatum that forces faith-based child placement agencies to choose between their religious identity and their humanitarian service to vulnerable persons.

Though it would be inappropriate for tax dollars to be used to promote any single religious domination to the exclusion of others, agencies should be free to place children with families of shared religious backgrounds and faith values. To this end, we express mutual concern that the state attorney general refuses to defend state laws that uphold conscience rights.

As we support those calling on Attorney General Nessel to apologize for her rosary comments, we further hope that Nessel pledges to respect and protect the sincerely held beliefs of all in Michigan even when they disagree with her moral perspective.

These issues are not only the concern of Muslims and Catholics in our state, but also those of different faith affiliations who seek a return to civility and renewed respect for what fellow citizens hold to be sacred.

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