

House and Senate Chaplains: An Overview

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House and Senate Chaplains: An Overview

Except for a brief period in the 1850s, the House of Representatives and Senate have had elected chaplains since 1789. The chaplains are chosen by each chamber as individuals and not as representatives of any religious body or denominational entity.

At the beginning of each Congress, the House chaplain is elected to a two-year term. The Senate chaplain, like other officers of the Senate, does not have to be reelected at the beginning of a new Congress.

The chaplains perform ceremonial, symbolic, and pastoral duties. They also coordinate the “guest chaplains” who are frequently invited by Members to deliver the daily prayer.

Since 1789:

- 52 individuals have been elected as Senate chaplain, although 9 of these chaplains served nonconsecutive terms. One of these individuals served three different terms across three decades. Regular turnover characterized the early Senate chaplain elections. Longer tenures began in the late 1800s, with 14 chaplains serving since 1893 (4 of whom died in office).
- 54 individuals have been elected as House chaplain, although 6 of these chaplains served nonconsecutive terms. Two of these chaplains served three nonconsecutive terms across three decades. As with the Senate, regular turnover characterized the position until the late 1800s. Since 1895, only 8 individuals have been elected House chaplain.
- 7 individuals were elected to serve, at different times, as both House chaplain and Senate chaplain. For some of these individuals, the service in each chamber was close in time. In contrast, the service of Reverend William Henry Milburn—the most recent chaplain to serve in both the House and Senate—spanned more than 50 years: he served three separate periods in the House (beginning December 22, 1845; beginning December 7, 1853; and beginning December 7, 1885) before being elected Senate chaplain (beginning April 6, 1893).

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Introduction and Functions

Both the Senate and House of Representatives elect chaplains. The chaplains perform ceremonial, symbolic, and pastoral duties. Pursuant to Senate Rule IV and House Rule II, the Senate and House chaplains open the daily sessions in their respective chambers with a prayer. In addition to these official duties, they also serve as spiritual counselors to Members, their families, and staff; coordinate religious studies, discussion sessions, and prayer meetings for Members and staff; and may officiate at the weddings and funerals of Members.

At the beginning of each Congress, the House chaplain is elected to a two-year term.¹ The Senate chaplain, like other officers of the Senate, does not have to be reelected at the beginning of a new Congress. The House and Senate elect the chaplains as individuals and not as representatives of any religious body or denominational entity.

The elected chaplains also coordinate the “guest chaplains,” who are invited by Members of the House and Senate to offer an opening prayer. These guest chaplains, who have represented numerous faiths, have been invited for many decades.² The House welcomed its first female guest chaplain in 1948,³ with the Senate following in 1971.⁴

History

The custom of opening legislative sessions with a prayer began in the Continental Congress, which elected Jacob Duché, rector of Christ Episcopal Church in Philadelphia, to serve as its chaplain from 1774 to 1776.⁵

For most of their history, the House and the Senate have each elected a chaplain. The Senate elected as its first chaplain Samuel Provoost, an Episcopal bishop from New York, on April 25, 1789. The House then elected William Linn, a Presbyterian minister from Philadelphia, on May 1, 1789. Pursuant to an act of September 22, 1789, each chaplain received an annual salary of \$500.⁶

When Congress moved to Washington in 1800, houses of worship were so few that the chaplains took turns conducting Sunday services in the House chamber—now Statuary Hall. Visiting clergy also participated in these services, which were open to the public.⁷

In the 1850s, numerous petitions were received requesting the abolishment of the chaplain offices. Some of these petitioners objected to the employment of chaplains in Congress and the military as a breach of the separation of church and state. Some critics also alleged that the appointments of chaplains had become too politicized. The House Judiciary Committee received

¹ For additional information on the House chaplain, see *Deschler's Precedents of the House*, Ch. 6, §21 *et seq.* 94th Cong., 2nd sess., H.Doc. 94-661, January 1, 1994; and U.S. Congress, House of Representatives, *Constitution, Jefferson's Manual, and Rules of the House of Representatives of the United States, One Hundred Eighteenth Congress*, H. Doc. 117-161, 117th Cong., 2nd sess., February 20, 2023, §665.

² For example, see *Congressional Globe*, Feb. 1, 1860, pp. 648-649; *Congressional Record*, January 21, 1955, p. 528; and *Congressional Record*, February 9, 1961, p. 2029.

³ *Congressional Record*, June 9, 1948, pp. 7597-7599; and *Deschler's Precedents*, ch. 6 §21.9.

⁴ For additional information, see U.S. Senate, “Senate Stories: Enriching Senate Traditions: The First Women Guest Chaplains,” March 8, 2023, <https://www.senate.gov/artandhistory/senate-stories/first-women-guest-chaplains.htm>.

⁵ *Journals of the Continental Congress*, September 6, 1774; July 9, 1776; and October 17, 1776.

⁶ 1 Stat. 71.

⁷ For an early description, see Gaillard Hunt, ed., *The First Forty Years of Washington Society in the Family Letters of Margaret Bayard Smith* (New York: C. Scribner's sons, 1906), pp. 13-17.

these petitions,⁸ issued a report on March 27, 1854, and proposed a resolution discharging the committee from further consideration.⁹ For a short period in the late 1850s, the House and Senate did not elect chaplains. Instead, local clergy were invited to serve voluntarily as chaplains.¹⁰ However, the difficulty in obtaining volunteer chaplains resulted in Congress returning to the practice of selecting official House and Senate chaplains.¹¹

There have been 52 individuals elected as Senate chaplain, although 9 of these chaplains served nonconsecutive terms.¹² One of these chaplains served three different terms across three decades. Regular turnover characterized the early Senate chaplain elections. Longer tenures began in the late 1800s, with 14 chaplains serving since 1893 (4 of whom died in office).

There have been 54 individuals elected as House chaplain, although 6 of these chaplains served nonconsecutive terms.¹³ Two of these chaplains served three nonconsecutive terms across three decades. As with the Senate, regular turnover characterized the position until the late 1800s. Since 1895, only 8 individuals have been elected House chaplain. Two House chaplains also had other House service. Oliver Cromwell Comstock, a Member of the House of Representatives from March 4, 1813, to March 3, 1819, later served as chaplain from December 20, 1836, until March 3, 1837. William Henry Hammett served as chaplain from December 12, 1832, until March 2, 1833, and was later elected to one term in the House (March 4, 1843, to March 3, 1845).

Seven individuals were elected to serve, at different times, as both House chaplain and Senate chaplain. For some of these individuals, the service in each chamber was close in time. In contrast, the service of Reverend William Henry Milburn—the most recent chaplain to serve in both the House and Senate—spanned more than 50 years: he served three separate periods in the House (beginning December 22, 1845; beginning December 7, 1853; and beginning December 7, 1885) before being elected Senate chaplain (beginning April 6, 1893).

Elections

The process for electing the House and Senate chaplains has changed over time.

Prior to the period in the 1850s without chaplains, for example, they were elected for a single session of Congress, and while each house elected a chaplain, the chaplains alternated chambers weekly.¹⁴

⁸ Some petitions referred to the House Committee on the Judiciary from the 31st-33rd Congresses (1849-1855) are preserved in the National Archives (Records of the U.S. House of Representatives, Record Group 233, National Archives, Washington, DC).

⁹ U.S. Congress, House of Representatives, *Chaplains in Congress and in the Army and Navy*, March 27, 1854, H.Rept. 124, 33rd Cong., 1st sess.

¹⁰ *Senate Journal*, December 9, 1857, pp. 34-35; *House Journal*, December 16, 1857, p. 78.

¹¹ See, for example, discussion of “Chaplains to the Senate,” in *Congressional Globe*, December 12, 1859, pp. 97-98. The Senate then proceeded to elect a chaplain a few days later (*Congressional Globe*, December 15, 1859, p. 162).

¹² For a list of Senate chaplains, see U.S. Senate, “About the Senate Chaplain,” http://www.senate.gov/artandhistory/history/common/briefing/Senate_Chaplain.htm.

¹³ For a list of House chaplains, see U.S. House of Representatives, Office of the Chaplain, “History of the Chaplaincy,” <http://chaplain.house.gov/chaplaincy/history.html>.

¹⁴ See entries, for example, in the *House Journal* on December 4, 1799, and December 6, 1853, and in the *Senate Journal* on November 5, 1792, and December 4, 1855.

During the 19th century, frequent transitions in the office, as well as multiple candidates and votes on the House floor during each chaplaincy election, were not unusual.¹⁵

Similarly, multiple Senate chaplain candidates, and even multiple votes on the Senate floor, were not unusual during the 19th century. For example, on December 10, 1833, six roll call votes were necessary before the election of one of the four candidates for chaplain.¹⁶ In the 20th century, minutes of the Senate Republican and Democratic Conferences through the 1960s also reveal discussion of multiple candidates.¹⁷

House

Since returning to the practice of having an official chaplain, the House chaplain has been elected to a two-year term at the beginning of each Congress. The House usually elects its officers by resolution. Since 1953, the Speaker has also had the authority to make a temporary appointment to fill a House officer vacancy,¹⁸ although the House may at any time elect a replacement officer.

In late 1994, prior to the convening of the 104th Congress, some thought was reportedly given to having volunteers of rotating denominations fill the post of House chaplain.¹⁹ However, the House decided to maintain the system of a full-time paid chaplain.

Electing an Officer at the Beginning of a Congress

When the House convenes at the beginning of a new Congress, the chair of the majority party caucus or conference typically offers an omnibus resolution for the election of House officers (currently, the Clerk of the House, Sergeant at Arms, Chief Administrative Officer, and the Chaplain). The chair of the minority caucus or conference is then customarily recognized. For many years, the minority caucus or conference chairman has then (1) asked for a division of the question so that a separate (and non-contested) vote occurs on the election of the chaplain, and (2) offered an amendment to the remainder of the resolution, replacing the names of the majority candidates for the three other officer positions with the names of minority party nominees. The portion of the resolution providing for the election of the chaplain is then adopted. With little or no debate, the amendment is generally defeated and the remainder of the resolution agreed to.²⁰

Electing an Officer During a Congress

The procedure for filling a vacancy that occurs during a Congress differs in some respects from the procedure used to elect officers at the start of a Congress. When a House officer resigns, dies, or is removed from office during a Congress, the vacancy may be filled by House action on a

¹⁵ For example, on December 14, 1847, three roll call votes were necessary before the election of a chaplain (*House Journal*, December 14, 1847, pp. 70-75).

¹⁶ *Congressional Globe*, December 10, 1833, p. 27.

¹⁷ U.S. Congress, Senate, *Minutes of the U.S. Senate Republican Conference, 1911-1964*, S.Doc. 105-19, January 1, 1999; and U.S. Congress, Senate, *Minutes of the Senate Democratic Conference (1903-1964)*, S. Doc. 105-20, January 1, 1998.

¹⁸ P.L. 197, August 5, 1953, 67 Stat. 387, 2 U.S.C. §5501.

¹⁹ Larry Witham, "Hill Chaplain Jobs May Not Be Sacred amid Frugal Mood," *The Washington Times*, January 6, 1995, p. A2; and Alice A. Love, "Permanent, Paid House Chaplain Could Be Another GOP Casualty," *Roll Call*, December 8, 1994. See also H.Res. 102 (104th Cong.).

²⁰ For example, see H.Res. 1 (118th Cong.), H.Res. 2 (117th Cong.), and H.Res. 1 (116th Cong.).

resolution or temporarily by the Speaker by appointment. A resolution to fill a vacant position is privileged for consideration.²¹

Senate

The Senate chaplain, like other officers of the Senate, does not have to be reelected at the beginning of a new Congress. When a vacancy does occur, the Senate chooses a new chaplain through the adoption of a resolution.

The three most recent Senate candidates for chaplain have been nominated by a bipartisan search committee that examined possible applicants.²² This method has not always been Senate practice and may differ from any future nomination.

In recent decades, the post of chaplain to the Senate has generally not been subject to party considerations. When the Republicans gained the majority in the Senate in the 80th Congress (1947-1948), they replaced the incumbent with a new chaplain, but his nomination occasioned a debate on the floor.²³ When the Democrats regained the majority in the 81st Congress (1949-1950), they restored the previous incumbent,²⁴ who remained in office in the subsequent transitions in the 83rd Congress (1953-1954) and the 84th Congress (1955-1956). Although new chaplains were elected in the 97th Congress (1981-1982) and the 104th Congress (1995-1996)—two Congresses with a new majority party—the change in chaplain appears to have been influenced by other factors.²⁵

Most Recent Chaplains

Reverend Doctor Margaret Grun Kibben was first elected as House chaplain for the 117th Congress (H.Res. 2, agreed to January 3, 2021). She was the first woman elected to the position, and she previously served as the 26th chief of chaplains of the United States Navy,²⁶ and prior to that, she served as the 18th chaplain of the Marine Corps. She followed Father Patrick J. Conroy,

²¹ For additional information in privileged resolutions, see U.S. Congress, House of Representatives, *Constitution, Jefferson's Manual, and Rules of the House of Representatives of the United States, One Hundred Eighteenth Congress*, H. Doc. 117-161, 117th Cong., 2nd sess., February 20, 2023, §698 et seq. For additional information, see CRS Report 98-411, *Questions of Privilege in the House*, coordinated by Elizabeth Rybicki.

²² The official record provides little information on these selections. See Ben Pershing, "Kyl Leading Senate Chaplain Search; Finalists Will Get Chance to Lead Opening Prayer for a Day," *Roll Call*, January 20, 2003; U.S. Congress, Senate, *Tributes Delivered in Congress to Chaplain Lloyd John Ogilvie To Commemorate His Service in the United States Senate*, S. Doc. 108-4, March 21, 2003, p. 28, <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/CDOC-108sdoc4/pdf/CDOC-108sdoc4.pdf>; and U.S. Congress, Senate, *Richard C. Halverson, U.S. Senate Chaplain, Memorial Tributes in the Congress of the United States*, S. Doc. 104-15, February 27, 1996, <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/CDOC-104sdoc15/pdf/CDOC-104sdoc15.pdf>.

²³ *Congressional Record*, v. 93, January 4, 1947, pp. 111-113.

²⁴ *Congressional Record*, v. 95, February 3, 1949, p. 799.

²⁵ According to tributes in the *Congressional Record*, the Reverend Dr. Edward L.R. Elson retired after 50 years as a chaplain, with 12 of those serving in the Senate (*Congressional Record*, January 29, 1981, p. 1221 and January 30, 1981, p. 1379). A tribute printed by the Senate upon the retirement of Elson's successor, Richard C. Halverson, stated that although Halverson "was appointed by a Republican-controlled Senate, he has been reappointed for successive two-year terms by Democratic controlled Senates as well" (U.S. Congress, Senate, *Richard C. Halverson, U.S. Senate Chaplain, Memorial Tributes in the Congress of the United States*, S. Doc. 104-15, February 27, 1996). The tribute also noted that he intended to "retire as the U.S. Senate chaplain for health reasons, but ... agreed to stay on until the Senate ha[d] time to find a replacement" (p. 50). He died on November 28, 1995.

²⁶ Presidential nomination to be rear admiral (lh) (PN1526, 113th Congress), confirmed by the Senate by voice vote on April 9, 2014, <https://www.congress.gov/nomination/113th-congress/1526/actions?r=1&s=2>.

who was elected as House chaplain on May 25, 2011 (H.Res. 278, 112th Congress).²⁷ His election followed the retirement of Father Daniel P. Coughlin, who was the first Roman Catholic House chaplain. Father Coughlin was appointed by the Speaker of the House on March 23, 2000, and he was elected at the beginning of each subsequent Congress through the 112th Congress. His appointment followed the resignation of Reverend James Ford, who had served as House chaplain since January 1979 (H.Res. 1, 96th Congress).²⁸

On June 27, 2003, the Senate elected its first African American and first Seventh-day Adventist chaplain (S.Res. 189, 108th Congress). Dr. Barry C. Black previously served as the 22nd chief of chaplains of the United States Navy.²⁹ His name was among those recommended by a bipartisan search committee of five Senators led by Senator John Kyl.

Dr. Black succeeded Dr. Lloyd Ogilvie, who had resigned in March 2003. Dr. Ogilvie was first elected by S.Res. 70, 104th Congress (agreed to January 24, 1995), and he followed Dr. Richard C. Halverson, who was first elected by S.Res. 48, 97th Congress (agreed to January 29, 1981).

Salary and Funding

Pursuant to the 2023 Order of the Speaker of the House, issued December 30, 2022, the salary for the House chaplain was increased to \$212,100, equivalent to the 2023 pay rate for Level II of the Executive Schedule (EX).³⁰

Pursuant to the Order of the President pro tempore implementing a pay increase for Senate employees, issued March 15, 2022 (contained in 2 U.S.C. §4571 note), the rate of compensation for the Senate chaplain is equivalent to Level II of the EX. This is equivalent to \$221,900 in 2024.³¹

²⁷ Father Conroy resigned on April 15, 2018 (*Congressional Record*, April 16, 2018, p. H3329), before being reappointed pursuant to 2 U.S.C. §5501(a) on May 8, 2018 (*Congressional Record*, May 8, 2018, pp. E99 and H3787); see also H.Res. 856 and H.Res. 878, 115th Congress; and U.S. Congress, House of Representatives, *Precedents of the U.S. House of Representatives (2017 series)*, Volume 2, Chapters 5-6, 115th Cong., 1st sess., H.Doc. 115-62, p. 580, footnote 33, <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/GPO-HPREC-PRECEDENTS-V2/pdf/GPO-HPREC-PRECEDENTS-V2.pdf#page=592>.

²⁸ In May 1999, after Reverend Ford announced his intention to retire, the then-House Speaker Dennis Hastert and the then-House Democratic Leader Richard Gephardt appointed an 18-member bipartisan search committee, chaired by Representatives Tom Bliley (R-VA) and Earl Pomeroy (D-ND), to recommend three finalists for House chaplain. In November 1999, Reverend Charles Wright, a Presbyterian minister, was chosen by the House leadership (the Speaker, and majority and minority leaders). However, he withdrew his name from consideration. Reverend Ford's resignation was accepted in the House on March 23, 2000. Speaker Hastert appointed Father Coughlin under his authority to appoint a temporary replacement officer in the middle of a Congress (currently contained in 2 U.S.C. §5501(a)). See *Congressional Record*, June 18, 1999, p. E1330; and, *Congressional Record*, March 23, 2000, pp. H1326-H1329. Father Coughlin was elected the following Congress by H.Res. 1 (107th Congress).

²⁹ Presidential nomination to be rear admiral (lh) (PN942, 106th Congress), confirmed by the Senate by voice vote on May 17, 2000 (<https://www.congress.gov/nomination/106th-congress/942?r=1&s=4>).

³⁰ 2 U.S.C. §4532 note containing the Order of the Speaker of the House and 2 U.S.C. §5521 (which states that the House Chaplain's compensation "shall not exceed the greater of \$173,900 or the rate of pay in effect for such position under an order issued by the Speaker of the House of Representatives pursuant to the authority of section 4532 of this title." P.L. 116-94, div. E, title II, §212(b)(3)(D), December 20, 2019, 133 Stat. 2777).

³¹ Previously, the Senate Chaplain's pay was equivalent to Level IV of the Executive Schedule (2 U.S.C. §6651, P.L. 100-202, December 22, 1987, 101 Stat. 1329-290, 1329-294, repealed by P.L. 116-94, div. E, title II, §212(a)(3)(G), December 20, 2019, 133 Stat. 2776). For Executive Schedule pay rates, see Office of Personnel Management, "Salaries and Wages," <https://www.opm.gov/policy-data-oversight/pay-leave/salaries-wages/>.

The budgets for the chaplains' office operations and staff are included in the annual legislative branch appropriations acts.³²

Constitutionality³³

The Establishment Clause of the First Amendment prohibits Congress from making any law “respecting an establishment of religion.”³⁴ This prohibition includes government actions that connote “sponsorship” or “active involvement” in religious activity³⁵ as well as the compulsion of worship.³⁶ While the Supreme Court has not specifically ruled on the constitutionality of chaplains in the House and Senate, it has stated that a legislative prayer practice will be constitutional so long as it “fits within the tradition long followed in Congress and the state legislatures.”³⁷ Consequently, the Court has upheld state and local legislative prayer practices that were consistent with historical practice, when the government was not prescribing the content of the prayers and there was no evidence the practice had “been exploited to proselytize or advance any one, or to disparage any other, faith or belief.”³⁸ Lower courts have rejected at least two challenges to Congress’s public funding of congressional chaplains, citing Supreme Court precedent suggesting this historical practice was acceptable.³⁹ A federal appeals court has also concluded the House of Representatives did not violate the Establishment Clause by requiring the opening prayer to be religious in character, again citing Supreme Court precedent.⁴⁰

Selected Links and Locations

Senate Chaplain

<https://www.senate.gov/about/officers-staff/chaplain.htm>

House Chaplain

<http://chaplain.house.gov/>

³² See, for example, references in H.R. 8772 and S.Rept. 118-192 (118th Cong.). Pursuant to 2 U.S.C. §6154, the Senate chaplain may transfer funds between the appropriation for salaries that of expenses (P.L. 114-113, December 18, 2015). See also 2 U.S.C. §6152 (compensation of employees) and §6153 (postage).

³³ This section was authored by Valerie C. Brannon, Legislative Attorney.

³⁴ US Constitution, amend. 1. For a discussion of this provision, see Cong. Rsch. Serv., *General Principle of Government Neutrality to Religion*, CONSTITUTION ANNOTATED, https://constitution.congress.gov/browse/essay/amdt1-3-1/ALDE_00013071/ (last visited December 2, 2024).

³⁵ *Walz v. Tax Comm’n*, 397 U.S. 664, 668 (1970).

³⁶ *Cantwell v. Connecticut*, 310 U.S. 296, 303 (1940).

³⁷ *Town of Greece v. Galloway*, 572 U.S. 565, 577 (2014).

³⁸ *Marsh v. Chambers*, 463 U.S. 783, 794–95 (1983); see also *Town of Greece*, 572 U.S. at 581. Coercion may be a relevant factor in evaluating a specific prayer practice. See CRS Legal Sidebar LSB10780, *Kennedy v. Bremerton School District: School Prayer and the Establishment Clause*, by Valerie C. Brannon.

³⁹ *Murray v. Buchanan*, 720 F.2d 689, 690 (D.C. Cir. 1983) (en banc); *Newdow v. Eagen*, 309 F. Supp. 2d 29, 39–41 (D.D.C. 2004). In addition, courts have dismissed other challenges for lack of standing. See, e.g., *Kurtz v. Baker*, 829 F.2d 1133, 1138 (D.C. Cir. 1987).

⁴⁰ *Barker v. Conroy*, 921 F.3d 1118, 1131–32 (D.C. Cir. 2019).

Congressional Prayer Room (Capitol Building)

The Congressional Prayer Room, which is near the Rotunda, was established in 1954 with the agreement in the House and Senate to H.Con.Res. 60, 83rd Congress (68 Stat. B37).

Interfaith Staff Prayer Room (Cannon House Office Building)

The interfaith staff prayer room opened on July 1, 2024. The establishment of the space followed a House Appropriations Committee report accompanying the FY2023 legislative branch appropriations bill (H.Rept. 117-389), which directed the Architect of the Capitol,

“in coordination with the Committee on House Administration and the House Office Building Commission, to identify a dedicated space that can be used as a Congressional interfaith space for the prayer and meditation of House staff of all faiths, and report back to the Committee...”

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