

# **Prayer in a Public Institution**

**By Harvey L. Lineberry, II, Assistant Dean for Personnel,  
College of Agriculture and Life Sciences, North Carolina  
State University**

Prayer in the workplace can be a one-way road to dissension and divisiveness, or it can find itself as the "chalice" or "conveyer" of constructive education and meaningful dialogue. The outcome of this issue is most often driven by many factors within an organization and most notably as a function of leadership, both formal and informal, as a means of effective organizational movement. Additionally, for public entities this issue is interlaced with legal mandates that must be explored, understood and with which we must comply. This article is intended to help frame the issues around prayer as both an intensely personal and important issue, but one through which we can educate ourselves with a goal of becoming more "aware" and even possibly allies for our co-workers, colleagues, neighbors and friends – honoring of the individual right of choice that was the basis for the founding of our country. A definition of "ally" is to "unite or connect in a personal relationship" and that is truly the goal this article seeks to reach.

We, within the requirements of the law, have a responsibility to honor and respect all who are present in our programs, meetings, classrooms, and in our offices. We have a responsibility to our colleagues to be aware and informed on these issues and to exercise professional sensitivity in all situations over which we have control or are planning.

It is logical to see the United States as one of the most religiously diverse nations in the world. Some accounts show that non-Christians number in excess of 20% in the U.S. and that this number is growing each year. Suffice it to say, diversity, or pluralism, is a fact of life and one that any dynamic organization must recognize and address in a proactive and forward thinking manner. However, it is extremely important to understand that religious diversity means only that different religions (including non-religious beliefs) coexist and in no way implies that individuals accept these religions or positions as valid. Therefore, our challenge is to determine how we express respect for each person at the place they find themselves in their religious journey and still be true to an organization founded on the principle of advancing the purpose of education through the "extension" of research to our clients statewide. Most people in the U.S. and the rest of the world probably take an exclusivist, or "dominate" position: they believe that their religion, and only theirs, is completely true. Most believe that their God communicated universal truths by special revelation given to their spiritual ancestors or patriarchs. This knowledge has been passed on to present-day humanity, often in the form of religious texts. Many people hold tenaciously to their particular faith, believing it to be God's revealed wish for all humanity. Some may even view other faith groups, those without a "faith community" or denominations within their own religion to be false. This type of exclusivity can sometimes develop easily into hatred, or intolerance, of any "other" interpretation of position. Religious exclusivity is often a major cause of much of the world's civil unrest, civil wars, mass crimes against humanity and genocide. Yet, in balance to many places in the world, the U. S. has enjoyed a high level of religious freedom and a relative absence of religiously motivated conflict -- even though exclusivism is probably predominant here.

## **Constructing an Inclusive Public "Prayer"**

- Seek the highest common denominator without compromise of conscience.
- Use forms and vocabulary that allow persons of different faiths to give assent to what is said.
- Use the language most widely understood by the audience, unless one purpose of the event is to express ethnic/cultural diversity, in which case multiple languages can be effective.
- Consider other creative alternatives, such as a moment of silence.
- Remain faithful to the purpose of giving thanks and that it is not used as an opportunity to preach, argue or testify.

## **Examples of Inclusive Reflections**

Words spoken on behalf of an entire community, University, or College, should be easily shared by any listener, regardless of their beliefs and is both a privilege and a marked responsibility. Appropriate examples for use as a meal is served (these can be easily modified to begin or conclude a meeting):

LET US PAUSE:

We meet together in an effort to build community, to advance education and understanding. We seek the patience of one another as we strive to learn and grow and the stamina to make a difference in our state, nation and world. We express our thanks for the gifts of life and for the food that we are about to partake of.

**OR**

LET US PAUSE:

We gather here today as colleagues and friends with attention to a common goal. That goal is the continued service to the citizens of our state through our programs and information. We understand our responsibilities as committed educators as well as learners – personally and professionally. It is obvious that we work and live in challenging times. We seek the patience of each other as we strive to learn and grow, and the stamina to make a difference in our state, nation and the world.

We express our thanks for an opportunity to gather together where we can reinforce our community principles of openness and engagement for all people, for the gifts of life and for the food that has been prepared for us. For all this, we are thankful.

TO BE USED IN ANY SETTING:

A Prayer for the World

Let the rain come and wash away the ancient grudges, the bitter hatreds held and nurtured over generations. Let the rain wash away the memory of the hurt, the neglect. Then let the sun come out and fill the sky with rainbows. Let the warmth of the sun heal us wherever we are broken. Let it burn away the fog so that we can see each other clearly so that we can see beyond labels, beyond accents, gender, or skin color. Let the warmth and brightness of the sun melt our selfishness so that we can share the joys and feel the sorrows of our neighbors. And let the light of the sun be so strong that we will see all people as our neighbors. Let the earth, nourished by rain, bring forth flowers to surround us with beauty. And let the mountains teach our hearts to reach upward.

Rabbi Harold S. Kushner (with slight modification)

## **Thoughtful Quotes**

I would like to share with you some thoughtful quotes that I think reflect the diversity of this issue.

"I ask you to uphold the values of America and remember why so many have come here. We're in a fight for our principles, and our first responsibility is to live by them. No one should be singled out for unfair treatment or unkind words because of their ethnic background or religious faith."

George W. Bush, President. Address to a joint session of Congress, 2001-SEP-20.

"It is very important to understand that pluralism is part of our system. We don't all think the same thing and part of our strength is that we come from different perspectives. We have to respect one another even when we disagree with each other. There has to be a spirit of tolerance for the views of others, while also being deeply committed to the positions we hold. If we do that, I think we can coexist and learn to love each other better."

James Dobson, founder and president of "Focus on the Family" interviewed by Tony Snow of Fox News Channel, 2001-SEP-20

"The wiser you are, the more you believe in equality, because the difference between what the most and the least learned people know is inexpressibly trivial in relation to all that is unknown."

Albert Einstein

It is so important to look at what holds us together in common ground rather than to seek out that which divides us from one another – do our words and actions seek to build rather than tear down or do harm?

The full text of this article may be found on the web at

<http://www.ediversitycenter.net/prayer.php>

D.L. Holmes 05.18.11