

Prayer in Public Institutions: Giving Thanks

As Extension professional educators serving the public it is our responsibility to develop an understanding of prayer in public places. Prayer in the workplace can create dissension and divisiveness if not understood and constructively discussed with a diverse society in mind. As Utah State University employees we are bound by state and federal laws, legal precedent and the First Amendment of the Constitution, which mandates that government cannot "...compose official prayers for any group of the American people to recite as a part of a religious program carried on by the government." The Utah Supreme Court has ruled that allowing public prayer, an invocation, readings or thought utilized to open public meetings is allowable. Before opening public meetings with prayer or taking time to express thanks for food, all faiths and belief systems must be welcomed. A principle which guided the founding of this great country was that of freedom of choice. Honoring and respecting the rights of all who attend Extension programs and activities is an important responsibility.

The United States is one of the most religiously diverse nations in the world. Although nearly 75% of this nation identifies themselves with Christianity, by some accounts the non-Christian numbers are growing and are now in excess of 20%. Where there is a predominance of one religious faith, whether it is in Utah with its Latter Day Saints [Mormons], Southern Baptists in Georgia, Lutherans in Michigan or Moslems in New York, religious exclusivity may create a sense of intolerance for one another. Clearly pluralism is a fact of life in America today. Extending religious freedoms to both believers and non-believers, even though you may disagree with the beliefs and or a practice of such groups, is important when planning and conducting Extension programs and activities. Showing compassion and respect for our colleagues, friends and neighbors who may have different beliefs than we do demonstrates our honor for them as individuals. Finding common ground by looking to what binds us together rather than that which divides us from one another is our responsibility.



Ask: What should you do if you are asked to lead a prayer at a Utah State University Extension event? What considerations should be made if you are inviting another to pray at the event?

Are you personally comfortable in doing so? If not respectfully decline to pray or to invite another to pray. If comfortable with the request consider that some in the audience may not have the same beliefs as you.

Listen for suggestions that may include the following when constructing non-denominational public prayers:

1. Seek the highest common denominator without compromise of conscience.

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2. Use forms and vocabulary that allow persons of different faiths to give assent to what is said.
3. 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.
4. Consider other creative alternatives, such as a moment of silence.
5. Remain faithful to the purpose of giving thanks and that it is not used as an opportunity to preach, argue or testify.



Inclusive reflections might include such thoughts as reflected in these non-denominational public prayers:

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. 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.

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.

“The need of the moment is not one religion, but mutual respect and tolerance of the devotees of the different religions”

Mahatma Gandhi

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