

IF YOU ARE ASKED TO GIVE PUBLIC PRAYER IN A DIVERSE SOCIETY

GUIDELINES FOR CIVIC OCCASIONS

(Provided by NCCJ)

Faith leaders and others are sometimes called upon to present prayer at civic occasions including club meetings, legislative sessions, graduations, political rallies, testimonial dinners and community forums. Prayer in such secular settings can and should bind a group together in a common concern. However, it can become unintentionally divisive when forms or language exclude persons from faith traditions different than that of the speaker.

Individuals who lead the general community in prayer have the responsibility to be clear about the public nature of the occasion and respectful of the composition of the audience. Prayer on behalf of the entire community should be easily shared by listeners from different faiths and traditions.

Inclusive Public Prayer is non-sectarian, general and carefully planned to avoid embarrassments and misunderstandings. On civic occasions, it is authentic prayer that also enables people to recognize the pluralism of American society.

When asking a person to offer a prayer on a civic occasion, it is important to explain clearly the need for general and inclusive prayer. Some persons are reluctant to offer Inclusive Public Prayer. This position should be respected, and the individual should be given the option of gracefully declining the invitation.

INCLUSIVE PUBLIC PRAYER:

- Seeks the highest common denominator without compromise of conscience.
- Calls upon God on behalf of the particular public gathered; avoids individual petitions.
- Uses forms and vocabulary that allow persons of different faiths to give assent to what is said.
- Uses universal, inclusive terms for deity rather than particular proper names for divine manifestations. Some opening invocations are "Almighty God," "Our Maker," "Source of all Being," "Creator God" or "Creator and Sustainer." Possible closing words are "Hear our Prayer," "May Goodness Flourish," or simply, "Amen."
- Uses the language most widely understood by the audience, unless purpose of the event is to express ethnic/cultural diversity in which case multiple languages can be effective.
- Considers other creative alternatives, such as a moment of silence.

- Remains faithful to the purposes of acknowledging divine presence, giving thanks and seeking blessing, and is not used as an opportunity to preach, argue or testify.

Sensitivity to the public's diversity and a commitment to inclusiveness should also apply to the content of meditations or addresses on civic occasions and to the selection and performance of music.

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