

Formal Prayer and Religious Readings: Guidelines on use at Purdue Extension Sponsored Events

Purdue University Extension is an organization that values all of its employees, volunteers and clientele. We appreciate the diversity that is in each one of us and are striving to become a diverse, inclusive, and pluralistic organization. We are an organization that has many wonderful traditions and we are establishing practices that we hope become traditions for future generations of employees, volunteers and clients. In order to continue on our path of diversity and inclusiveness there are some practices that we as an organization are revisiting. Formal prayer is one of them.

As an organization, we are working diligently to be inclusive and respectful of all people because it is the right thing to do, not just so we comply with state, federal, and Civil Rights laws. As Purdue Extension employees are aware, our programs are conducted and delivered to people regardless of race, sex, class, religious belief, sexual orientation, ethnicity, gender identity and expression, age, veteran status, or ability. We strive to conduct our programs, events, and ceremonies in ways that are welcoming to all people. It is with this in mind that we as an organization are asking that all Purdue Extension sponsored events refrain from using formal prayers or religious readings to be a part of our meetings, fundraisers, camp sessions including meals, and/or award ceremonies.

We recognize that having an “invocation” or “grace” at the aforementioned events is a long-standing tradition. However, we must recognize that not all of our employees, partners, and clients subscribe to the same belief systems and/or practices. This movement away from religiously based formal prayers may be difficult for some employees and volunteers to accept and that is understandable. While it is understandable, we as an organization must take a stand and request that alternatives to formal prayers be used at events where we may have traditionally said, “grace” or invoked the name of “God” and/or “Jesus.” Recognizing that this transition may be difficult for some the following information includes some frequently asked questions followed by some suggested alternatives that Purdue Extension colleagues have found effective.

Frequently Asked Questions:

1. When is an invocation appropriate?

Invocations are often conducted as a beginning point of important events such as formal dinners, award ceremonies, and fundraisers. The organization is not saying that invocations cannot be used. However, the person doing the invocation must ensure that it is inclusive of all people. There are some sample invocations at the end of this document.

2. Who made the decision that we cannot say “grace” before meals?

No one individual person made a decision to “ban” grace or prayer. What we as an organization are advocating is allowing individuals to say thanks in their own way on an individual basis. What the organization is asking is that people who coordinate or lead events not support or encourage one method of thanks to be the basis of opening events, ceremonies, or meals.

3. By forcing secular options on employees and volunteers, isn’t Purdue Extension endorsing and practicing reverse discrimination?

Requesting that non faith-based openings be used is not discrimination because the organization is not stating that individuals cannot pray before meals at programs, ceremonies, camps, etc. What we are saying is that we as an

organization cannot impose specific faith-based prayers or statements on everyone participating in a program. That is what we are doing when specific faith-based prayers or statements are used to begin meals, programs, etc.

4. Why should we change our traditions when no one in our county has complained?

It does not matter if there have not been any complaints regarding specific faith-based prayers, songs, or statements at camps or other Extension programs in your county. As an organization, we want to be proactive and not reactive. Additionally, we are funded by federal, state, and local funds and we cannot legally support or promote specific individual faith-based practices.

5. Everyone who comes to our camps, fundraisers, award ceremonies, training programs, meetings, etc. is Christian, so why can't we say "Grace" or use "God" or "Jesus" in saying thanks?

Everyone being Christian is not relevant to the policy of not using specific faith based prayers or statements. Sharing one Christian faith may be an assumption. However, we are not a private faith-based organization, rather, we are a public organization that cannot support or promote any one specific faith or belief system. "Grace" and other religious statements are parts of specific faith based practices and therefore can be viewed as promoting one specific religious belief.

6. Why is Administration trying to dictate our beliefs?

Purdue Cooperative Extension Service is not attempting to dictate any individual's beliefs. As an organization, we are trying do to address diversity and inclusivity in addition to adherence to federal, state, and local Civil Rights Laws in a proactive manner instead of reactive manner.

7. Why doesn't the majority rule apply to the type of opening we do at our events?

Although the majority of participants in our programs may be of a one specific faith and not opposed to saying "Grace" or invoking the name of "Jesus" or "God," every person must be considered and simply telling a child or even an adult that she/he can just opt out is not an acceptable response. Additionally, a majority vote does not mean it is all right to break the law. People often do not feel comfortable being the only person not doing something; this may be especially difficult for youth.

"The commands of the First Amendment cannot be evaded by delegating the decision to popular vote. The First Amendment simply does not permit government to sponsor "a religious exercise even with the consent of the majority of those affected" and "has never meant that a majority could use the machinery of the State to practice its beliefs". Abington School Dist. v. Schempp, 374 U.S. 203, 225-226 (1963).

(<http://archive.aclu.org/congress/prayer.html>)

8. How is saying "Grace" or mentioning "God" or "Jesus" discrimination or forcing religious beliefs on others?

Saying "Grace" and using "God" and or "Jesus" is generally associated with Judeo-Christian beliefs and is grounded in religion. When everyone is asked, "To bow their heads" and listen to someone recite a formal prayer or make a statement that invokes the name of "God," it leaves out the many other religious practices of other faiths.

9. Why is the prayer issue such a big deal when people who do not say, "Grace" or who are not Christian do not have to participate if they do not want to?

Simply stating that you do not have to participate is not sufficient, as people may still feel pressured into participating in the secular activity. People, especially children, may not feel comfortable being the only person to stand out and not participate.

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.

Alternatives to opening prayers, invocations, vespers, etc.

The following are some examples of different types of openings and ways of giving thanks in a large group setting.

- Offer a non-religious inspirational reading or poem that ties to the goals and mission of the event followed by a moment of silence
- Thank everyone for their contributions to the organization and ask for a moment of silence
- The following are examples of invocations that have been used at PURDUE or OSU events including commencement and convocations. They can be reworded to reflect the specific community event, fundraiser, etc.

Examples:

1.

Let us pause. We gather here this afternoon as colleagues, partners and friends in celebration of our accomplishments in the past and in recognition of our fundamental belief that learning put to use, leads to a healthier life for the individual, family and community.

With this in mind we express our thanks for this opportunity to gather together, recognizing our diversity in beliefs and honoring our unity in gratitude. We seek direction from the mission of the university and those given the public trust, and from educators – so that we may use our knowledge, reason and skills to inspire others in making a difference in our communities, state, nation and world.

For the opportunities that have been nourished in the community of this institution, for the gift of life, for the food that has been prepared for us, we are thankful.

Please enjoy the fellowship and meal.

2.

For a quiet moment, I invite you to express gratitude, for goals met, honors, and the gift of intellect, mentors, the support of family and friends, and a society that encourages and funds education.

Continuing, reflect with gratitude and ask for blessings, on the mission of the university and those given the public trust, the graduates, that they may use their knowledge, reason and skills to strive for peace, understanding and the common good.

Please end this reflection according to your own tradition.

3.

As we gather, recognizing our diversity in beliefs, values, faith traditions, but honoring our unity in gratitude, I invite you to reflect quietly on all that is yet to be while expressing thanks for: the gift of intellect, goals met, the support of family and friends, mentors, and a society that encourages and funds education.

Continuing to reflect with gratitude, ask for blessing on the mission of this university and for those given the public trust. As we journey forth filled with knowledge and dreams let us continue to learn from our diversity, filled with compassion, to honor the peaceful, nurture the fragile, empower the impoverished, sensing wonder in the ordinary.

May the gratitude that we experience on this day of new beginnings be the focus for all that is to come.

4.

Sisters and Brothers, we gather on this grand day, understanding that we come from different places, hold different values, and cherish different beliefs. Yet, today we are united in gratitude.

In a world where many cannot study, we are thankful for the achievements, degrees, and honors that we celebrate today.

In a world where many have no future, we are thankful for the dreams, hopes, and plans that have been nourished in the community of this institution.

In a world where many have no community, we are thankful for the support of mentors, teachers, family, and friends.

As we go on from this grand day, on different paths, to different experiences, and different destinies, may our gratitude unite us in the desire of using all that we are and all that we have for the common good so that reasons to be thankful will fill every life.

May our gratitude on this grand day grow into peace for each, and freedom to live, work, and serve throughout all our days.

Examples of inclusive reflections when a meal is served

1.

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.

2.

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.

Mealtimes at Camp:

- Offer a non-religious inspirational reading or poem
- Ask each person to take a moment to reflect on the day
- Ask a camper to offer a thought or words of wisdom

Some examples of non-religious reflective readings are:

My Prayer....

That I will have the strength to carry on,
the patience to try again when things go wrong,
the ability to see beauty where others see none.
That I will have the hope of a new dream
waiting to be dreamed, the chance to reach out
and the wisdom to look forward to tomorrow.
Donna Wayland

“Let us remember that, as much has been given us, much will be expected from us, and that true homage comes from the heart as well as from the lips, and shows itself in deeds”.

Theodore Roosevelt

“...Help us make the most of this life we are living. As we are about to partake of this bountiful meal, let us not forget the needy and the hunger they feel. Help us to show compassion in all that we do, and for all our many blessings we say thank you.”

Helen Latham

This list was developed to give you some ideas, please know that any inspirational or motivational reading you find that fits your event's needs will be acceptable, as long as it is inclusive.