

Religion Today
August 29-September 4, 2004
It's O.K. to Pray in Your School
Paul V.M. Flesher

The arrival of the school year provides a good moment to revisit that continually confused and confusing issue, prayer in schools. There is a great deal of misinformation and misunderstanding of what kind of prayer is permitted in United States public schools. Let's review what is and what is not allowed with regard to prayer in public schools.

What kind of prayer is allowed in a public school?

Everyone and anyone who goes to a school may pray there. "Everyone," that means students, teachers, staff and administrators, may offer a private prayer to the divine at anytime they choose. "Anyone," that means any person of any religious faith, be they Methodist, Baptist, Catholic, or Mormon, or even Native American, Jewish, Moslem, Hindu, or Wiccan. Thus praying in the schools is permitted to everyone there, as long as it is private and personal, and does not interrupt legitimate school activities.

It is also O.K. for students of like beliefs to join together to pray, whether informally ("let's meet at the west door before the bell") or more formally in a religious club of voluntary membership. This club may meet on school property, such as in a classroom, at times when clubs are usually allowed to meet. The only exception to this is if the school has banned clubs altogether. The rule of thumb is that religious clubs must be treated the same as other clubs.

Similarly, it is permitted for teachers, staff, and even administrators to join together voluntarily to pray. Again, this may occur in formal or informal settings.

What kind of prayer is not allowed in a public school?

It is not O.K. to pray in a school in ways that would coerce anyone of a different belief to join in. Thus teachers, principals and others in a position of authority should not use that position to persuade, require, or intimidate students or others under their supervision to take part in prayer that they otherwise would not. Schools are inherently hierarchical and those who are higher in the hierarchy should do nothing that would seem to make those below them pray.

Furthermore, prayer should not be conducted in such a way to exclude or stigmatize those who do not participate. Finally, participation in prayer should not be used as a basis to reward or promote those who take part or to withhold such rewards from people who do not.

These rules, both positive and negative, are designed to ensure every individual's freedom to believe and worship as they choose, and to prevent the power of the state from interfering with that right. Those who do not follow such rules may be exercising what they see as their religious freedoms, but they will be doing it at the expense of the religious freedoms of others.