

Jesus' words: *"My house will be called a house of prayer for all peoples."*

(Mark 11:17)

## **Guiding Principles for consideration of the display of flags in places of worship**

1. Our highest allegiance is to following Jesus Christ.
2. The mission of the church, per the BCP, is to restore all people to unity with God and one another in Christ Jesus. These two allegiances must guide our approach to mistakes and differences churches may exhibit, and to our relationships to one another. Love is the answer. Deepening relationships with one another is the Jesus priority.
2. None of us believes that honoring the American flag must involve its inappropriate worship.
3. None of us believes that our country is perfect and without flaws.
4. None of us should assume negative intent on the part of others, whom we are called to love as neighbors, or even as enemies, as one of the two great commandments of Jesus.
5. People of good faith in so far as it in us is possible, take thought for what is ennobling to all, and seek peace with all. -from the 12<sup>th</sup> chapter of the Epistle to the Romans

## **Theological Considerations-**

1. In a place of worship, the cross takes highest precedence, but in the Flag Code of the United States, there is no provision for it taking secondary importance. Are we theologically united enough to display our flags, or the flags of other nations, as deserving our respect, and representing the peoples of the earth, but as of lesser importance than our identity as children of God?
2. The display of the Christian flag began in the early twentieth century about the same time that the display of the American flag became more common. As it re-displays the cross, it is often in a sense superfluous, but was sometimes to balance the display of the American flag. At the time that the American flag appeared initially in many churches, it was a symbol of a new unity following the Civil War, only found during World War I! During World War II, singing the last stanza of My Country Tis of Thee became popular in many congregations following the doxology at the presentation of offerings. One does not typically find national flags in churches overseas. Franklin Roosevelt issued a statement requesting churches to have the flag placed in churches as we entered WWII. The cross on the Christian flag is one inch taller than the eagle on the American flag.
3. As a place of public worship, our sanctuary is a public space, and yet retains some rights of non-public spaces. Do we endorse a separation of faith from the public sphere? Some may wish to, but Jesus was unambiguous on this point. Separation of church and state is a political, not a defensible theological,

position. When a Christian holds office, they are still a Christian. This for some is a reason to include the American flag in a place of worship, but not in the place of first importance.

4. From a Presbyterian church in Iowa:

In what way does the flag function to contribute to the worship of the Triune God?

An example prompting discussion was the experience of an active and faithful member who is a citizen of another country. This person shared what it was like to be so often reminded of her status as an alien in this country. Every day she had to carry documentation. The Christian faith was vital because it reminded her that she is a child of God and she belongs. Yet what greeted her in the chancel at worship was an American flag – suggesting that in fact she was a stranger and alien even in God’s house.

5. How can we communicate concern and respect for the people of other nations in our worship displays, as we do in our prayers? In the words of Baptist theologian J. Brent Walker, “It is also fitting to display the American flag along with flags from other countries. The symbolism would signify unity with Christians throughout the world.”

6. The idolatrous concept of equivalence is tempting, that we respect both God and country by display of the American flag in a place of worship. There is no historical Christian theological justification for this position in any church tradition. Following Christ comes first.

7. By excluding the flag from the sanctuary we may unintentionally communicate that it is part of an unholy world, or excluded from a place of holiness, or God’s concern, or that faith is private and has nothing to do with our public, national, and political lives.

### **Principles for Respectful Dialogue**

1. “Try on” the perspective of each speaker, and look at them with love. Use positive imagination. Prayer helps. This helps us find the space for holy listening.

2. We will each speak about how we feel, and how things affect us. When we are ready to, we may speak about how we think about flags in sanctuaries. This is sometimes called “using I-statements.”

3. We will not debate, speak for others, or make statements about others or characterize them in any negative or critical way. Shame, blame, and attack are not Christian methods.

4. Anyone speaking must use a microphone, and a moderator will try to help to ensure alternating points of view are offered in turn. Only one person speaks at a time.

5. Each person will have a time specified to share, and we won’t share a second time during each sharing until all have had a chance to share. If it’s a large crowd, 1 minute will be the length of each sharing, so chose your words carefully.

6. Our process monitor may request that we take a time out for silent prayer.

7. When appropriate, someone may wish to restate what they heard from another to make sure they heard correctly. When done well, this is validating, rather than annoying or combative.

The Flag Code (United States Statutes at Large, Seventy-seventh Congress, Second Session 1942, Volume 56 — Part I, Public Laws) states in Section 3 (k): "When displayed from a staff in a church or public auditorium, the [American] flag should occupy the position of honor and be placed at the clergyman's or speaker's right as he faces the congregation or audience. Any other flag so displayed in the chancel or on the platform should be placed to the clergyman's or speaker's left as he faces the congregation or audience. But when the flag is displayed from a staff in a church or public auditorium elsewhere than in the chancel or on the platform, it shall be placed in the position of honor at the right of the congregation or audience as they face the chancel or platform. Any other flag so displayed should be placed on the left of the congregation or audience as they face the chancel or platform."

The above is commonly violated but often without intention or deliberation or consensus. Can we arrive at a win-win decision based on shared theological principles and shared faith that honors every person?

**From the Catholic Church**, a U.S. bishops' Committee on the Liturgy suggested on Sept. 26, 2001, that American flags displayed in Catholic churches should be outside the sanctuary. But they added that the ultimate decision on placement of flags rests with the local bishop, or, if he chooses, the pastors.

### Sensible Lutheran help:

Flags are not a required element in a Christian worship space and the decision about whether or not to place them in a worship space is a local decision. While it is a local decision we offer the following issues and recommendations for congregations to consider when discerning this question.

The American flag is a powerful symbol of this nation. It carries enormous emotional meaning, especially for veterans and for families that have sacrificed loved ones in wars and armed conflicts under that symbol. For others, the flag carries great political significance as a symbol of what they consider amiss with our nation. Anyone who doubts the power of the flag as a symbol might consider the public scandal caused in Chicago when a student artist at the internationally known Art Institute of Chicago chose to display the American flag on the floor of an art gallery. Public demonstrations followed the opening of the exhibit. The use and display of the flag remains a sensitive issue.

Some Christian churches are identified with nations or states (the Church of England is Anglican; the Church of Norway, Lutheran; the Church of Sweden, Lutheran; and so forth.). Sometimes these churches display flags as a part of their national identification. In the United States, of course, we have no state church. Yet here, too, many Christian congregations have traditionally included an American flag among the items used to furnish their worship space or displayed elsewhere in their building. In many congregations, it has been customary for the American flag to stand to one side of the altar and the often -called Christian flag to stand on the other.

The symbols that are central for Christians focus on what is distinctive in Christian identity: being baptized into Christ, being formed by the Word, being fed at Christ's table. Such symbols draw us to Christ and enrich our worship as a community and as individuals. The distinction that can be made between the powerful symbolism of the flag and the powerful Christian symbols is that the Christian symbols are transcultural; they are not national symbols. Christians from around the globe can be drawn to Christ in the presence of such symbols. As Saint Paul says: "For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (Galatians 3:27-28). The most appropriate visual symbols displayed in worship spaces convey this unity in Christ.

As Christians, however, we live as both baptized people of God and citizens of a nation. Living as both members of the Church and citizens of a country has its challenges. Martin Luther in his commentary on the first commandment noted that, "We are to fear, love, and trust God above all things.<sup>2</sup>" Honoring the flag of our country certainly has its place, yet in worship, we are focused on the eternal presence of Christ that extends beyond tribe and nation. Sometimes "a sense of patriotism leads to the desire to display and honor flags in public spaces" (Principles for Worship, S-16G). Yet Principles for Worship notes that the flag in a worship space can be a source of conflict: Flags signal national loyalties and may become divisive, implying that a particular national identity is synonymous with the Christian way.

There are ways to honorably display a flag in the church building while still respecting the primary worship space and its Christian symbols. A responsible alternative to putting the flag in the worship space would be to display it prominently in another suitable place. Placing flags in the fellowship or community hall, the gymnasium, or other large meeting room used by civic groups such as scouting organizations or for civic functions such as voting, allows the flag to carry out its symbolic function for the nation without competing with the central symbols of the Christian faith. Congregations that have war memorial chapels, plaques, or books of remembrance and the like and which desire to display the American flag might want to consider placing the flag near those places in their building rather than in the worship space.