

Proposals for Possible Discernment about the Placement of the American Flag

The group that gathers to discern using the gospel abundance discernment method will decide which options, in which order, they wish to discern about. Here are the parameters that will guide our discernment. The proposals below are all possibilities that the vestry and rector can embrace with integrity. Other suggestions don't meet that need fully, or solve a different question, such as installing display flags outside visible from the street. Our discussion will incorporate the principles of respectful dialogue, and the guiding principles for consideration, and the theological considerations, from our resource handout about flag placement in church facilities, included as a separate attachment.

The Rector and vestry have ruled out the permanent absence of the American flag from the sanctuary. It is hurtful to many members, and it may send wrong messages. Likewise, we cannot with integrity embrace its permanent residence in a place reserved and defined by the most prominent Christian symbols, the holy table, the cross with Jesus upon it, and the font. Fonts now normatively occupy prominent placement at the front of a sanctuary near the holy table, rather than the earlier, medieval pattern of the rear of the church, and baptismal renewal is common theological emphasis in modern churches. Nor, out of respect, will we violate the stipulation of the US Flag Code that the American flag be "not in a corner," although we do not feel obligated to follow all the details of the flag code if our faith and theology respectfully suggest a different course.

Enough parishioners, including many former service members, have concerns about the flags' placement behind the altar rail, that we cannot contemplate options that require its placement there during regular Sunday worship. However, we welcome its occasional placement in the chancel area behind the rail at suitable ceremonies such as a Memorial Service for a veteran, the Fourth of July, or a Boy Scout color guard ceremony.

We value the diversity of our parishioners, and their persons, and will not adopt as a decision any proposal with any presumption or subtext of disrespect for those who disagree. As both Christians and Americans, we do not accept the intolerant incivility behind a position that says of diverse views that "it is a shame that some people see it that way." Diversity, struggles for justice and freedom and respect, and our ability to disagree freely and respectfully are God-given gifts both of our nation, and are painfully important aspects of Christian faith, and of our parish, given past hurts.

Finally, we must reckon with the fact that the way we currently use our sanctuary for worship has created a more cluttered and busy front, somewhat at odds with its original design. This would make placement of the flag on the edge of the space where the band performs, for instance, problematic both for the respect due the flag, and for the band; as the very prominent elevated pulpit on the far left side does for one of the most typical placements of an American flag in a sanctuary, to the right of all speakers, out of the way of altars, crosses, and fonts, forward of the chancel or raised area, etc. but not in a corner.

We believe that to display the American flag, we must also signal two things:

1) our membership as Jesus followers in a fellowship that is global, and concerned for the wellbeing of the peoples of all cultures and nations, through some appropriate banner display about God's love for the whole world.

2) our identity in this place as the congregation of St Peter's with our own call and vision as Jesus followers. We need a beautiful and moving processional parish banner for display similar to the positive practice of many Episcopal parishes.

This leaves us with several options for the group to choose from to discern about:

Option A The American flag and the Episcopal flag would be in the sanctuary in one of several designated, locations at all times, meaning to show respect and self-restraint both for those who wish it present, and those who prefer its absence.

Option B The flag would be displayed in an appropriate and respectful location in the sanctuary for a significant portion of the year, from Memorial Day weekend through Veterans Day weekend, and displayed proudly in the window of our parish hall the rest of the year. This normalizes the choice of its display in both locations for positive reasons, and shows respect for those with reservations or objections to its presence in the sanctuary, as well as those who ardently desire its display in our sanctuary.

Option C The flag would be displayed in an appropriate and respectful location in the sanctuary on particular weekends associated with national holidays, in particular, Martin Luther King Day, President's Day, Memorial Day, July 4th, Labor Day, and Veteran's Day.

Option D Removal of the pulpit and elevated box around the organ and replacement with a reading-preaching lectern of smaller proportions one step up, placed in front of the altar rail would improve the space for the choir in the area near the piano, allow better use of the piano, and placement of the American flag on the left side of the sanctuary in front of the altar rail when desired.

Option E Placement of the American flag in two locations that do not require much modification of the space, by the side door on its right, balanced by the Episcopal flag on the other side of the door, and placement between the two side doors in the back, along with the Arizona flag on one side, and the Episcopal flag and a Holy Spirit dove symbol on the other side.