

To Pray Or Not To Pray

by Elizabeth Campbell, Texas PTA Inclusiveness Chair

In response to the title of this article, you might think: What? When? Where? And “Of course, I can if I want to.”

Perhaps you have attended a PTA meeting or other function with a formal agenda or program. And perhaps the meeting/program leader -- which could be you -- started the event by offering a brief prayer or asking someone else to say a prayer.

Sound familiar? Sound plausible? Sound inappropriate?

It is certainly true that some organizations and some events routinely incorporate prayer or words of inspiration into most, if not all, of their sponsored events. Here is the challenge: Not all participants pray. Plain and simple.

The issue is not one of separation of church and state. The Texas PTA is neither. But the issue can become complicated, especially if public school premises are used for PTA meetings and teachers are present. However, this article is not intended to be an analysis of legal issues nor is this author expressing a legal opinion -- one way or the other.

The issue I would like to address is one of inclusiveness -- and the tension created by the exercise of practices which may appear to promote or embrace certain religions and, in fact, exclude or alienate people who do not embrace those religions.

The Texas PTA values diversity and inclusiveness:

Diversity: We acknowledge the potential of everyone without regard to at least the following characteristics: age, culture, economic status, educational background, ethnicity, gender, geographic location, legal status, marital status, mental ability, national origin, organizational position, parental status, physical ability, political philosophy, race, religion, sexual orientation, and work experience.

Respect: We value the individual contributions of members, employ-

ees, volunteers and partners as we work collaboratively to achieve our association’s goals.

Thus, in order for our members to work collaboratively and to respect each other -- including those who have different backgrounds and perspectives--we must be mindful of the unintended consequences of seemingly harmless gestures.

Another area of interest from a context perspective is the fact that we are trying to grow Texas PTA as an organization. In order for us to expand our membership, we likewise must be mindful of practices that might cause existing members to drop out or discourage new members from getting involved.

But, sometimes, it is not easy to embrace differences -- that is, people who come from different backgrounds or have different beliefs than the “majority.”

One way to cope with the tension that can be created by these differ-

ences is to start with our Mission. Of course, we must remain true to the Mission of our Texas PTA, which is to make every child’s potential a reality by engaging and empowering families and communities to advocate for all children.

If someone has an objective that is inconsistent with our Mission, that objective should not be pursued.

Thus, leaders within our PTA organization should start with carrying out our Mission and move from there to affirmatively make every effort to include people and their differences (except, as I said, as to the Mission itself). Our members, likewise, should be committed to the Mission and to embracing other members and leaders with differences.

The Praying Leader

What if, as a PTA leader, you feel comfortable starting a PTA meeting with a brief prayer? After all, that’s the way other meetings you attend start off, and the other PTA members do not seem to mind. And,



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you cannot imagine that praying is inconsistent with our Mission. However, how do you know that no one objects or feels excluded? He or she may simply be embarrassed about questioning your approach to organizing the meeting. And, how are you demonstrating the ability and desire to advocate for all children if you appear to embrace some (those who pray) and exclude others (those who do not).

Now, consider this perspective. You are an active member of your Local PTA, and you want to stay involved. However, your Local PTA president starts each meeting, program, event and school visit with a few words of prayer. You are not accustomed to praying in private, much less having your volunteer membership organization incorporate prayer into every activity. "Why can't we just go about the business of PTA?" you wonder. You feel isolated and uncomfortable. You are too afraid to speak up for fear of having your beliefs rejected or ridiculed.

On-Going Legal Challenges Raise Awareness

For many years, there have been highly publicized challenges to

expression of religion in "public" contexts.

For example, the website for the Bellingham Herald reported on January 12, 2011, that Michael Newdow, a California attorney who is an acknowledged atheist, is bringing several U.S. Supreme Court challenges to the reference to "God" by the federal government. His separation of church and state challenges include: (1) objecting to "In God We Trust" as the national motto, especially because it appears on our U.S. currency; (2) objecting to the phrase "So help me God" in the presidential oath of office; and (3) objecting to the phrase "under God" in the Pledge of Allegiance.

In addition, there are many lower court challenges to prayer or reference to religion in public school districts, and the dispute can become rather contentious.

Choose Option "I" for Inclusiveness

Maybe you are cautiously reading this article and not feeling so good. No worries. Moving toward inclusiveness is a journey with a few bumps to be expected along the way.

The good news is you are still reading, which means that you are interested in finding a solution.

As Inclusiveness Chair, my practical recommendation to PTA leaders (again, not intended as legal advice) is to follow our committee agenda template for meetings -- which does not include an agenda item for prayer. The Texas PTA Handbook, page 219, Please visit the Texas PTA website for more information.

For other events and programs, limit the agenda or program to the business elements of the event.

As the richness of society grows, our children will benefit by having our members focus on ways to be more inclusive in our PTA efforts. Mistakes will occur along this journey. A sincere "I am sorry" is an appropriate response, and then we resume our journey.