



Connections



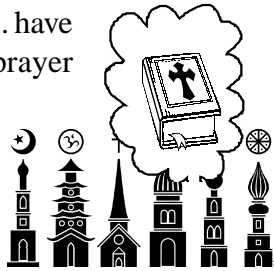
A monthly letter calling the church to faithful new life


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What kind of school prayer?

Terrorist attacks on the U.S. have revived the issue of school prayer and the question of whether the majority should impose its practices on minorities. A recent incident in Texas has renewed Texans' concerns about that subject, and the event has important implications for the entire U.S. Here's how the October 20 issue of the *Austin American-Statesman* described the incident.



 "The prayer was sincere, direct, and—offered in the gymnasium during second period at Palestine [Texas] Middle School—about as out of bounds as it could be. 'We recognize, Lord, that all authority comes from you,' said the Rev. Roy Duncan as students stood in the bleachers at an event Thursday featuring Gov. Rick Perry. At the end of the prayer, offered 'in Jesus' name,' Perry, like many of the students, responded with 'Amen.'"

"It was the kind of organized prayer banned in public schools since a U.S. Supreme Court ruling in 1963. And, according to Perry, it's exactly what Texans need and want more of. ... Perry, a member of Austin's Tarrytown United Methodist Church, acknowledges there is a substantial legal hurdle involved in restoring open prayer in public school. But he wants it done. ..."



"Is Perry ready to make it a campaign issue? 'Sure. Absolutely. I mean who is going to be against that?' he said. ..."

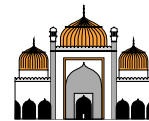
I am, for one. As one of his fellow Texans and fellow United Methodists, I'm appalled. I hope a lot of other Christians are, too.

The landscape has changed

We used to take public Christian practices for granted, but we can't do that now. Christians still far outnumber followers of other religions in the U.S., but followers of other religions are much more numerous here now than they were a few decades ago, and more widely distributed. We're now in much closer contact with the rest of the world than we used to be, too. We're having to think globally, and at that level, Christians aren't the majority as we sometimes assume they are. These changes bring the need to reconsider whether following Christian practices at public events and in nonreligious institutions is wise and loving.



We're more diverse than we used to be

 Recent world events have made us especially aware of Islam and its followers. The people who measure such things disagree about the number of Muslims currently living in the U.S. Estimates vary from 8 million to 3 million, but whatever the exact number may be, most surveys agree that it has increased since 1963 changes in our immigration laws. It's still increasing, too, and immigration isn't the only reason. According to one recent survey, more than 1200 mosques are in the U.S., and nearly a third of their regular attenders are converts.



Followers of other religions have become more numerous here, too, and many of them are U.S. citizens. Many are native-born or even multi-generation U.S. citizens. And religious diversity isn't only in a few parts of the U.S. as it once was. The *Dallas Morning News* reports that 50,000 Muslims now live in the Dallas-Fort Worth area.

Old questions have new urgency

Reading a book about world religions lately, I noticed how its description of Christianity differed from many Christians' actual practice. I wondered (again!), how faithful are we to what Jesus modeled and taught? And is Jesus really the only route to God? How much should we cooperate with non-Christian groups? Is the Bible more authoritative than other religions' scriptures? Such questions need our fresh attention. More about some of them in next month's *Connections*.

“ ‘From my personal perspective,’ ” the newspaper article continues, still quoting Perry, “ ‘I think that a prayer life and a country that respects a higher being, our God, is a stronger country. I believe that, and I think the vast majority of the people in Texas and in this country believe that,’ he said. ... ‘I happen to think we all pray to the same God,’ said Perry. ‘I’ll let the theologians split the hairs and do all those kinds of things. And how we pray in public, those that would find that to be offensive, I would ask them to be tolerant.’ ”



Praying and respecting God are important

I agree with some of Governor Perry’s statements, of course. Like him, I believe that praying and respecting a “higher being” are important. And all the evidence I’ve seen says that the vast majority of the people in the U.S. believe those are important. I expect, too, that when most of a country’s citizens believe that, the country is stronger and more likely to discover God’s will and do it.



I’m inclined to believe, too, that there’s a sense in which all the people who pray are praying to the same God. They don’t all attribute the same characteristics to God, and they don’t all knowingly address their prayers to the same God. I strongly suspect, however, that when they pray they’re all responding in some way to the one and only God that

exists, or at least they’re reaching for that God even if they aren’t aware what they’re reaching for.

Christians don’t own God

Perry’s use of the phrase “our God,” however, bothers me a lot. Christians say, “Our Father,” when we pray the Lord’s Prayer, and I understand that to be a way of acknowledging that we’re addressing God as a community rather than as separate individuals. When a person who holds a secular office and is making a public appearance in his official role uses the phrase “our God,” however, as Perry did, it gives me the impression that he’s referring only to himself and his fellow Christians.



It sounds as if he’s claiming that Christians have a monopoly on the real God, that we possess God and control access to God, or at least that we’re the only ones who know God and God’s true character. That implication strikes me as not only inexcusably arrogant but also completely unrealistic.

No person or rule can prevent prayer

Many Christians are angry about the 1963 ruling, they say, because it forbids students from praying in school. But it doesn’t. Although Christians believe that praying out loud in a group has benefits, it’s not essential. It’s not the only way to pray. Praying can easily be silent and invisible, and a lot of praying happens si-



Spiritual Family Trees

by Barbara Wendland and Larry W. Easterling

For centuries Christians have shared their personal faith stories, to see what God has been doing in their lives and what God may be calling them to do next. For years, genealogists, genetic counselors, and family therapists have used diagrams called genograms, for picturing family history. In our new book, published by the Alban Institute, Larry Easterling and I bring these strands together. We show how to use genograms in church groups to promote spiritual growth, build community, and increase communication.

Larry is a United Methodist clergyman with extensive experience and training in counseling and in family systems. After several years as a teaching chaplain, he is now Vice President of Mission and Spiritual Care for a Chicago-area hospital system. You may remember my account of sharing spiritual family trees in the Sunday School class he and I were in, in the July and August 2000 *Connections*. In our book we relate personal stories of how other lay people and pastors have used spiritual family trees and found them to be a powerful tool for building community and promoting spiritual growth. We also give many suggestions of ways to lead groups in this exciting process.

To get our book, send me your check for \$12 per copy, order from the Alban Institute (www.alban.org or 1-800-486-1318, ext. 244), or order through your favorite bookstore.



Whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.
—Matthew 6:6



lently and invisibly. In fact, the Bible tells us about Jesus specifically recommending prayer that is done privately rather than where it is seen or heard by others.

That means that no one can keep anyone else from praying, and no rule can keep anyone

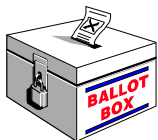
from praying. Unconsciousness is probably the only thing that can keep someone from praying, and maybe even unconsciousness won't do it. The claim, therefore, that so many Christians are making, that children are not allowed to pray in school, is not only false but also senseless.

All that the Supreme Court ruling prevents is praying out loud as part of an official school activity. It thus prevents imposing one set of beliefs or one way of expressing them—even if they're the majority's beliefs or the majority's way—on people who don't hold those beliefs or accept that form of expression. I find that kind of prevention essential, and I'm dismayed that Governor Perry doesn't.



How much tolerance is too much?

Perry merely says, however, that people who hold minority views must be tolerant, meaning they must simply put up with whatever the majority chooses to do. I recognize that in a democratic state, nation, or other institution, the majority view must prevail when official decisions are made. But majority rule doesn't need to mean disregard for minority views.



It doesn't mean letting the majority overpower minorities by forcing them to be part of what the majority wants, in matters like religion. That's why in the U.S. we've recognized the importance of keeping religious beliefs and practices out of the control of the government.



When Governor Perry asks for tolerance, he apparently is asking only the minorities to be tolerant. Especially if the majority is Christian, however, as it still is in the U.S. despite the increase of other religions in recent decades, I believe the majority needs to exercise some tolerance too.

Does love impose Christian practices?

The commandments ... are summed up in this word, "Love your neighbor as yourself."
—Romans 13:9

Doesn't the most basic Christian teaching demand that we consider other people's feelings, rather than just our own? It seems to me that Jesus's command, "Love your neighbor

as yourself," means that we shouldn't just do what we prefer, and impose it on others, if they experience it as hurtful. If we Christians avoided insisting that Christian religious practices be used in official gatherings that include non-Christians, that might be our most convincing way to show Christian love and thus the value of Christianity, to non-Christians.

Obeying God, or opposing God?

Evidently Governor Perry knowingly and deliberately violated the Supreme Court ruling, by helping a Christian prayer to be part of a public-school program. If I felt that he was obeying God by disobeying sinful human authority, I'd consider his ac-

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I'm a United Methodist lay woman, and neither a church employee nor a clergyman's wife. *Connections* is a one-person ministry that I do on my own initiative, speaking only for myself. Some readers make voluntary financial contributions, but I pay most of the cost myself. *Connections* goes to several thousand people in all 50 states, D.C., and Puerto Rico—laity and clergy in at least 12 church denominations and some nonchurchgoers. *Connections* is my effort to stimulate fresh thought and new insight about topics I believe our churches need to address.

Peter and the apostles answered, "We must obey God rather than any human authority. ..."
—Acts 5:29

tion admirable, but I'm afraid he's opposing God instead of obeying God.

Perry happens to be Republican, but the main Democratic candidate for

governor has now publicly said that he also opposes the present policy about school prayer, so this issue isn't a partisan one. It's not just a Texas issue, either. It's every U.S. citizen's issue, and it's a Christian issue. It's therefore an issue whose pros and cons we need to be discussing openly in our churches. It's also one that Christians need to be speaking up

about in the public arena. I hope we'll see that happening, not just in Texas but throughout the U.S.

Before this Texas school-prayer incident happened, I was planning for this month's *Connections* to be about some other questions related to Christians' interaction with followers of non-Christian religions. In fact, I had an issue of *Connections* about some of those other questions almost ready to mail this week, and another one close to ready for use next month. I'll still get to those, but writing what I've written here seemed more important for now. Thanks for considering it.

Barbara

What if your situation changed?

When we think about school prayer and other Christian practices that sometimes happen in public places, we often incorrectly assume that our founders were all Christians and that they intended this to be a Christian nation when it was founded and forever afterwards. Many of us also assume that because Christians are in the majority in the U.S., using Christian practices at public places and events is appropriate.



What if Christians were no longer the majority, at some future time? If you were still living then, would you be in favor of having Jewish, Islamic, Buddhist, Hindu, or Sikh prayers included in public-school events and other nonreligious public settings? What about letting quotes from those religions' scriptures, or scenes depicting events in their history, be displayed on public property? Do your answers to such questions match your views about including Christian displays in public places now?

What if your job or family situation took you to live in a country where Christians were in the minority? Would you want your children or grandchildren to attend a school in which they had to attend events that featured the majority religion's prayers or scriptures?

We need to give fresh thought to such questions, looking at many possible answers—not just those we've previously assumed were the only right answers—and to talk about them at church.

