



# The National Day of Prayer

## **Q: What is the National Day of Prayer?**

**A:** The very first day of prayer was declared in 1775 by the Continental Congress, which asked residents to pray for the fledgling nation. Later, George Washington offered the first official Presidential Proclamation urging the nation to partake in a "day of public thanksgiving and prayer."

In 1952, Congress formally created a National Day of Prayer so "the people of the United States may turn to God in prayer and meditation at churches, in groups, and as individuals." Its intent was to honor the U.S. history of public prayer by designating a day during which Americans could choose to come together and pray according to their own belief systems.

In 1988, President Reagan signed the 1952 resolution into law, amending the original resolution to name the first Thursday in May as the National Day of Prayer (Public Law 100-307). Every year since, the sitting U.S. President, regardless of party or denomination, issues an official proclamation.

In 1998, then-President Clinton stated:

*"I call upon every citizen of this great Nation to gather together on that day to pray, each in his or her own manner, for God's continued guidance and blessing."*

While in 2007, then-President Bush remarked that:

*"For two centuries, Americans have answered this call to prayer... We pray as congregations in churches and in synagogues, and mosques, and in temples. We welcome people of all faiths into the United States of America."*

Each of the 50 U.S. Governors issue similar proclamations. Many religious, interfaith and community groups hold events recognizing the day.

## **Q: I see a lot of events sponsored by the National Day of Prayer Task Force. What is this?**

**A:** In 1988, a Christian organization called *America's National Prayer Committee* established the National Day of Prayer Task Force. The National Day of Prayer (NDP) Task Force is a privately funded non-governmental, Christian organization dedicated to promoting the National Day of Prayer through prayer and events with a conservative Christian focus. It was not created and is not endorsed by the U.S. government.

Although the Task Force's events officially invite people of all faiths to pray, its mission and value statements are explicitly Christian. As its website states, "The efforts of the NDP Task Force are executed specifically in accordance with its Judeo-Christian beliefs... The National Day of Prayer Task Force's mission is to com-

municate with every individual the need for personal repentance and prayer, mobilizing the Christian community to intercede for America and its leadership.” Volunteers coordinating Task Force events must sign personal pledges attesting to their faith in Jesus Christ.

Each year, the Task Force sponsors thousands of events across the country. In 2008, it held over 40,000 events. In many areas across the country, the only National Day of Prayer event is one that is sponsored by the Task Force, leaving those who do not identify with Christian traditions feeling excluded from participation.

**Q: Are there non-Christian options for observing the National Day of Prayer?**

A: Of course! While the U.S. government officially recognizes the day, it does not mandate or provide any guidelines as to how it should be observed. Indeed, participation is entirely voluntary. In addition to the National Day of Prayer Task Force’s events, organizations from any tradition – or simply a group of interested individuals - can create a National Day of Prayer observance, and many non-Christian and interfaith groups do so.

In some places, a local Chamber of Commerce or service organization (e.g., Kiwanis) may organize a day of community service or another type of charitable event to celebrate the day. Individual temples, churches, mosques, langars or other houses of worship may hold their own events, or may come together for an interfaith event.

Because the National Day of Prayer is completely voluntary, anyone can organize an event, from a prayer breakfast to a food drive to a moment of silence.

**Q: What about separation of church and state?**

A: There are some who think the National Day of Prayer violates the Establishment Clause of the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, which states that “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion.” In late 2008, the Freedom From Religion Foundation filed a lawsuit challenging the federal law that designates the National Day of Prayer and the Presidential Proclamation, arguing that “Mandated Prayer Proclamations by the President exhorting each citizen to pray constitutes an unabashed endorsement of religion.”

In a lower court, the judge ruled that the National Day of Prayer was unconstitutional; however that ruling was unanimously overturned by the Federal Appeals Court in April 2011. The Federal Appeals court found that the National Day of Prayer imposes responsibility solely on the U.S. President, leaving private citizens no legal standing to challenge it.

Those who support the National Day of Prayer point to the long history of national prayer in the U.S. and argue that “separation of church and state” does not require a complete ban of religion in public life. They emphasize that the National Day of Prayer does not prefer any one religious denomination over another, is not mandatory, and is expressly *not* limited to any particular religious group.

**Q: What about nonbelievers?**

**A:** The American Humanist Association also objects to the National Day of Prayer. In partnership with other secular and humanist organizations, they observe the first Thursday in May as the National Day of Reason, with the aim of “provid[ing] a positive, useful, constitutional alternative to the exclusionary National Day of Prayer.”

Some organizations also create celebrations around charitable events so that believers and non-believers alike feel welcome and can fully participate.

**Q: And what about...?**

**A:** Tanenbaum is always here to help! Contact us at [workdiversity@tanenbaum.org](mailto:workdiversity@tanenbaum.org) or (212) 967-7707.