

National Day of Prayer

On the National Day of Prayer, people of different faiths are invited to pray for the United States of America and its leaders. It is held on the first Thursday of May and in 2024, it will fall on **Thursday, May 2nd**.

History

The very first day of prayer was declared in 1775 by the Continental Congress, which asked people to pray for the fledgling nation. This initial declaration gradually evolved into two formalized events. In 1863 President Lincoln oversaw the naming of the autumnal observance of prayer and thanks as Thanksgiving Day.

Almost a century later President Truman oversaw the establishment of the spring tradition of prayer and thanks as the National Day of Prayer in 1952. The intent of the Day was to honor the history of public prayer in the United States by designating a day for Americans to come together and pray or meditate according to their own belief systems.

In 1988, President Reagan amended the 1952 resolution to designate that the National Day of Prayer would be on the first Thursday in May. Every year since then, the sitting U.S. President, regardless of party or denomination, has issued an official proclamation on the National Day of Prayer. Similarly, each of the 50 U.S. Governors issue annual proclamations. Many religious, interfaith, and community groups hold events recognizing the day.

Observances

While the U.S. government officially recognizes the day, it does not mandate or provide any guidelines as to how the day should be observed. Organizations and people from any tradition can create a National Day of Prayer observance, including interfaith groups. Anyone can organize an event, from a prayer breakfast to a food drive to a moment of silence.

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

The National Day of Prayer Task Force

In 1983, the National Day of Prayer Task Force (NDP Task Force), a non-profit subsidiary of the evangelical Christian National Prayer Committee, was established. The NDP Task Force is dedicated to promoting the National Day of Prayer around the country through prayer and events

with a conservative Christian focus, as per its mission. The organization was not created by, nor is it endorsed by, the U.S. government.

In many parts of the country, the only National Day of Prayer event is one sponsored by the NDP Task Force. As a result, many of those who do not identify with Christianity may feel excluded from participating.

Separation of Church and State

There are some people and organizations who believe that the National Day of Prayer violates the Establishment Clause of the First Amendment, which states that “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion or prohibiting the free exercise thereof.” Many interpret this to mean not only that the government must not favor one religion over the other but also should not favor the religious over the non-religious. However, the courts ruled that since the National Day of Prayer does not force anyone to pray nor endorse any particular religion it does not violate the Constitution.

National Day of Reason

In partnership with other secular and humanist organizations, the American Humanist Association began to observe the National Day of Reason in 2003. Created in part to protest the National Day of Prayer, the National Day of Reason is also observed on the first Thursday in May. The goal of this day is to “celebrate reason – a concept all Americans can support – and to raise public awareness about the persistent threat to religious liberty posed by government intrusion into the private sphere of worship.”

Within the past decade, government officials have begun to publicly support the National Day of Reason, including state-wide proclamations and even pushing for an official resolution in 2015 to honor the day. For more information, please see our National Day of Reason Fact Sheet.

Implications for the Workplace

Both the National Day of Prayer and National Day of Reason are not public holidays, therefore, unless indicated otherwise, regular business hours at companies and in governments are adhered to on this date. As with other days of significance, some employees may choose to observe this day by taking time from work. If a company chooses to have events connected to either day, care must be taken to be clear that every employee has a right not to participate.

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