

PASTORAL LETTER

The following letter was written by Sr. Pastor Scott McKee on October 8, 2004 for members who may desire more background information than the brief elder statement provides.

Someone asked me recently, "Why don't we have an American Flag on the stage in our worship area?"

Let me begin by saying that I am proud to be an American and am grateful to live in a country where I am free to worship God. The American Flag is a powerful symbol of American freedom, just as the cross is a powerful symbol of the grace and power of God. The appropriate use of symbols in Christian worship has been a matter of conversation for centuries. [1] At Mt. Pleasant Community Church, we believe that if any symbols are going to be used in Christian worship, they should be symbols of Jesus Christ. For Christian worship, our sole focus is Jesus Christ.

The person who asked this question regarding the flag was very concerned that the absence of a flag in our worship center would be dishonoring to American veterans. I sincerely hope not. Men and women who lay their life on the line for the sake of freedom and peace are modern day heroes and are worthy of honor. Our purpose in Sunday morning worship, however, is to honor Jesus Christ.

The placement of a national symbol in a Christian sanctuary raises other questions regarding the global and universal nature of the Church of Jesus Christ. Our Scripture, history, and tradition affirm clearly that our faith is a universal one. Jesus shocked his culture by declaring that his Father's house will be a house of prayer *for all nations* (Mark 11:17). The early church, under the Apostle Paul's leadership, was one that sought to show that ethnic and national identity was not the determiner of one's Christian identity. *There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus* (Galatians 3:28). Jesus reconciles us to each other across ethnic lines (Ephesians 2:11-22) and has formed a global church from every nation, tongue, and tribe (Philippians 2:11). Both the Apostles' and Nicene Creeds affirm our belief in the "holy catholic church." In this context "catholic" means the "universal" church. Clearly, God's love and Gospel extend to the world (John 3:16).

The Bible calls followers of Christ to be responsible citizens, to submit to governing authorities (Romans 13:1, 1 Peter 2:13-17), and to pray for governmental leaders (1 Timothy 2:1-2). The Bible also reminds us that ultimately our citizenship is in heaven (Philippians 3:20) and we are *aliens and strangers on earth...longing for another country* (Hebrews 11:13-16). Our primary allegiance is to God. As citizens of heaven, we are God's ambassadors here on earth. We are called to reach out as ambassadors of God (2 Corinthians 5) beyond national boundaries and make disciples of *all nations* (Matthew 28:19).

Placing a powerful national symbol in a Christian sanctuary can mislead people to assume that Christianity is an American religion, dilute our understanding that the gospel is for all people and all nations, and can displace Jesus Christ as the sole object of our praise and admiration in worship. We believe that our worship requires a focus, not upon national symbols, but upon the nature and being of God. For these reasons, the elders currently have no plans to place a flag in the worship center.

This policy applies only to the ongoing act of worship and does not preclude the possibility of flags in other portions of our facility or the use of flags on certain Sundays (e.g. Veterans Day or others). It also does not mean that as a church we should not seek out appropriate ways to encourage citizenship and honor those who have modeled it.

The following historical summary was sent to me by an MPCC member:

The practice of placing a national flag in a worship space is uniquely American and dates to the 1850s. It was started by nervous Catholics that were suspected of being under rulership of a "foreign power" (the Pope). It was "refreshed" by nervous German-American Protestants during World War I. Mainline Protestants caught on during World War II to remember those fighting overseas. Apparently, after the war, everybody just sort of forgot to take the flags back out of sanctuaries (strange as it sounds) and most people have just thought that's how it's supposed to be ever since [2].

The elders recognize that the American Flag is a deeply loved and emotionally-charged symbol of our country. We pray that this issue will not be a divisive one in our community, but rather will serve to further our conversation about these important matters of faith, citizenship, and their interrelatedness with the other. Now more than ever is a time for the Christian Church to stand in unity and engage in our mission of extending hope and healing to a broken world.

[1] The Puritans believed that no symbols at all should be used in worship. They were reacting to the ornate icons of the Roman Catholic Church and the reverence toward these objects that grew to idolatry. The Puritans preferred simple worship environments where they could focus on God alone. At MPCC, we recognize the danger of idolatry, but believe that symbols rightly understood and used can enhance the worship of God.

[2] Historically, the term "sanctuary" has meant a safe haven for anyone seeking refuge. Church space has traditionally been neutral space not subject to politicization; thus church space has had the right of sanctuary and police/military forces cannot invade its territory. The US military honored sanctuary even for Noriega in Panama when he took refuge in church. The broader international community sees a national flag as a violation of neutral space.