

Prayer time

by [John Buchanan](#) in the [August 15, 2001](#) issue

For most pastors, the question of how the church should relate to the state and to the society and culture around it arises in a very mundane way—in the form of a phone call asking you to deliver an invocation at a meeting of the city council or the PTA, or at a school sports banquet. Whenever this happens, I agonize a bit about it. Should I baptize a secular event with a little piety? What is my appearance saying about prayer or God?

Probably most pastors have, as I do, some memories of awkward, bizarre or (from the safe distance of time) funny moments on these occasions. I recall being asked to deliver the invocation to kick off a Christmas parade—but the parade took off without waiting for my carefully prepared “parade prayer.” I also recall a junior high athletic banquet at which my prayer actually evoked enthusiastic adolescent applause.

Recently I agreed to offer the invocation for the Cook County board of commissioners. Such an invitation isn’t often issued to ministers like me from congregations like mine. I showed up at the appointed time and was greeted by a woman who had made the invitation. She seemed a bit distracted. The time for the opening of the meeting and my prayer came and went. Five, ten, then 15 minutes went by. Finally, she reappeared, told me the commissioners were ready, and ushered me into the impressive board room. A deputy slipped a piece of paper in front of the president, who stopped mid-sentence and said, “Apparently we’re going to have another prayer this morning. Welcome, Reverend. You can do your prayer now.” Obviously, two invitations had been issued, so the commissioners sat through two prayers—which I’m sure didn’t hurt them much and in fact created a moment of levity.

For what it’s worth, here is part of what I prayed: Almighty and Merciful God, you have made us in your image and have called us to live together as your children, in peace and compassion and justice. We thank you, O God, for that—for that divine charter for our life together, that holy mandate to honor you by respecting and loving one another. . . . We pray for this body and for each of its members. Give

them wisdom—to understand the complex issues before them. Give them courage to make responsible decisions even when they are not popular. Give them a sense of justice that everyone—great and small, rich and poor—may have equal opportunity in this community to become everything you have created them to be. And, God of love, give them compassion, so that those whose needs are great, those who are vulnerable, those who are not well connected or well organized, may be affirmed and held up—and healed and comforted and welcomed as members of your family.