

Public prayer

By [Rich Simpson](#)

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What should clergy do when asked to offer public prayers at various events? My colleagues tend to have strong opinions on opposite sides of this question. Some feel that they are being used—or that it is part of an old Christendom model of being church to offer invocations and benedictions at public gatherings. Others feel it is a time to proselytize; so they will only pray if they can do so in the name of Jesus.

For my own part, whenever I can accept such invitations I say yes. While my prayers are to the living God whom I know through Jesus, I don't feel like I sacrifice my integrity by letting Jesus be present more silently at interfaith gatherings; I trust that the one who washed his disciples's feet with a towel on the last night of his life doesn't need to be forced on his fellow Jews, or Muslims, or unbelievers to make a prayer valid. I have prayed at the dedication of a new public safety building and the swearing in of a county sheriff, and at countless high school and college baccalaureates and graduations. I have blessed the holy ground of an elementary school classroom as the teacher got ready for the first day of school and the arrival of her students in the year ahead.

I say yes to such invitations for theological reasons and for personal ones. First, I believe in the ministry of the baptized. I believe that the lawyers and business people and college presidents and bankers and public servants who were there today are doing “the Lord's work.” Every week in my tradition we send the people out to “do the work that God has given us to do.”

Recently I offered an invocation at the annual business meeting of the [Worcester Business Development Corporation](#). There were two former parishioners of mine there, faithful Episcopalians, and two others whom I know as Episcopalians in another Worcester parish. I am certain there were many other people of faith there. I got to hear a speaker who was a graduate of [Quinsigamond Community College](#), a WBDC partner, speak about her work in the area of global health with former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and now with the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. The work that she and the Gates Foundation are doing is without a

doubt holy work. So personally I am enriched by being in the presence of such dedicated people.

Here is the prayer I offered on that occasion, based on "[A Prayer for Cities](#)" from *The Book of Common Prayer*, [Isaiah 58:12](#), and the mission statement of the WBDC:

Living God, you have given us a vision of that holy City where ancient ruins are rebuilt and the foundations are raised up: help us to embrace your challenge to be repairers of the breach and restorers of streets to live in. Behold and visit, we pray, the cities of this earth. Behold and visit, we pray, our city of Worcester. Strengthen and renew the ties of mutual regard which form our civic life. Give us eyes to see our diversity not as a problem to be managed, but as a gift to be celebrated, and as a sign of your presence among us. Send us honest and able leaders who will work with You and with your people to eliminate poverty and oppression, that peace may prevail with righteousness, and justice with order, until men and women from different cultures and with differing talents may find with one another the fulfillment of our common humanity. Bless the work of the Worcester Business Development Corporation and strengthen the ties of collaboration between public and private resources, that together we might seek the common good for all your people. Grant us wisdom and grant us courage for the facing of this hour and beyond as we aspire to do the work that you have given us to do. In your holy name we pray. Amen.

What does my prayer do? Is God not there if I refuse to show up and say the words, but magically appear when I invoke God's Spirit? Of course not. God is at work in the world already and in the midst of faithful men and women regardless of whether or not I offer a prayer. But in my experience, such prayers are more than perfunctory nods to cultural Christianity or American secular religion. They are a way of practicing what we preach; at least it feels that way for me. A way of naming the holiness of such work.

The Episcopal Church is discovering ways to take the word into the street—Ashes to Go, Stations of the Cross, and other creative ways. I think we also need to be people who are committed to the dedicated collaborative work of rebuilding and revitalizing our urban centers and stand with them in that work.

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