



Offering Prayers

Rev. Peter R. Hook, State Chaplain

As a VFW Chaplain, one of the main things you will be asked to do at many of the functions you attend, is to offer a prayer. This will happen within the VFW and also at other functions you attend outside of the VFW community. On some occasions, you will be asked ahead of time, and at other times, it will be a last-minute request. This is normal once people get to know that you are the chaplain.

Leading in prayer involves standing before others and addressing God on their behalf, and it should be done with reverence, some measure of confidence, and with a degree of feeling. This is true for the VFW ritual prayers and also for the spur-of-the-moment spontaneous prayers.

Here are a few things I have found to be helpful.

1. Expect to be asked, so don't be surprised. Be ready! What happens if you attend a community Memorial Day service and the local pastor, who was scheduled to give the invocation, is not present for some reason? Those in charge may turn to you and ask if you would provide the invocation. So, anticipate that something unexpected will happen sometime, and be prepared for it. This happened to me recently at a community dinner for senior citizens. The local pastor did not show, and as the program was about to start, the person in charge began to panic. Someone spotted me, and I was asked if I would provide the invocation.
2. Speak naturally and clearly. Remember, it is your responsibility to be heard and understood.
3. Enunciate. Don't read or speak in a garbled or low-toned voice. Droning or speaking in a monotone voice, sends a signal to the brain of the listener that this is not important or meaningful.
4. Be sincere and speak slower than normal. When a Chaplain reads a prayer or offers a spontaneous prayer publicly, it should not only be his/her personal prayer, but it is a collective prayer offered to God on behalf of everyone present. In essence, it is "our" collective prayer offered by one person, and if done well, everyone will mentally participate in the prayer. When a person reads a book, the author attempts to get into the head of the reader. And, when a Chaplain offers a prayer, he/she should do it in such a way that the persons listening mentally follow along.

5. Don't preach, try to evangelize, or be intentionally offensive. Unfortunately, there are numerous examples of lengthy controversial and offensive prayers offered at State Capitols by "guest chaplains." One of the most famous ones took place in Wichita, KS by Pastor Joe Wright http://www.eaec.org/desk/joe_wright_prayer.htm. See also: <https://www.snopes.com/fact-check/prayer-for-our-nation/>

In keeping with the previous advice in #5, be careful about referring to specific deities. Included in the March/April 2018 Pennsylvania General Orders was the following statement: *Dept. of PA, VFW, reminds all duly elected Chaplains at all levels within this Dept. to adhere to those references to a supreme being as set forth in the VFW Ritual during all official functions of this organization, not to interject reference to any specific deity or deification during same* (March/April 2018 Pennsylvania VFW News, General Orders #15, p. 5).

This is a difficult adjustment, especially for some conservative protestants, whose faith tradition and culture teaches otherwise. I found the following article quite insightful and helpful when offering prayers at civic gatherings: <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/markdroberts/series/praying-in-the-name-of-jesus/>.

The bottom line is to be sensitive and respect others who may not share your beliefs or passion. We should always strive to conduct ourselves in a way that does not denigrate or demean other faith traditions or offend those who have no religious faith.

Blessings as you serve.

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