

On Flags in the Sanctuary

(from lcms.org, *Frequently Asked Questions*)



Q: What is the LCMS position on the American flag and the Christian flag being displayed in the sanctuary?

A: Rev. Prof. William Schmelder, seasoned parish pastor, historian and professor emeritus of Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, has responded to a query from the LCMS Worship regarding this matter:

"To the best of my knowledge, the U.S. flag began appearing in our churches in response to two things: the desire to express an unquestioned loyalty as U.S. citizens (a reaction to WWI sentiment) and the growing sacralization of the flag in U.S. culture. In the history of my home congregation (Immanuel, Bristol, CT), the story of the responses to both WWI and WWII is given in some detail. However, the picture of the church after the renovation in 1948 does not show a flag. There was a flag on the grounds between the church and the school, and it was raised and lowered with considerable ceremony when school was in session. I think that is one response evident in many congregations: we could show our loyalty in many ways without placing the flag in the church; other congregations seem to have brought it into the building itself, with great debate about the proper location (nave, chancel, narthex, etc.).

"Non-Americans are often astounded to see a national symbol in the church (perhaps they have memories of the Nazi flag being touched to the altars of German churches).

"The so-called Christian flag is another matter entirely. It has no tradition of the church behind it. In fact, it violates much of what anyone knows of ecclesiastical heraldry. It seems to be the design of one man, who both drew it and profits from it. He or his heirs still get a royalty on every one sold. People seem to think that you need something to balance the U.S. flag on the other side, so you have a Christian flag."

Obviously, the inclusion of the American and Christian flags is widespread in the LCMS. As Professor Schmelder mentioned, this probably developed out of the desire of congregations of prominently German-American heritage not to appear German during and after the world wars. Likewise, many veterans of those wars returned with great patriotic zeal, which probably manifested itself in the desire to display "Old Glory" in the sanctuary.

Today, however, it may be time to reconsider this short-lived tradition among us (Lutherans never did this prior to WWI, and then only in America). One may observe that many congregations today, when considering a sanctuary renovation or even building a new sanctuary, will opt to leave the flags out of the church building entirely, or perhaps to display the flag in a location other than the chancel or nave (such as outside the building proper or in the narthex), the goal being not to blur the distinction between the kingdom of Christ with the kingdom of the world/government. Our Lord's words, of course, come to bear on this issue ultimately: "Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's; and render unto God the things that are God's" (Luke 20:22). Both are good and right ... in their respective places and times.