
Prayers in plenary and other religious services in Parliaments

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Introduction

This *L&RS Note* outlines practices concerning prayers at the beginning of plenary sessions and arrangements for holding other religious services in a selection of parliaments.

Summary

In terms of prayers in the plenary, there is a clear division between practices in continental European parliaments,ⁱ which do not have any prayers, and parliaments in the Westminster tradition, including Ireland, which do. Interestingly, the three devolved parliaments in the UK have each taken different approaches but none have a specific prayer read at start of daily business.

Only eight of the 24 European parliaments with no prayers in the plenary have some religious services, whereas fourteen have neither prayers in the plenary nor religious services.

There is greater diversity of practice when it comes to holding religious services in parliaments. There is almost an equal divide between the number of parliaments surveyed that have no services of any kind and those with either occasional or regular religious services.

The Table over summarises the findings of our research.

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Summary table - prayers and religious services in national parliaments

Prayer or silent reflection in Plenary (6)	No prayer or silent reflection in Plenary (24)	Some religious services (18)	No religious services (19)
Ireland <i>Australia</i> Canada <i>South Africa</i> US UK	Austria Belgium <i>Bulgaria</i> Cyprus Czech Republic Denmark Estonia Finland France Germany Greece Hungary Italy <i>Latvia</i> Lithuania Luxembourg Netherlands Poland Portugal Romania Slovakia Slovenia Spain Sweden	Denmark Estonia Finland <i>Georgia</i> Germany Hungary <i>Iceland</i> Ireland <i>Israel</i> New Zealand <i>Norway</i> Lithuania Poland Sweden UK Romania <i>Turkey</i> US	<i>Albania</i> Austria Belgium Canada* <i>Croatia</i> Cyprus Czech Republic France Greece Italy Lithuania* Luxembourg <i>Montenegro</i> Netherlands <i>FYR of Macedonia</i> Portugal <i>Serbia</i> Slovakia Slovenia Spain

Note: As the table is based on information from two different surveys we don't have full information for the 14 parliaments in italics. *Canada and Lithuania have no services but do have meditation rooms.

Parliaments where there are prayers

This section describes the procedures and the prayers used in the parliaments where there is a prayer or period for reflection at the beginning of each sitting: Ireland; Australia and Australian State Legislatures; Canada; New Zealand; South Africa; UK, Westminster and devolved parliaments (Northern Ireland Assembly and Scottish Parliament); US Congress and US State Legislatures.

1. Ireland

The Standing Orders for each House deal with the prayers, there is also a period of reflection in the Seanad. (Dáil SO 27 (2016) and Seanad SO 18 (2011)).

Dáil

The Ceann Comhairle (Speaker) formally opens each day's sitting by reading the official prayer, in English only:

'Direct, we beseech Thee, O Lord, our actions by Thy holy inspirations and carry them on by Thy gracious assistance; that every word and work of ours may always begin from Thee, and by Thee be happily ended; through Christ Our Lord. Amen.'

Seanad

Since 2012 there has been a period of reflection (30 seconds) before the Clerk of the Seanad reads the same prayer as above in both English and Irish.

2. Australia

The Standing Orders require the Speaker of the House of Representatives and the President of the Senate to read a prayer for the parliament and the Lord's Prayer at the beginning of each sitting of the Parliament of the Commonwealth of Australia. There has been some debate about ending the practice. ⁱⁱ In February 2014 a proposal to remove the Lord's Prayer at the beginning of Senate proceedings was defeated.

Senate

Extract from Standing Orders:

The President, on taking the chair each day, reads the following prayer:

Almighty God, we humbly beseech Thee to vouchsafe Thy special blessing upon this Parliament, and that Thou wouldst be pleased to direct and prosper the work of Thy servants to the advancement of Thy glory, and to the true welfare of the people of Australia.

Our Father, which art in Heaven, Hallowed be Thy name. Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done in earth, as it is in Heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive them that trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation; but deliver us from evil: For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, for ever and ever. Amen.

The President shall then make an acknowledgement of country in the following terms:

I acknowledge the Ngunnawal and Ngambri peoples who are the traditional custodians of the Canberra area and pay respect to the elders, past and present, of all Australia's Indigenous peoples.

House of Representatives

Standing Order 38 deals with the prayer:

Acknowledgement of country and prayers

On taking the Chair at the beginning of each sitting, the Speaker shall make an acknowledgement of country in the following terms:

I acknowledge the Ngunnawal and Ngambri peoples who are the traditional custodians of the Canberra area and pay respect to the elders, past and present, of all Australia's Indigenous peoples.

The Speaker shall then read the following prayers:

Almighty God, we humbly beseech Thee to vouchsafe Thy blessing upon this Parliament. Direct and prosper our deliberations to the advancement of Thy glory, and the true welfare of the people of Australia.

Our Father, which art in Heaven: Hallowed be Thy Name. Thy Kingdom come. Thy will be done in earth, as it is in Heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive them that trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation; but deliver us from evil: For Thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, for ever and ever. Amen.

2.1. Australian State legislatures

There is a prayer said in all six of the Australian State legislatures.

For example the Standing Orders for the New South Wales Parliament provide for a prayer at the beginning of each sitting as follows:

Prayer and acknowledgement of Country

(1) The Speaker or the Clerk shall read the following prayer after the Speaker takes the Chair each day:

Almighty God, we ask for your blessing upon this Parliament. Direct and prosper our deliberations to the true welfare of Australia and the people of New South Wales. Amen.

(2) The Speaker or the Clerk shall read the following acknowledgement of Country after reading the prayer each day:

We acknowledge the Traditional Owners, the Gadigal People of the Eora Nation. We also acknowledge the Traditional Owners of the lands we represent and thank them for their custodianship of country.

3. Canada

There is a prayer said in both the House of Commons and the Senate. The details of the Commons' prayer are outlined.

Houses of Commonsⁱⁱⁱ

The prayer has been part of the daily proceedings since 1877 but was codified in the Standing Orders in 1927. The Speaker reads the prayer before the Chamber is opened to the public and television coverage of the proceedings begins. While the prayer is being read, the Speaker, the Members and the Table Officers all stand. When the prayer is finished the House pauses for a moment of silence for private thought and reflection. The following prayer has been in use since 1994:

Almighty God, we give thanks for the great blessings which have been bestowed on Canada and its citizens, including the gifts of freedom, opportunity and peace that we enjoy. We pray for our Sovereign, Queen Elizabeth, and the Governor General. Guide us in our deliberations as Members of Parliament, and strengthen us in our awareness of our duties and responsibilities as Members. Grant us wisdom, knowledge, and understanding to preserve the blessings of this country for the benefit of all and to make good laws and wise decisions. Amen.

3.1. Canadian State Legislatures^{iv}

Most Canadian State Legislatures have non-denominational prayers or alternate various prayers at the start of sittings. In Ontario, for example, the *Lords Prayer* is followed by alternating prayers from First Nations, Buddhist, Hindu, Muslim, Jewish, Baha'i and Sikh faiths. In three states there are traditional prayers read and in two states there are no prayers at all, in fact the Newfoundland State Legislature never opened sittings with a prayer.

4. New Zealand

The wording of the current prayer was adopted by resolution of the House in 1962, but it is not written into the Standing Orders and is not regarded as binding on the Speaker. In 2007 the Standing Orders Committee considered changing the wording of the prayer following a survey of MP but ultimately decided to retain the current wording.^v In 2014 the Speaker considered changing the wording there but decided to retain the wording as it was:

Almighty God, humbly acknowledging our need for Thy guidance in all things, and laying aside all private and personal interests, we beseech Thee to grant that we may conduct the affairs of this House and of our country to the glory of Thy holy name, the maintenance of true religion and justice, the honour of the Queen, and the public welfare, peace, and tranquility of New Zealand, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Occasionally, the Speaker will say the prayer in Te Reo Māori (Maori language), rather than in English, at the start of a sitting day. Karakia (ritual chants invoking spiritual guidance and protection) is common before meetings that observe Maori traditions, for example the Māori Affairs Committee.

5. South Africa

At the start of each sitting the Presiding Officer calls for a moment of silence to give members an opportunity for silent prayer or meditation.^{vi}

6. United Kingdom. Westminster and devolved parliaments and assemblies

6.1. Westminster

Sittings in both Houses begin with Christian prayers.^{vii} Members of the public are not allowed into the public galleries during prayers.

House of Commons

The Speaker's Chaplain usually reads the prayers. The form of the main prayer is as follows:

Lord, the God of righteousness and truth, grant to our Queen and her government, to Members of Parliament and all in positions of responsibility, the guidance of your Spirit. May they never lead the nation wrongly through love of power, desire to please, or unworthy ideals but laying aside all private interests and prejudices keep in mind their responsibility to seek to improve the condition of all mankind; so may your kingdom come and your name be hallowed. Amen.

House of Lords

A Bishop who sits in the Lords usually reads the prayers. Prayers are read at the beginning of each sitting, whether the House is meeting in its judicial function or for public business. There are a number of possible prayers read in the House of Lords which are printed in Appendix J to the [Companion to the Standing Orders](#).

6.2. Devolved parliaments and assemblies^{viii}

There are no specific prayers at the beginning of plenary sessions in the Northern Ireland Assembly, the Scottish Parliament or the National Assembly of Wales.

In Northern Ireland the first item on the Order paper called 'Prayers' is in fact a two minute silence for silent prayer or contemplation. The Scottish Parliament has a multi-religious and multi-denominational 'Time for reflection' at the beginning of each week when an invited speaker has up to 4 minutes to address parliament. There are neither periods for silent prayer nor times for reflection in the Welsh National Assembly.

7. United States

7.1. House of Representatives and Senate

The daily order of business for both Houses begins with a prayer by the Chaplain.

Each House elects a chaplain to perform ceremonial, symbolic, and pastoral duties. The House and Senate elect the chaplains as individuals and not as representatives of any religious body or denominational entity.

There is a prayer archive on the website of the House of Representatives – see <http://chaplain.house.gov/archive/index.html>

7.2. US State legislatures

Almost all State Legislatures have an opening prayer as part of their tradition and procedure.^x The timing of the prayer varies, in the majority of cases it is read after the session is called to order but before the opening roll call is taken. In some cases the prayer is read before the session is called to order. The prayers can be read by chaplains, members, clerks, staff or visitors depending on the rules of different chambers.

The matter has been the subject of a number of court cases. In 1983, in *Marsh v Chambers* the US Supreme Court found that legislative prayer was constitutional because it has a long and unbroken tradition in American public life.

The legal benchmark for legislative prayer remains the 1983 Supreme Court decision, *Marsh v. Chambers*, 463 U.S. 783 (1983)¹, which ruled that the Nebraska legislature's tradition of opening with a prayer by a paid chaplain was constitutional. Nebraska State Senator Ernie Chambers challenged the practice as violative of the Establishment Clause. The *Marsh* decision carved out a very narrow exception to the Establishment Clause, as well as established Court doctrine, as a nod to history and custom; however, the Court made clear that "Standing alone, historical patterns cannot justify contemporary violations of constitutional guarantees . . ." *Marsh v. Chambers*, 463 U.S. 783, 790 (1983).^x

Religious services in parliaments^{xi}

This section describes religious services in parliaments other than prayers at the start of plenary sessions. There is a wide variety of practices to be found. Nineteen of the thirty-seven parliaments surveyed have no religious services of any kind, while eighteen parliaments have some religious services either on or off campus.

Ireland is included in the group that has occasional services without any specific chapel or prayer room. While Lithuania and Canada have meditation rooms there are no religious services held in those parliaments.

1. No religious services (19)

Nineteen parliaments have no religious services of any kind held either on or off campus, nor do they have any prayer room or chapel or meditation room within the parliamentary campus. See the Summary Table p.2 for details.

2. Some religious services in parliament without a parliamentary chapel/prayer room (4)

Four parliaments, Ireland, Finland, New Zealand and Romania have some religious services within the parliamentary campus, while not having a chapel or similar space.

Occasionally, religious services are arranged by Members in Ireland. There is an annual mass for deceased staff held in a nearby church and occasionally similar masses have been held for deceased Members.

In the Finnish Parliament there is a Christmas carol event in December, in addition to which a moment of reflection and a morning prayer are organised weekly. In New Zealand there are no routine religious services; occasional events with a religious component, like weddings, are organised by Members or staff. There is also a weekly prayer group which meets in a staff lounge and when necessary a room is assigned as a prayer room for Muslim attendees of parliamentary events. In the Romanian Parliament there is an ecumenical prayer group.

3. Parliaments where services are held outside the parliamentary building (4)

In this group (Hungary, Iceland, Denmark and German Bundestrat) most services are held outside parliament in nearby churches and the services are annual or the start of a parliament.

- In the Hungarian Parliament a church service is held at the beginning of every parliamentary session.
- In Iceland each session begins with a church ceremony in the cathedral.
- At the Danish Parliament a service is organised in connection with the opening of parliament by the Ministry of Ecclesiastical Affairs in the Palace Chapel close to the parliament.
- In the German Bundesrat once a year on the 3rd of October, Germany's national holiday, the Speaker of the Bundesrat together with the Federal President, the Speaker of the Bundestag, the Federal Chancellor and the President of the Federal Constitutional Court (the representatives of the five constitutional organs) invite Members to a religious service in the capital of the federal state which holds the (rotating) Bundesrat Presidency.

4. Parliaments with a chapel, prayer room or mosque for services (10)

Parliaments in this group have a parliamentary chapel, a prayer room, meditation room, a mosque, a synagogue or similar space. Generally, religious services are held more frequently in these parliaments than for parliaments where services are held off campus. For example, daily in Poland and Israel, weekly in the German Bundestag, Sweden, UK, Norway, Georgia, and Turkey.

However, two parliaments, Canada and Lithuania have meditation rooms without holding religious services.

Some parliaments have two or more chapels or prayer rooms:

- Swedish Riksdag has a chapel and prayer room;
- UK has a chapel and a quiet room;
- Israel Knesset has a synagogue and a prayer room;
- Turkey has a mosque and smaller mosques called masjids in separate parliamentary buildings.

Also, some parliaments have a parliamentary chaplain (UK, Norway, Poland and US) to organise services.

- In the UK, Anglican services are held by the Speaker's Chaplain and Roman Catholic mass is said by a Parliamentary Roman Catholic Duty Priest.

- In Norway, the services are organized and led by a part time parliamentary chaplain, who also offers pastoral care to MPs and employees at Stortinget. The chaplain is employed by The Church of Norway, but the salary is paid by Stortinget.
- In Poland, mass is arranged by the chaplain appointed by the Council of the Bishops of the Catholic Church in Poland.
- In the US both the Senate and House of Representatives elect chaplains.^{xii} The chaplains perform ceremonial, symbolic, and pastoral duties. The chaplains open the daily sessions in their respective chambers with a prayer. In addition to these official duties, they also serve as spiritual counsellors to Members, their families, and staff; coordinate religious studies, discussion sessions, and prayer meetings for Members and staff; and may officiate at the weddings and funerals of Members.

Endnotes

ⁱ European Centre for Parliamentary Research and Documentation (ECPRD) Request to Parliaments that are in EU Member States 2011 and Parliamentary websites

ⁱⁱ In February 2014 a proposal to remove the Lord's Prayer at the beginning of Senate proceedings was defeated. <http://www.thetablet.co.uk/news/446/0/australian-senate-reject-move-to-axe-lord-s-prayer>; Gonzalo Villalta Puig(2009) 'Parliamentary Prayers and Section 116 of the Australian Constitution' <http://www.aph.gov.au/senate/pubs/pops/pop51/puig.htm>,

ⁱⁱⁱ Robert Marleau and Camille Montpetit eds. (2000) House of Commons Procedure and Practice <http://www.parl.gc.ca/MarleauMontpetit/DocumentViewer.aspx?Sec=Ch10&Seq=2&Language=E>

^{iv} Martin Lanouette (2009) *Prayer in the Legislature: Tradition Meets Secularization*. Canadian Parliamentary Review Winter 2009

^v Office of Speaker (2007) Press Release <http://www.parliament.nz/en-NZ/AboutParl/HowPWorks/Speaker/PressReleases/6/1/b/61b20eda0d2847aa8ca98bfa6ebfea44.htm>

^{vi} South Africa. National Assembly (2004) [Guide to Procedure](#)

^{vii} <http://www.parliament.uk/about/how/business/prayers/>

^{viii} Bonney, Norman (2013) 'Established religion, parliamentary devolution and new state religion in the UK'. Parliamentary Affairs v. 66

^{ix} U.S. National Conference of State Legislatures (2002), [Inside the legislative process](#) (accessed 10 May 2016)

^x Link to Marsh v Chambers

http://www.law.cornell.edu/supct/html/historics/USSC_CR_0463_0783_ZO.html

^{xi} ECPRD Request to Parliaments that are members of the Council of Europe 2015, direct communication with parliaments and Parliamentary websites.

^{xii} Website of Office of the Chaplain of the US House of Representatives accessed 11 April 2016 <http://chaplain.house.gov/>