

# Look Back | July Fourth Worship's Focus on God, Not Patriotism

*Editor's note: This article [first appeared](#) on July 1, 2002. At the time of publication, Furr was a freelance writer and operated his own communications/marketing business in Poquoson, Virginia. It is reposted today in advance of the annual Fourth of July holiday.*

July Fourth is an opportunity for churches to celebrate religious liberty, but it is not a time for holding a patriotic pep rally, according to a church-state expert.

"A healthy sense of patriotism is good. But we are Christians first and Americans second," Brent Walker, executive director of the Baptist Joint Committee on Public Affairs, told EthicsDaily.com.

Walker noted that it is appropriate for Christians to refer to themselves as American Christians but cautioned people against referring to themselves as Christian Americans.

James Miller, pastor of First Baptist Church in Providence, Rhode Island, has little problem striking a note of national recognition while remaining worshipful in his church.

Miller is pastor of the first Baptist church founded in America by ardent religious liberty advocate Roger Williams.

In the 17th century, when all other neighboring settlements became modified versions of the Church of England, Providence remained as a place where

everyone would have religious freedom and complete separation of church and state.

“We have almost no symbols at all in the church because of its tradition of religious liberty,” Miller told EthicsDaily.com.

However, Miller is not opposed to celebrating liberty, especially religious liberty.

“Rather than tapping into those old land of liberty-type of songs that are often sung in some churches, I prefer to highlighting those old hymns such as ‘Be Thou My Vision’ and ‘God of Grace and God of Glory’ that remind us we are citizens of two worlds but that it is God we worship,” Miller said.

Walker agrees and said that “Faith in God is superior to love of country; allegiance to God transcends all nationalism.”

Walker cautioned against making the flag an idol and placing it alongside the Christian flag on a routine basis because it signals that the Kingdom of God and the kingdom of Caesar are equal.

“We are citizens of two kingdoms,” Walker said. “Yes, we are to respect our governmental institutions and pray for our governmental leaders, but that must always be secondary to our commitment to and love for God.”

Miller said all sorts of creative things can be done that would be appropriate for the occasion.

He said that the song, “America the Beautiful,” was originally a poem written by Katharine Lee Bates but that it was a Baptist minister, Clarence Barbour, who

combined the poem with a melody written by Samuel Ward to fashion the song as we know it.

Miller said it is important to refrain from fanfare and pep rallies and remember the church is a “sacred place.” He said that shortly after the Sept. 11 disaster, author David McCollough spoke at his church.

McCollough said there are some “sacred places” in America where important and meaningful events tend to occur repeatedly, such as prophetic vision and healing.

“It dawned on me about how the church has historically occupied its sacred space and becomes the center of America’s prophetic vision, wound healing and other important events in the life of this nation,” Miller said.

Walker noted that it is OK to include patriotic symbols in worship services but only in certain places and at special times.

“It is quite appropriate to display the flag, even in the sanctuary, on special occasions,” he said. Walker noted that the First Amendment’s establishment clause bars the government from endorsing a religious message or a particular religious group but “it does not prohibit a church from endorsing a patriotic symbol.”

Miller said a church he previously pastored borrowed 60 flags from the United Nations building and displayed them throughout the sanctuary.

“By doing this, we acknowledged that as Americans we are part of a world that is interrelated with other nations,” he said.

Walker cited special occasion worship services that celebrate the Fourth of July, Religious Freedom Day and times of national crisis and mourning as examples of when it is appropriate for a church to display the U.S. flag or other patriotic symbols.

“I have never been comfortable waving the flag in the sanctuary,” Miller said. “I am not opposed to displaying an American flag in the vestibule or some other area of the church - but not in the sanctuary.”

Walker said he believes churches that routinely display an American flag in the sanctuary may be promoting an act of “civil religion.”

He sees no problem with displaying patriotic symbols routinely in other parts of the church where worship does not occur.

Areas such as the fellowship hall, assembly rooms, the vestibule and other places where they can be seen and appreciated are more appropriate.

But, he said, the flag should be placed where it does not threaten to displace the cross as the quintessential symbol of Christianity.

Walker believes that whatever a church does in celebrating Independence Day, “we must be sure that we don’t overshadow the cross.”