

## On Mennonite Colleges Playing the National Anthem

The first playing of the national anthem before a major American sporting event was before a World Series game in 1918 -- during World War I. It was during World War II that the playing of the national anthem before sporting events became a regular practice in the United States. Although different individuals ascribe different meanings to the playing of the anthem, from its beginning, the ritual of playing the national anthem before sporting events has been linked to loyalty to the nation when at war.

Individual Mennonites and Mennonite congregations haven't always agreed, but Mennonites as a denomination have understood loyalty to the country and loyalty to Christ as sometimes in conflict -- especially when the country asks people to participate in or support war. As article 22 of Mennonite Church USA's *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective* says, "As disciples of Christ, we do not prepare for war, or participate in war or military service....Led by the Spirit, and beginning in the church, we witness to all people that violence is not the will of God. We witness against all forms of violence, including war among nations..."

As part of that witness (to ourselves and to others) announced in our confession, Mennonite institutions have often not participated in such rituals as flying the American flag and playing the national anthem.

The colleges that are part of Mennonite Church USA have had different practices regarding playing the national anthem before inter-collegiate sporting events. Hesston College and Eastern Mennonite University have never played the anthem. Both Bethel College and Bluffton College have played the anthem before sporting events for some time. After having never played the anthem, Goshen College has this year changed its practice.

As has been the case historically when American troops have been in combat, that American forces are now fighting in Afghanistan and Iraq has brought criticism on institutions that, for reasons of faith, don't play the anthem. At Goshen, non-pacifist athletes on some of the sports teams and some fans of opposing teams -- as well as the host of a radio talk show -- have harshly criticized the school for not playing it. The major reason given by these critics is that Goshen College should play it out of respect for the troops whose fighting gives American Mennonites the freedom to hold their unique views.

In response to this criticism, Goshen College in January announced that it would begin playing the national anthem before games. This new practice began at the beginning of the spring baseball and softball seasons, with an American flag was flown beside the field and an instrumental version of the anthem played before games.

Goshen president Jim Brenneman explained this decision as a desire to be more hospitable to non-pacifists on campus (45% of Goshen students are non-Mennonite, including almost all baseball, softball, and basketball players) and as a movement away from traditional Mennonite rejection of most everything that has to do with the government. In explaining the decision, the college has acknowledged that it is "owned" by Mennonite Church USA and has noted that the denomination has no official policy on playing the anthem.

There have been many expressions of concern that Goshen's decision to play the anthem is a symbolic acceptance of military violence -- especially as "support for the troops" was the primary stated motivation of critics who pushed for the anthem to be played. At the least, the change seems to remove a powerful symbolic witness to the Mennonite insistence that God's will is to reject all waging of war and that loyalty to country conflicts with loyalty to God when the country asks people to support and wage war. Further, the acceptance of the anthem seems to undermine one of the main reasons to have separate Mennonite

schools: to form identities according to the values of the kingdom of God rather than the values of the surrounding society.

Among those expressing concern about playing the national anthem have been a large number of Goshen College faculty who have felt excluded from the decision-making process and have openly encouraged the administration to reverse course on this issue.

submitted by John Zimmerman

Some additional online resources for more information and background:

Article 23 of Confession of Faith: <http://www.mennolink.org/doc/cof/art.23.html>

MC USA Peace Minister Susan Mark Landis: [http://peace.mennolink.org/articles/flag\\_reflections.html](http://peace.mennolink.org/articles/flag_reflections.html)

<http://www.emu.edu/president/flag-anthem/>

<http://www.mennoweekly.org/2010/3/1/goshen-anthem-decision-debated/>

<http://abcnews.go.com/US/wireStory?id=9897058>

[http://www.themennonite.org/bloggers/timjn/posts/Praise\\_the\\_Power\\_that\\_hath\\_made\\_and\\_preserved\\_us\\_a\\_nation](http://www.themennonite.org/bloggers/timjn/posts/Praise_the_Power_that_hath_made_and_preserved_us_a_nation)

[http://www.goshennews.com/local/local\\_story\\_022220952.html](http://www.goshennews.com/local/local_story_022220952.html)

<http://www.mennoweekly.org/2010/2/1/goshen-begin-playing-national-anthem-athletic-even/>

<http://www.mennoweekly.org/2010/2/8/national-anthem-and-christs-lordship/>

<http://www.wsbt.com/news/local/34294434.html>

<http://www.facebook.com/l.php?u=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.jesusradicals.com%2Fanarchism%2Fresistance-to-the-national-anthem-at-goshen-college-2%2F&h=96124>

<http://www.etruth.com/Know/News/Story.aspx?id=505915&fcid=Know-NEW/UPDATED>

<http://www.goshen.edu/news/pressarchive/02-17-10-national-anthem2-419.html>

<http://www.jesusradicals.com/calls-to-faithfulness-challenge-goshen/>