



RELIGION AND 4-H YOUTH DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMS

The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), which is home to National 4-H Headquarters and the 4-H Youth Development Program, prohibits discrimination in all its programs and activities on the basis of race, color, national origin, gender, religion, age, disability, political beliefs, and marital or family status. As a result, 4-H programs must have secular purposes focused on education and must not advance religion. Promoting religion, or explicitly or implicitly requiring religion or practices that specifically support one denomination, such as Christianity, as a condition for participation in 4-H club meetings or activities not only has religious purpose, it has the obvious effect of promoting one religion over others and can create a barrier for participation among other groups. If 4-H activities and programs included prescribed religious prayers, scriptures, or religious components to club bylaws, activities, or names, it would inject impermissible sectarian overtones. Such violations could create the impression that 4-H is not open to participation by all.

4-H youth development programs and all of their delivery methods, including clubs, school enrichment programs, afterschool programs, camps, and others are the programmatic outreach from the Land Grant University and USDA to our youngest citizens. Although local 4-H clubs and programs are voluntary associations of citizens, these youth clubs and programs were conceived, organized, and promoted by Cooperative Extension as a means of carrying out responsibilities under the Smith-Lever Act, 7 U.S.C. 341, *et. seq.* Given that, the 4-H Clubs or programs should not engage in those activities that are prohibited to federal and state governments by the Constitution. The 4-H club members, volunteers, parents, and 4-H educators and paraprofessionals cannot promote activities, through the Cooperative Extension or its programs, that the Cooperative Extension, Land Grant University, or USDA cannot promote directly.

The First Amendment to the United States Constitution requires government neutrality with regard to religion. Under present law, the principle that government may accommodate the free exercise of religion does not supersede the fundamental limitations imposed by the establishment of the religions clause of the First Amendment. Issues regarding the “separation of Church and State” under the First Amendment are both complex and situation-dependent.

4-H participation in religious activities does not violate the “separation of Church and State” when: 1) The purpose of participating is secular; 2) the primary effect of participating will not be to advance religion; and 3) the participation will not excessively entangle the affairs of the government with the affairs of the church.

If the scheduling of religious prayers, for example, reflects a secular purpose of setting a tone of solemnity prior to a meeting or meal, and the prayers are nondenominational or various prayers reflecting a variety of religious traditions are utilized, then this would be acceptable. 4-H programs may also engage in activities that neither advance nor inhibit religion, allowing moments of silence, for example.

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QUESTIONS RELATED TO RELIGION AND 4-H

Can 4-H Clubs include specific and overt references to a specific religious tradition within their club or program names?

No, 4-H club names that promote specific religious perspectives or icons promote the ideals of religious life and are not secular. Promoting such ideals in 4-H programs, clubs, or activities not only has religious purpose, it promotes one religion over others, and it creates the impression that 4-H is not open to all regardless of their religious standing.

Can 4-H club members and 4-H volunteers hold prescribed religious prayers and Bible readings?

4-H club members and volunteers could use a neutral or nondenominational prayer or reflection to create an environment of solemnity, or to gather a group for a shared meal, but these should not be specific to one denomination or they should vary to reflect a number of traditions.

For questions concerning 4-H Clubs or Affiliated 4-H Organizations, please contact either your State 4-H Program Office or the National 4-H Headquarters—USDA at (202) 720-2908 or email at 4-H_N&E@csrees.usda.gov. For more information, please visit <http://www.national4-hheadquarters.gov/>.



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