

Is there a flag in your church? Do people comment on it? The presence of an American flag alongside the Christian flag in a sanctuary can elicit very strong reactions. Some laity and visitors laud the church for showing their loyalty to the government. Others are offended and decry the practice as worship of America. The Missouri Synod has always held that the display of flags is an *adiaphoron*.¹ Some churches therefore have them, others do not. How did we get to this place? The LCMS FAQ mentions that flags were introduced in response to anti-German sentiment during World War I, but no sources are cited. There has never been a careful examination of the history of American flags in churches. This article seeks to provide a basic history that can open up a dialogue about this topic with some historical grounding.

What makes the placement of the flag in sanctuaries difficult to track is that there have never been any formal decisions made about it. There are no convention resolutions or any major studies written in any of our periodicals.² The introduction of flags was done from the “bottom up” and was driven by laity. As such, we cannot find one standard practice. Therefore, a careful study of the topic needs to go beyond looking among convention proceedings and instead look to individual churches to see what it is that they did. This article is not a full sociological study that will look at each individual church, instead, it tracks the development in the popular periodical *Lutheran Witness* for slight hints about congregational practice.

First, we should understand briefly the history of the American flag itself. Until the late 19th century, the American flag was not used as the kind of national symbol it is used for as today. It was only during the 1890s that the flag gained the kind of prominence as a patriotic symbol when the Civil War veterans organization, The Grand Army of the Republic (GAR) (the precursor to the American Legion) and the Daughters of the Revolution made a concerted effort to cause flags to be flown regularly as a sign of patriotism.³ Before this time, flags were used on military and government buildings, but very rarely on private buildings and incredibly rarely in churches.⁴ What is interesting is that the use of the flag on public display on private buildings was also a “bottom up” grassroots movement.⁵ In 1889, for example, the GAR alongside the Women’s Relief Corps began purchasing flags and donating them to schools, leading to a celebration of Columbus Day in 1892 in which every public school flew the flag.⁶ The organizations continued their push and began donating flags to every public space available.⁷ During World War I, the display of the flag became the mark of loyalty for the country. It was particularly used to attack German immigrants and anyone who spoke out against the war. They would be forced to kiss the flag, and in some cases were

The History of the American Flag in Missouri Synod Churches



paraded through the town covered in flags to show their loyalty.⁸ Simultaneously, it was also during World War I that most American churches began introducing flags in their churches as a sign of their support of the war effort.

The first evidence of flags in Missouri Synod churches was during this time. When America entered the first World War, Missouri Synod churches started to make a concerted effort to show their patriotism. The *Lutheran Witness* of that year had an article series called

“Patriotic Activities of our Churches.” In that series, one of the listed patriotic activities was to hang service and American flags. In that article, Henry Fricke, from Monroe Michigan says “To-night we shall hang up a service flag in the vestibule of our beautiful church containing for the present 24 stars.” From Hannibal, Missouri, C.E. Scheidker writes “About six weeks ago we purchased a large service flag, and it is on display every day in front of our Parish House, where we have our hall. When we received the flag,

we held a public service in our hall at which our good pastor, Rev. Walz, made a fine patriotic speech, which was published in the papers the next day." J.M. Bailey writes from Chicago

"The big event of our year was the great Festival service of October 28th in honor of the four-hundredth anniversary of the Protestant Reformation. Services were held in the

applause!" and further "The young people of my church have hung a 14-foot American flag in the Social Concourse, where every passer-by can see it through the plate-glass doors." From Detroit, E.C. Fackler says "Through the city and county most of our Lutheran schools and Sunday-schools are displaying in prominent places service flags, speaking eloquently of the patriotic response of our young men, graduates of our Lutheran schools, and now practicing the precepts of healthy Lutheranism as applied to the Government – Loyalty in the Service. A special feature placed on the school-calendar by Trinity and other churches is a flag-drill, to inculcate in the rising generation even more respect and love for "Old Glory." Further, "Trinity Lutheran School of St. Joseph, Mich., is flying a service flag." "At a service of prayer for our country and its military forces, the Grace Church quarter of Cleveland, O., December 16, 1917, rendered *America*, a cantata with text and music especially arranged for this occasion. A service flag with 15 stars was dedicated." Later in the same issue, the article "Christian Patriotism" which includes the address given by Rev. Frederick Brand at Trinity Hall, Springfield Illinois when a Service Flag was dedicated. "Many of our acquaintances and no less than twenty-five young men from the families of Trinity Lutheran Church have gone out to take part in this terrible conflict. In honor of these latter men we unfurl this Service Flag this evening. We do this in order to assure them that, though far away, they are dearly and prayerfully remembered at home, and to remind us that our sons and brothers

are performing a great duty in the service of our country, and to inspire all who remain to emulate their patriotic example."⁹

The evidence from 1918 shows that the American Flag and the Service Flag became paired. Some churches only were putting up a Service Flag, others an American Flag, but if one was dedicated the other was expected to be there.¹⁰ Secondly, it should be noted that while flags are mentioned being displayed, they are *not* mentioned as being put in the sanctuaries of the churches. Instead, they are in the parish house, parish hall, vestibule, and social concourse.

Secondly, flags were used during World War I to counter some of the anti-German propaganda being levied against German immigrants. The Missouri Synod addressed this issue at this time through a variety of ways – most notably the adoption of using English rather than German. However, we must be careful not to overstate the significance of this for the use of the flag. After all, it was at this same time that most American churches began displaying an American flag in their church and most of them were not immigrant communities. Further, we should point out how little debate there was. Unlike the language question which drew all sorts of discussions, the flag did not seem to cause anyone to be bothered. In fact, the first time that there is any challenge to the use of flags was in 1930, responding to an Episcopal bishop who made an argument that saluting the flag was fetish-worship.¹¹ Therefore, as much as bringing the flags into churches was due to combating anti-German sentiments, it was equally sim-



"Astonishment filled me to read that the WITNESS took notice of the service flag in Jehovah Lutheran Church in Chicago, for while my head was full of things to say about the loyalty of our Chicago Lutherans, it never occurred to me to put them in any regular 'Chicago Letter.'" Further,

Second and Seventh Regiment Armories. The afternoon services were in German. When the service was opened, the Stars and Stripes were unfurled, the bands played the "Star-spangled banner," and the audience arose and sang with whole-hearted fervor, and the singing was even greeted with



**THE FLAG OF
THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA
and
THE CHRISTIAN FLAG**



Authentic Information regarding the proper
Display of the Flags in Churches
and Parish Halls



Adapted from
"THE FLAG CODE"

National Flag Conference
Washington, D. C.
June 14-15, 1923 - May 15, 1924
by
F. C. PROEHL
World War A.E.F. Chaplain



ARMED SERVICES COMMISSION
of The Lutheran Church — Missouri Synod
2633 Sixteenth Street, N. W.
Washington 9, D. C.

SIGNIFICANCE OF COLORS

RED FOR COURAGE

The red in the Flag symbolizes courage—the courage that inspires men to face danger and do what is right.

In every part of this broad land deeds of valor have been performed under the Stars and Stripes.

WHITE FOR LIBERTY

General George Washington once described the Flag by saying, "We take the star from heaven, the red from the Mother Country, separating it by white stripes, thus showing that we have separated from her, and the white stripes shall go down to posterity representing liberty."

BLUE FOR LOYALTY

The blue symbolizes loyalty. It tells the story of men and women who are loyal to their Country through prosperity and adversity, through suffering and hardship, of men and women who are willing to sacrifice all, even life itself when their country demands it.

SYMBOLISM OF THE CHRISTIAN FLAG

The red cross symbolizes the Savior's sacrifice on Calvary to redeem mankind.

The blue field signifies the faithfulness of God made manifest in His eternal promises, which have endured throughout the ages.

The white field is a symbol of the righteousness and purity of Christ, perfect in the sight of God.



**THE FLAG OF THE
UNITED STATES OF AMERICA
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IN THE CHURCH

If the flags are displayed in the chancel, the Flag of the United States is placed at the left side as seen by the Congregation, and all other flags, including the Christian Flag, at the right, as seen by the congregation. See diagram No. 1.

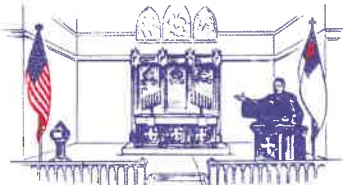


DIAGRAM NO. 1

If the flags are placed outside of the chancel, then the Flag of the United States shall be placed at the right as seen by the Congregation, and all other flags, including the Christian Flag, at the left, as seen by the congregation. See diagram No. 2.



DIAGRAM NO. 2

Recommendation: Where the pulpit is within the chancel it is suggested that congregations adopt the policy of placing the flags outside of and at either side of the chancel, as shown in the second diagram.

IN THE PARISH HALL

When the flags are displayed on a platform, and from a staff, the Flag of the United States should be placed to the speaker's right and front. If only the Flag of the United States is displayed, it should likewise be placed to the speaker's right and front. See diagram No. 3.



DIAGRAM NO. 3

When the Flag of the United States is attached to the rear wall of the speaker's platform it should be placed above the speaker with the blue field to the left of the audience. See diagram No. 4.



DIAGRAM NO. 4



DIAGRAM NO. 5

When the United States flag is displayed with another flag against a wall, staffs crossed, the Flag of the United States should be on the left as seen by the audience, with its staff in front of the staff of the other flag. See diagram No. 5.

SIZE OF THE FLAG OF THE UNITED STATES

Regulation size of the United States Flag as specified by United States Army regulations is 4 ft. 4 in. by 5 ft. 6 in.

BUNTING

Bunting is used for decorative purposes. It should be arranged in such a manner that the blue is above and the red below, since the blue field of the flag is the point of honor.

MILITARY FUNERALS

When the Flag is used to cover the casket of a departed comrade, the blue field is placed at the head and over the left shoulder of the deceased.

The Flag should never be lowered into the grave. It should be folded by two members of the guard under the direction of a Non-commissioned Officer. It should be folded into a triangle so that the final fold will show three stars.

The Flag is usually given to the nearest relative.

Pamphlet from the Armed Services Commission of the LCMS printed in the 1950's.

ply a standard practice among American churches.

Therefore, when were flags first placed in the *sanctuary*? It is not entirely clear, but it is noteworthy that it seems to have happened after World

War I.¹² The movement then seems to have happened without much notice. The first very clear evidence that a flag was placed in a sanctuary is found on the June 1937 cover of the *Witness*.¹³ The cover is

a photograph of a sanctuary which is deliberately focused so as to include the American and Christian flags at the front. What is interesting, though, is that despite the entire issue of the *Witness* being about patrio-

tism, there is no explanation of the flags on the front cover. It seems, then, by 1937 the presence of flags in sanctuaries was not a surprising enough thing to warrant any comment. By the time World War II arrived,

it was largely assumed that flags were already in the sanctuary. In the dedication services for Service Flags, it was assumed that they would be placed next to the American flag which frequently were in the chancel.¹⁴ Somewhere, therefore, between the two World Wars, American flags moved from parish halls into sanctuaries. By 1953, M. Weidenschilling not only can assume that flags were present, but can make a theological argument about it concerning loyalty to the country.¹⁵

The discussion concerning the flags shifted focus in 1942. At that time, the United States Congress passed the Flag Code which dictated the proper placement of flags in sanctuaries which was reflected in the *Witness*¹⁶ as well as resulting in a pamphlet for churches put out by the Armed Services Commission.¹⁷ By this time,

there is no longer a question of whether flags should be present, it is only a question about their proper placement.

While this has been an overview of the history of the American flag, its partner, the Christian flag is tied to this discussion. By 1944, the Christian flag was seen to balance the American flag. Having both flags was the way to express Lutheran two kingdoms theology. It shows the fealty to both kingdoms visually in the front of the sanctuary.¹⁸ The Christian Flag was originally conceived of in 1897 in an ecumenical desire to try and show that the Christian church as a whole was larger than any political divisions. However, critics have noted that the fact that the flag is made up of the colors red, white, and blue shows that this Christian flag is simply an American byprod-

uct.¹⁹ It is not clear when Christian flags were first placed to “balance” the American flag, but by the 1940s, it was a standard practice.

After this, there is relatively little said in any publication concerning flags.²⁰ It is more than likely that the practice of retaining flags had become commonplace and was thereby not discussed. In recent years, the use of the flag has been mildly discouraged. In *Lutheran Worship: History and Practice*, it is said that flags in the sanctuary invite confusion. They do not draw attention to the altar but to themselves (213–214).²¹ The first altar guild book that mentions flags (1996) is the *Altar Guild Manual* discourages the flag from being in the sanctuary saying that “Many Lutheran churches display flags in the chancel or nave, but this practice must

be discouraged. The national flag is a symbol of the state whose values and purposes are different from, and sometimes incompatible with, those of the church. The “Christian flag” is a piece of redundant and distracting symbolism, since the focus in the church is on the altar and cross in the chancel.”²²

Flags, therefore, have not been a topic that have been discussed and debated at convention or in academic settings. Rather, this has been a “bottom up” movement that has been far more about standards of practice by the laity. It seems to have been motivated by two factors: to combat anti-immigrant sentiments in World War I and to follow the standard practice of what many American churches were doing at this same time.

—Ben Nickodemus

¹ LCMS FAQ: <https://www.lcms.org/about/beliefs/faqs/worship-and-congregational-life#flags>. For two sides of the debate among Concordia Seminary, St. Louis's Faculty see Joel Biermann, *Wholly Citizens: God's Two Realms and Christian Engagement with the World* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2017), 123–24 contrasted with David L. Adams, “Quo Vadis,” in *The Anonymous God: The Church Confronts Civil Religion and American Society*. Edited by David L. Adams and Ken Schurb (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2004), 259.

² The closest the Synod ever came to making a statement of any kind about the flag was the patriotic statement of loyalty to the nation at the 1941 convention: “Resolved, that we as a church reaffirm our unreserved loyalty to our country and its institutions, our flag, and the principle of government guaranteed to us by the Constitution of the United States.” *Lutheran Witness* 60 (1941): 237. However, while it affirms the loyalty of the country to the flag, it does not mention their placement in churches.

³ Marc Leepson, *Flag: An American Biography* (New York: Thomas Dunne Books St. Martin's Press, 2005), 162–68; Arnaldo Testi, *Capture the*

Flag: The Stars and Stripes In American History. Trans. Noor Giovanni Mazhar (New York: New York University Press, 2010), 27–34.

⁴ Some churches did put flags during the Civil War to show their solidarity with the soldiers from their congregations; however, these were frequently simply the flag of that particular regiment rather than simply the American or Confederate flag. I find no evidence, however, that any early Lutheran congregations did this.

⁵ On this phenomenon in the country over time see Testi, *Capture the Flag*.

⁶ Leepson, *Flag*, 168.

⁷ Craig Watts, *Bowing Toward Babylon: The Nationalistic Subversion of Christian Worship in America* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2017), 92–93.

⁸ Leepson, *Flag*, 190.

⁹ *Lutheran Witness*, 37 (1918): 197–99.

¹⁰ *Lutheran Witness*, 36 (1917): 404.

¹¹ “Every society should have at least one national flag and one service-flag for display; preferably two each, one of each for the street and one of each for the assembly hall. The indoor flags may be of silk the street flags of durable material. The service-flags should have a red border, a white center field, and a blue star for each enlisted man of the congregation. If there are too many

stars, then either use more flags, or put one large star in the center of the white field, and have the number of enlisted men sewed on it in white figures. These service-flags can all be made at home.”

¹² “Perhaps this bishop has seen something of fetish worship in connection with the flag. There are people who are guilty of that sort of thing. But that need not be, nor does our Government require that of us. But he ought to remember that a thing does not become wrong in itself simply because some people about it or use it in the wrong way. The flag may be displayed in our churches and schools, but mere display of the flag will mean little, or it may do harm if the truth of its meaning is not proclaimed, just as a crucifix is of value there only where the truth concerning the Crucified is taught.” *Lutheran Witness*, 49 (1930): 181.

¹³ C. Abbtmeyer has a lengthy article in the *Lutheran Witness* in 1917 that details the sanctuary down to decorations and banners with very little possibly missing. In that article, flags are not mentioned as even a possible element to be considered in a sanctuary. C. Abbtmeyer “The Proprieties of Public Worship” *Lutheran Witness* 36 (1917): 190–92; 225–26; 241–42, 254–56, 272–73.

¹⁴ *Lutheran Witness* 56 (1937): 209.

¹⁵ *Lutheran Chaplain*, Nov–Dec 1942, 21; June 1943, 17–18; 33; Oct–Nov 1946, 13.

¹⁶ M. Weidenschilling, *Christian Citizenship* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1953), 44–55.

¹⁷ *Lutheran Witness*, 62 (1943): 278.

¹⁸ Pamphlet from Armed Services Commission, “The Flag of the United States of America and the Christian Flag.”

¹⁹ Martin S. Sommer, “Two Flags in Our Churches,” *Lutheran Witness*, 63 (1944): 219–20.

²⁰ Wilbur Zelinsky, *Nation Into State: The Shifting Symbolic Foundations of American Nationalism* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1988), 199.

²¹ There is one letter to the editor sent in 1950 that asks for further clarification on the uses of these flags, but the clarification offered is incredibly slight. *Lutheran Witness*, 69 (1950): 34.

²² Wayne E. Schmidt, “The Setting of the Liturgy and the Decorum of Its Leaders: The Place of Worship,” in *Lutheran Worship: History and Practice*. Edited by Fred L. Precht (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1993), 213–14.

²³ Lee A. Maxwell, *The Altar Guild Manual* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1996), 45–46.