

Aug. 19, 2011

From: Goshen College President James E. Brenneman

Decision Regarding an Alternative to Playing the National Anthem at Goshen College

On June 6, 2011, the Goshen College Board of Directors asked me to find an alternative to playing the national anthem that “fits with sports tradition, that honors country and that resonates with Goshen College’s core values and respects the views of diverse constituencies.” In developing an alternative, I considered the diverse viewpoints of alumni, students, faculty, staff, Mennonite church members, local community members, and other friends and constituents.

On Aug. 19, 2011, I announced at the All-Employee Brunch that “America the Beautiful” would be played before select sports events starting in Fall 2011. The Board of Directors unanimously endorsed my decision that the first verse of “America the Beautiful” be played or sung with the U.S. flag present. A brief prayer may be offered at the discretion of the coach.

Criteria and rationale for alternative practice:

1. *“Fits with sports tradition.”* People come to a game either to play or root for their team. It’s that simple. The sports tradition, as practiced, calls for a song, easily recognizable and sung by the majority of attendees at a game. The sports venue is not the place to introduce or teach a new song. A short pre-game opening — welcoming attendees, singing a song, introducing players — is all that is called for.
2. *“Honors country.”* Given the limits posed by the song choice needing to be easily recognized by a majority of fans at a game, very few songs “fit the bill” as alternatives. The song that was recommended more than any other as an alternative across all constituency groups was “America the Beautiful.” This song also was the immediate favorite of local community leaders I met with recently. “America the Beautiful” was the song most named by almost 40 percent of respondents to a July 3 survey (*Parade Magazine*) asking what song they would prefer as our national anthem. “America the Beautiful” also was an early rival to the national anthem, and remains so. It often is sung during the seventh-inning stretch at some major league baseball games and played alongside the national anthem at other sports venues.
3. *“Resonates with GC’s core values.”* The words of “America the Beautiful” are wonderfully descriptive of creation’s beauty in the heartland, in the coastlands and in urban and rural settings. They petition God’s gracious blessing upon America. Just as we might petition God’s grace upon our college, homes, us individually or another nation we love, such requests are never mutually exclusive. Katharine Lee Bates, a poet and professor of English at Wellesley College, wrote the lyrics in 1893 after a grueling trip on mules to the top of Pikes Peak, so overwhelmed and inspired she was by the awesome vista before her. Samuel A. Ward, a church organist, composed the music.

4. *“Respects views of different constituencies.”* In the entry hall to the gymnasium where volleyball and basketball are played at Goshen College, a canopy of flags from many nations, including the United States, provides wonderful symbols of the college’s commitment to the core value of global citizenship. The United Nations’ flag has long flown next to the U.S. flag at the entrance to campus. Alongside Goshen College’s deep commitment to the world community, flying the U.S. flag at sports venues can foster public appreciation for the particularity of being citizens of this country and members of this community. Such self-conscious cultural awareness can nurture healthy intercultural interactions that we strive for on this campus, in and out of the classroom.

Conclusion:

Though some may or may not agree with the alternative recommended here, I call now on each one of us to move beyond this decision and turn our attention to other important matters before us. May God help Goshen College become one of the most welcoming places on earth for all who come to our campus.